An Audit of Facebook’s Political Ad Policy Enforcement

Victor Le Pochat, Laura Edelson, Tom Van Goethem, Wouter Joosen, Damon McCoy, Tobias Lauinger

USENIX Security 2022, 10 August 2022
Joe Biden

Sponsored • Paid for by BIDEN FOR PRESIDENT
ID: 363174934756582

Every single day since Donald Trump was elected, we’ve been looking forward to this – finally, Election Day is here.

Take just a minute right now to confirm your polling place, and then get out and vote Trump out on Tuesday, Nov. 3!

Donald J. Trump

Sponsored • Paid for by DONALD J. TRUMP FOR PRESIDENT, INC.
ID: 1481460322039326

President Trump needs you now more than ever. Vote November 3rd.

TAKE THE FIRST STEP TO BUILD BACK BETTER

Election Day is Tuesday, Nov 3rd.
Online political advertising is powerful, but has a risk of abuse

- Interference from foreign actors
- Disinformation
- Voter suppression
- Inauthentic behavior
Oversight falls to major advertising platforms

Lack of up-to-date legislation

→ Google, Twitter, Facebook (Meta) developing their own policies (self-regulation)
We audit Facebook’s enforcement of its political ad policy.
Facebook’s political ad policy enforcement

› “Ads about social issues, elections and politics” (“political ads”)
Facebook’s political ad policy enforcement

› Catch undeclared ads that are political

https://www.facebook.com/business/help/167836590566506
We **audit** ads deemed political by Facebook or us

Active ads on political ad pages worldwide from July 2020 to February 2021

- 4.1M ads were declared as political by their advertisers
- 29.5M ads were deemed not political
- 189k ads were not declared yet deemed **political** by Facebook or by us
  → *enforcement by Facebook*
We **audit** ads deemed political by Facebook or us

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Not political | Actually political

* Precision: 0.45  
  Recall: 0.22  
  $F_1$ score: 0.29

* Across all advertisers worldwide; estimate based on 55% FP rate in U.S.  
  § Across political advertisers worldwide.
**False positives in enforcement**

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False positives in enforcement

- Manual annotation of 600 ads:
  
  “In scope of Facebook’s political ad policy?”
False positives in enforcement

- Manual annotation of 600 ads:

  “In scope of Facebook’s political ad policy?”

  55% of detected ads are **incorrectly** detected
  (~40,191 ads)

  [Sos21, Ede20, Mat22]
Example falsely flagged ads

Friendly Ford - Las Vegas
Sponsored
ID: 981284638664603

Shopping for a new car? Check out our new models and competitive pricing.

SmartNews - Local Breaking News
Sponsored
ID: 27214677888279

11 new cases of COVID-19 confirmed in Madison County, 3,050 in the state. Download SmartNews for free to read more.

The News Break - News Break
Sponsored
ID: 320741887020937


Friendly Ford - Nevada’s Only 12 Time
Sponsored

2020 Ford F-150 XLT | For only $43,345

2020 Ford F-150 | For only $66,845

HTTPS://APPS.APP.COM/US/APPS/SMARTNEWS LOCAL BREA...

Local Madison County News
SmartNews is the award-winning news app downloaded by 40+ million readers in 100+ countries! SmartNews analyzes...

WWW.BREAKAPP.COM
Breaking news from US!
Connecting to the iTunes Store.
## False negatives in enforcement

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False negatives in enforcement

› All ads from political actors should be declared
  » Discover through external lists and page categories
False negatives in enforcement

✓ All ads from political actors should be declared
  » Discover through external lists and page categories

116,963 undeclared ads from political actors go undetected
Example missed ads

- Vlaams Belang
  - Sponsored
  - ID: 163690363382828
  - Geen moskee in onze gemeente. LIKE als je het eens bent!

- Elizabeth Warren
  - Sponsored
  - ID: 81272636232502
  - Gear up and show the world that you are fighting for big, structural change! Our limited time sale ends at MIDNIGHT tonight. Enter code SHOPFROMHOME20 at checkout for 20% off your order.

- Progressive Turnout Project
  - Sponsored
  - ID: 2703790594129
  - 100% of proceeds support our work.

- Don Young
  - Sponsored
  - ID: 588300784256856
  - "DON YOUNG supports our police and our right to defend ourselves. He stands up to liberal nonsense."

- "Joel Eldred
  - Glennallen, AK
  - "Don Young fighting for you to the end."

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Facebook’s enforcement is currently **flawed**

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Limitations in enforcement

1. Approach: automated solutions do not learn obvious signals of political intent
   - Take the advertiser into account
   - Simple, clearly enforceable rules to complement automated review

2. Consequences: prevent pages from running violating ads
   - Prohibit pages from running ads, or take them down
Limitations in enforcement

3. **Consistency**: better (fairer) performance globally
   - Adapt policies + enforcement system to local context

4. **Policies**: ambiguities complicate compliance/enforcement
   - Clarify and simplify ad policies

5. **Transparency**: bad enforcement → bad transparency
   - Archive *all* ads and metadata
better transparency
→ better accountability
→ better compliance enforcement
→ better security
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victor.lepochat@kuleuven.be  @VictorLePochat
https://osf.io/7tw3e/  https://lepoch.at

NYU Ad Observatory  By NYU Cybersecurity for Democracy  adobservatory.org

KU LEUVEN  DistriNet  iwn  NYU TANDON SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING  CYBERSECURITY FOR DEMOCRACY
References


