Meta runs ads to prepare Canada for blocking content, but news groups block them in protest
Quebecor, Corus Entertainment and Cogeco are among companies refusing to run ads from Meta

Marie Woolf

Ottawa - Meta has started to run ads to inform Canadians of its plan to block the viewing and sharing of news content on Facebook and Instagram within weeks, but some Quebec radio stations and news publications are refusing to carry them.

It's the latest development in a tense standoff between Meta and the federal government and supporters of the Online News Act, also known as Bill C-18. The legislation is designed to support the Canadian news industry after much of its advertising migrated to big-tech platforms.

Martin Champoux, the Bloc Québécois's heritage critic, accused Meta of arrogance by placing ads about its plans to withdraw from news with the very media it would deny funds to by failing to comply with the legislation.

Bill C-18 would make Facebook and Google negotiate deals to compensate news outlets for posting or linking to their work, but the tech giants say it is deeply flawed. By withdrawing news from its platforms, Meta would not be subject to the act.

Google has also said it also plans to block the ability to search for Canadian news in this country in response to the act. But unlike Meta, which has ceased talks with the federal government, Google is in continuing negotiations over the law.

Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez accused Facebook of being "deeply irresponsible and out of touch."

"How much money is Facebook going to spend modifying their platforms at the expense of their users?" Mr. Rodriguez said. "How much money is Facebook going to spend on a public-relations campaign? Facebook is willing to spend money on all these things, but they refuse to pay their fair share and follow the law in Canada."

Meta says the ads are an attempt to be upfront with Canadians, who will find they can no longer share or access Canadian news on Facebook and Instagram within weeks.

"We want to remain clear and transparent with Canadians about the upcoming changes to our services," said Lisa Laventure, Meta's spokeswoman in Canada.

"The Online News Act is based on the incorrect premise that social-media companies benefit unfairly from news content shared on our platforms, but the reverse is true. News outlets voluntarily share content on social media to expand their audiences and help their bottom line.

"Unfortunately, the only way we can reasonably comply with this legislation is to end news availability for people in Canada in the coming weeks."

Opinion: Google and Facebook act tough in Bill C-18 standoff because they are desperate

The tech giant began running several ads, including in French, on digital platforms, radio and websites in Canada this week. "To comply with federal legislation, viewing and sharing news content will no longer be possible on Facebook and Instagram in Canada," the ads say, adding a critique of the legislation.
Cogeco, which owns a string of Quebec radio stations, said it is not carrying Meta's advertisements.

"We have decided to refrain from using Meta's advertising that takes a stand against the laws in Canada. However, we welcome Meta representatives to debate their points of view on our live broadcasts if they wish," said Cogeco spokeswoman Diane Patenaude.

Véronique Mercier, vice-president of communications at Quebecor, said its media outlets would not carry the tech giant's ads "in response to Meta's action on C-18." The Journal de Montreal has already blocked ads Meta tried to place.

Quebecor and Cogeco are among dozens of advertisers, including the Quebec government, Hydro-Québec, Loto-Québec, Bell Media, as well as the cities of Quebec and Montreal, to have suspended ads on Meta platforms in protest of the tech giant's decision to block news.

Corus Entertainment, whose brands include the Food Network and Global News, said earlier this week that it was suspending advertising with Meta and is "encouraging our partners and clients to do the same."

"We are disappointed in the recent actions taken by Meta, and encourage all foreign digital platforms to actively participate in meaningful discussions regarding Bill C-18 to create an open and accessible media landscape in Canada," it said in a statement.

Earlier this month, B.C. Premier David Eby said Meta's decision to block news from Canadians was "totally unacceptable" and the province was pulling all ads, except safety and health bulletins, from the tech giant's Facebook and Instagram platforms. B.C. spent $1,352,000 last year on advertising with Meta, with another $138,000 so far this financial year.

Ottawa, which is also suspending advertising with Meta, spent $11.4-million on advertising on Facebook and Instagram last year.

Paul Deegan, president and chief executive of News Media Canada, which represents the news industry, said Meta should sit down with the government to discuss the Online News Act instead of running ads about it.

"Rather than promoting spin, they would be well advised to follow Google's lead and do the painstaking work of ensuring the regulations are fair, balanced and predictable for all stakeholders," he said.

Michael Geist, the University of Ottawa's Canada research chair in internet law, said blocking the Meta ads over the Online News Act will "fuel distrust in the media."

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