Here’s what we know, so far, about Facebook’s recent disclosure that a shadowy Russian firm with ties to the Kremlin created thousands of ads on the social media platform that ran before, during and after the 2016 presidential election:

The ads “appeared to focus on amplifying divisive social and political messages across the ideological spectrum,” including race, immigration and gun rights, Facebook said.

The users who purchased the ads were fakes. Attached to assumed identities, their pages were allegedly created by digital guerrilla marketers from Russia.
hawking information meant to disrupt the American electorate and sway a presidential election.

Some of those ads were pushed out to very specific parts of the country, presumably for maximum political effect. Facebook has identified some 2,000 other ads that may have been of Russian provenance, although, as CNN reported last week, it can’t rule out that there might be far more than that.

Here’s what we don’t know, at least not directly from Facebook:

• What all of those ads looked like
• What specific information – or disinformation — they were spreading
• Who or what the accounts pretended to be
• How many Americans interacted with the ads or the fake personae

We also don’t know what geographical locations the alleged social media saboteurs were targeting (The regular list of swing states and counties? Or the most politically flammable fringes?). Facebook says that more of those ads ran in 2015 than in 2016, but not how many more.

Nor has Facebook reported whether the people who were targeted were from specific demographic or philosophical groups — all of which means we really don’t know the full extent of the duping on Facebook, and maybe Facebook doesn’t either.

Facebook says it is working to prevent a repeat. And it was hardly the only platform that Russia is presumed to have used to disrupt the political debate in America; there were others in the mix as well, particularly Twitter, which has divulged even less than Facebook has.

But, in total, there’s a stunning lack of public specificity about an alleged foreign campaign to influence our domestic politics. It was an effort that involved “the American companies that essentially invented the tools of social media and, in this case, did not stop them from being turned into engines of deception and propaganda,” as The Times’s Scott Shane noted in his penetrating investigation
earlier this month.

Mr. Shane’s report helped fill in some blanks when he unearthed several of the phony accounts, like that of one Melvin Redick, a professed Pennsylvanian. On his Facebook page, Mr. Redick appears to be a loving dad of an adorable little girl, but as it turns out he doesn’t actually exist. That account was early to spot and promote DCLeaks, the site that became a receptacle for hacked information about prominent Americans.

And then last week The Daily Beast uncovered a promotion for a supposed “Citizens before refugees” rally in Twin Falls, Idaho, in August of 2016. As the independent (and embattled) Russian news organization RBC reported in March, the supposed group behind that rally, SecuredBorders, was the creation of the Internet Research Agency, which is suspected of being behind the Facebook ads in question here.

So a picture starts to emerge. But it’s a spotty one, only as good as the journalism that’s working so hard to fill the canvas, and the scraps we’re getting from law enforcement and the social platforms themselves.

Facebook is cooperating to varying degrees with efforts in Washington to understand how it might have been used by Russian influence agents. As The Wall Street Journal first reported late last week, Facebook handed evidence related to the ad campaign over to the special prosecutor investigating the Russia allegations, Robert S. Mueller III.

When I asked Facebook why it couldn’t be more forthcoming with the public, the company responded with a statement saying, “Due to federal law, and the ongoing investigation into these issues, we are limited as to what we can disclose publicly.”

Facebook is referring to its obligations under the Electronic Communications Privacy Act, the federal law that prohibits the government from unduly spying on our electronic communications.

Facebook, which didn’t elaborate, appears to be saying it is legally restricted from the willy-nilly handing-over of information about its users to the government
or, for that matter, the public. And it’s certainly a challenge for Facebook to decide where the line is between sharing vital details about its use in a plot like election meddling, and exposing private data about its legitimate users.

On Friday, I asked Marc Rotenberg, the president of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, or Epic, an advocacy group, where he stood on the question.

“The best case for that is that the First Amendment protects anonymous speech,” he said. “And if the United States government were to try to comprehend the identities of controversial speakers, we’d be up on the front lines saying the government doesn’t have the right to do that.”

But in this case, “We’re talking about non-U.S. persons engaging in political speech in U.S. elections, and it’s a stretch to extend that kind of protection to this type of activity,” he said.

Ryan Calo, a law professor at the University of Washington, told me that the electronic communications privacy law did not extend protections to advertisements or posted messages that were readily accessible to the public.

That’s not to say that Mr. Mueller’s involvement doesn’t add to the sensitivity for Facebook. It does. But sooner rather than later Facebook owes it to the public to provide still more detail about the ads. And it owes it to its users to let them know if they have directly interacted with the equivalent of digital spies sent to influence them.

Then there’s democracy itself, and the new problems the social platforms are creating for it.

The American electoral system includes a complicated campaign finance regime that was devised to keep Americans informed about who finances the media messages designed to sway them.

The system is imperfect. And it’s **badly weakened** over the years. But it still requires, for instance, that television stations keep careful logs of the ad time they sell to candidates and political groups around elections, and make them available to the public. It is also illegal for foreign interests to spend money in our campaigns.
The Russian effort was able to elude those laws through social media, where the system has clearly — and fundamentally — broken down.

“We now know that foreign interests can run campaign ads — sham issue ads — in this country without anyone having any knowledge of who was behind it, and that fundamentally violates a basic concept of campaign finance laws,” said Fred Wertheimer, a longtime advocate for greater regulation of political spending through his group Democracy21.

Facebook’s announcement about the Russian ads prompted calls from Senators Mark Warner of Virginia and Martin Heinrich of New Mexico for a new law requiring that social media ads receive the same regulatory scrutiny as television ads (“I’m Vladimir Putin and I approve this message!”).

As of now, we don’t even know the full extent to which the Russian ads violated the current legal requirements. That’s something Mr. Mueller should be able to determine. But Facebook and other platforms need to get more information out there publicly, too, so the necessary discussion about potential remedies doesn’t have to wait for the Mueller investigation to conclude. Hopefully they will.

This much should be clear: Arguments that sites like Facebook are merely open “platforms” — and not “media companies” that make editorial judgments about activity in the digital worlds they created — fall woefully flat when it comes to meddling in our democracy.

The platforms have become incredibly powerful in a short amount of time. With great power has come great profit, which they are only too happy to embrace; the great responsibility part, not always so much.

“Given the role they played in this election, they now have a major responsibility to help solve this problem,” Mr. Wertheimer said.

After all, the 2018 midterms are just around the corner.