At first glance, the internet hardly seems to be playing a role in the campaigns for the 2020 US presidential election. Democratic presidential candidates talk about healthcare, taxes, immigration, environmental protection and student debts. Only the Democratic candidate Elizabeth Warren has been demanding the split-up of “big tech” — despite her massive use of Instagram for self-promotion as part of her election campaign.

The US suffered a significant shock when the country realized that it, the largest democracy in the Western world, was susceptible to manipulative news reports and hacker attacks. And the details of the Trump-Russia affair continue to be unsettling: Russian spies were able to infiltrate the 2016 US presidential election without being noticed and then insert themselves into local campaigns to learn about their language and style. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of highly automated or fake social media accounts kicked into action to spread disinformation and agitation. President Trump has never acknowledged the scale of interference, even if intelligence agencies have already begun warning of attacks on the 2020 elections. Elaine Kamarck of the Brookings Institution thinks the challenge of targeted disinformation is being underestimated. She has stated that Russian and Chinese hackers were becoming increasingly sophisticated, adding that Facebook and other social media companies haven’t been able to keep up and have lost their users’ trust. Fortunately, the political debate has already progressed further in the country’s center of power, Washington, DC. Federal authorities have been threatening investigations, and the US Congress has started inquiries into big tech’s market dominance, data abuse and cybersecurity. Tighter regulation of the tech sector is one of the few issues where Republicans and Democrats find common ground to work together. Even Trump has sharpened his criticism — although his focus has been on Google and Twitter allegedly censoring conservative voices. The accusations have not been proved, but they have been playing a role in shaping US political opinion: 85% of Republican supporters consider such censorship likely, a Pew Research Center study found out.

Either way, the days are over when Facebook boss Mark Zuckerberg would be welcomed like a star in Washington, DC. At an October 2019 hearing on the cryptocurrency Libra, members of Congress interrogated Zuckerberg for hours on, among other things, the decision to continue accepting placement of political ads. Twitter, on the other hand, has announced its intention to ban such ads worldwide. But the step is more symbolic than meaningful because mainstream consumer advertising has greater relevance to Twitter. And even without election advertising, the political battle for control over interpretation on social media has now, barely a year before the presidential elections, been fully unleashed. Trump and his campaign are attacking left-liberal voices to make them seem ridiculous. And the left is creating the impression that Trump’s impeachment has already been decided, although that is less than certain. With or without manipulation from abroad: The standards for discourse have shifted dangerously. We must be prepared for the 2020 US presidential election to become aggressive, boundless and poisonous on the internet.