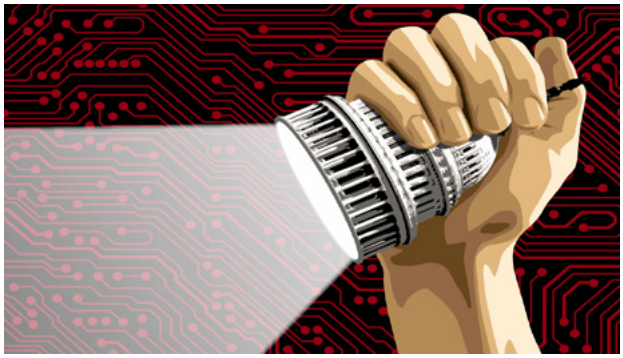
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Executive Summary

A Standard for Universal Digital Ad Transparency

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Election meddling and public health misinformation have fueled calls for greater transparency around online advertising on social media platforms. In response, many platforms have begun to make voluntary disclosures about some of the ads they run, but these efforts remain woefully insufficient. Platforms often neglect to provide data about how ads microtarget users, and only disclose data about a narrow category of political ads, failing to capture the larger ecosystem of digital advertising that is shaping our political, social, and economic environment.

Moreover, current regulatory measures have not kept up as digital advertising has proliferated, allowing misinformation and hate speech to spread rapidly through paid online channels that lack meaningful oversight, driven by algorithmic systems poorly understood by users and policymakers concerned with such threats to the democratic process. And to make matters worse, social media companies have also demonstrated hostility towards researchers who have tried to study advertising on their platforms.

Historically, digital advertising has dealt with issues around ad content that is "illegal, discriminatory, misleading, and manipulative in a wide range of categories beyond political ads." This status quo demonstrates the urgent need for interventions that support researcher access to platform-held data to increase transparency around advertising practices on platforms, and to enable regulators to ensure existing law around any disclosures is being followed.

The paper proposes a technical standard for universal digital ad transparency, defining the criteria for determining which ad platforms would need to comply and what content should be made transparent. Additionally, it compares the proposed standard to the platforms' current voluntary transparency practices, as well as to related U.S. legislative efforts.

Key Findings/Insights

The Problem

- Digital ads can be served to a single user at a time. Unlike broadcast communication, which is seen by many people at a time, highly tailored and manipulative messaging can be aimed at an individual without detection. Such microtargeted delivery can be and has been used to disseminate medical disinformation; promote scams, predatory, discriminatory advertising practices; and promote content that is divisive and violent.

- Many platforms, including Facebook and Google, use limited to no human review of ads that are submitted for promotion on their platforms. Instead, they rely on inherently porous AI-based content filters that outsource content moderation to users.

- We argue this allows political and health misinformation, hate speech, and other abusive content to bypass algorithms and proliferate through paid promotion (from which platforms profit).

Proposed Solution

The universal digital ad transparency proposal calls for all major digital ad platforms to disclose an ad's impressions, targeting placement, delivery, and creative data to the public.

- We also push for disclosures around content removal details and decision-making processes.

- The FTC would store this data in public databases available for up to seven years to users and researchers.

- The standard would apply to any social media company that uses microtargeting in advertising, does not use human review of advertisements, or has a reach exceeding one-third of the United States adult population.

Interaction With Existing Legislation

We explain that our proposal aligns to varying extents with legislative proposals on the table calling for increased transparency but is more exhaustive and inclusive.

Despite these challenges, we emphasize that greater transparency is absolutely necessary for understanding the mechanics of digital advertising, which can help quell the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and abuse that proliferate through paid online channels today.

Note: The release of the universal digital ad transparency proposal follows recent news that Facebook suspended the personal accounts of New York University researchers—including that of Laura Edelson—who were using the proprietary Ad Observatory tool they built to study targeted political advertising trends on the platform.

Disclosure Product		Scope of Access & Disclosure		Types of Data Disclosed				Notes & Problems
Platform	Ad Archive(s)	Access	Types of Ads Disclosed	Ad Creative	Ad Impressions	Ad Targeting	Ad Placement	
PROPOSED PLAN								
Platforms meeting any of the following criteria: **1. No human review of ads** **2. Microtargeting of ads** **3. Annual reach exceeding one-third of the U.S. adult population**	Universal digital ad transparency proposal	Publicly accessible through database maintained by the FTC, in the form of: • Daily HDF5 summary files (available for two years) • Daily HDF5 snapshot datasets (available for seven years) • Monthly and yearly advertiser summary CSV datasets (available for seven years) • Public-facing API/web interface	All forms of advertising on social media, including paid, branded, native, etc.	✓	✓	✓	✓	
EXISTING PLATFORM APPROACHES								
Facebook	Library for Ads on Social Issues, Elections, and Politics	Publicly available web portal (archives after seven years)	Social issues, electoral politics, housing, employment, credit	✓	✓	x	x	Per-ad spending is only disclosed in ranges
Facebook	Facebook Open Research & Transparency (FORT)	Only available via API to academic researchers who apply for access; only available in the U.S.	Political/electoral, only in the 90 days before the 2020 election with > 100 impressions	✓	✓	✓	x	Ads with fewer than 100 impressions make up a majority of political ads on Facebook during this period, so important data is missing
Google	Transparency Report	Publicly available web portal, report, and database through BigQuery platform	Electoral only: ads about candidates and/or officeholders related to state and federal elections, and about ballot measures	✓	✓	✓	x	
Google	Ads Transparency Spotlight	Browser extension for Chrome users	Allows users to browse information about ads targeted to them	✓	✓	✓	x	This information is revealed only if the advertiser has adopted Google's "ad disclosure schema"
Twitter	Ads Transparency Center	Public downloadable database	Political ads	✓	✓	x	x	Twitter discontinued this product in 2019, meaning only 1.5 years worth of data is collected and available
Snapchat	Political Ads Library	Public downloadable database	Political ads	✓	✓	✓	✓	Targeting parameters includes both inclusion and exclusion criteria
Roku	Political Ad Archive	Folder of files, but requires users to log in through Roku's Box.com account	Scanned advertising contracts from political advertisers, likely identifies the advertisers themselves	x	x	x	x	Contracts are in differing formats and contain codes not explained in the documents
Xfinity	Political ad archive	Publicly available searchable web portal, but requires users to log in using a Microsoft account	Political ads	*Unknown*	*Unknown*	*Unknown*	*Unknown*	Interface is broken; without modifying the script, users cannot access information

Read the entire paper at https://knightcolumbia.org/content/a-standard-for-universal-digital-ad-transparency