DECIPHERING THE DIGITAL POLITICAL AD DATABASES

A TIP SHEET FROM ISSUE ONE

One of the ways that Russian agents interfered in the 2016 election was by using online advertising to spread disinformation. In 2018, Facebook, Google, and Twitter created new resources to help the public track political ads on their platforms, bringing more transparency to the sponsors of digital ads. Snapchat followed suit in September 2019. But these databases of political ads are woefully inadequate, as Issue One has detailed in a major report. They lack uniform standards, display uneven amounts of information, and are difficult to use. Here's what you need to know about them.

FACEBOOK

Facebook also offers two resources to access information about political ads: Its "Ad Library" and its downloadable "Ad Library Report." (Both include ad spending on Facebook as well as Instagram.)

Facebook ads are difficult to search. One of the major challenges is that there is no easy way to see older ads. Because Facebook's ad library displays ads in an infinite scroll design — with no ability to filter by a specific date or date range — finding older ads, especially from prolific ad sponsors, can take quite some time.

An organization must have a Facebook page to run ads on Facebook, but the page name is not required to reflect the organization's name. The same group can also sponsor ads from multiple pages they control.

Facebook's Ad Library is designed to be navigated using keyword searches. Results can be filtered based on whether an ad is active or inactive, by the name of the Facebook page running the ad, by the disclaimer that ran with the ad, and by the platform the ad appeared on (e.g., Facebook or Instagram). You can also filter to see only ads that ran within one of the four following timeframes: 1) the past day, 2) the past seven days, 3) the past 30 days, or 4) the past 90 days. Many of these filtering options were rolled out in October 2019. In October, Facebook also introduced a keyword search on each advertiser's page — meaning you can now easily search for keywords within any ads sponsored by a particular group.

In Facebook's Ad Library, you can see targeting, cost, and impression information for each individual ad by clicking on a link on the bottom of each individual ad that says "ad

details." Cost and impression information is only given in broad ranges, although you can see total aggregate figures for spending on ads and the number of ads from each sponsor by downloading the reports.

In August 2019, Facebook announced new transparency policies that would allow political ad sponsors to become certified as "confirmed organizations." Ads from such sponsors now appear with an icon that shows whether the group used an FEC-issued ID number or IRS-issued EIN number to register with Facebook. However, the actual ID numbers are only shown deep within the ad library. At this time, these identifiers are not included in any of Facebook's downloadable data sets.

Facebook's Ad Library Report includes some interactive summary data as well as links to download aggregate information about the total spending by each Facebook page and total number of ads for any of the following five timeframes: 1) the last day, 2) the last seven days, 3) the last 30 days, 4) the last 90 days, or 5) all time, since Facebook launched its ad archive in May 2018.

All five of these reports contain advertiser data including the page ID, page name, disclaimer, amount spent, and the number of ads in the library. The all time report provides the best window to see how many ads an organization has paid for and how much it spent since May 2018, although it's important to remember, when counting ads, that one page can run ads with multiple disclaimers — which Facebook lists as separate line items in these downloadable files.

GOOGLE

Google offers two resources to access information about political ads: Its online "Political Advertising Transparency

Report" as well as downloadable data files. (Both include ad spending on Google as well as YouTube.)

Google has the most accessible political ad archive. The Political Advertising Transparency Report features interactive summary data, including a map of spending by state that also breaks down aggregate spending by congressional district, the top search terms people buy ads on, and a complete searchable, filter-enabled repository of ads.

You can easily see the total number of ads and aggregate spending figure for each ad sponsor. You can also see cost and impression information for each individual ad, although the cost per ad and number of impressions per ad are only given in broad ranges. You can filter all ads or all ads from one advertiser by a specific date or date range.

Its downloadable data (download a zip file here) includes six .csv files, each highlighting different information, organized by unique ad, advertiser, and campaign IDs that Google assigns (which make the data easier to analyze). Demographic and geographic targeting information for each "campaign" of an advertiser is available via the downloadable data.

Google's online ad library as well as some of its downloadable files also helpfully show the associated FEC-issued ID number or IRS-issued ID number for each organization that sponsors ads (i.e., a group's FEC ID or federal EIN number).

One note of caution: Because ad sponsors, during Google's verification process, have the option of providing either their FEC-issued ID number or their IRS-issued EIN number, many sponsors of Google ads appear in the company's database twice — with some spending tied to groups' FEC-issued ID numbers and some tied to groups' IRS-issued ID numbers.

TWITTER

Twitter ads are also difficult to search. Twitter separates its political ad archive into two lists — one for certified "issue advertisers" and one for certified "political campaigning advertisers." Unfortunately, no data from Twitter's ad library — known as its "Ads Transparency Center" — is downloadable. The only way to look at ads is to click through to each advertiser's profile. There is no interactive dashboard or easy ways to search Twitter ads by date, key word, disclaimer, or targeting information.

There are two tabs on each advertiser profile: 1) The "ads" tab shows the tweets the account paid to promote; and 2) The "billing information" tab shows the name of the individual or organization who paid for them. Billing information can be useful when the disclaimer or information in an account's bio doesn't offer much insight into who actually paid for the ads.

In the ads tab, you can click a link labeled "ad details" under each ad to learn about the campaign's cost and the impressions it earned. In the section of this tab labeled "targeting," if you click on the "campaign" in which an ad appeared, you'll see demographic and geographic information about who the ad targeted and reached, along with the actual disclaimer that appeared with the ad.

You can search to see if any account is a certified political campaigning advertiser or issue advertiser using the following URL formula: https://ads.twitter.com/transparency/twitterhandle (replacing "twitterhandle" with the real name of any account).

SNAPCHAT

In September 2019, Snapchat released two downloadable .csv files of political ads — one with ads that ran on its platform in 2018 and one with ads that have run so far in 2019. There's no interactive dashboard to search ads online.

These files, however, are easy to sort and filter. Among the fields included in the databases are the exact amount spent on each ad, the exact number of impressions, the date the ad began running, the date the ad stopped running, the organization name of the ad's sponsor, the ad sponsor's billing address (if they provided it), and targeting information for each ad. There is also a unique ID and unique URL for each ad, meaning every ad in Snapchat's political ad library can be viewed online.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Research into digital political ads has also been performed by a number of academics, including Project DATA at the University of Wisconsin and a team at New York University (who have published reports and code on Github, for those who are more technologically inclined). MapLight also published a useful primer in May 2019.

Questions? Contact Issue One Research Manager Michael Beckel at mbeckel@issueone.org.

HOW THE CORPORATE POLITICAL AD LIBRARIES COMPARE

	FACEBOOK	GOOGLE	TWITTER	SNAPCHAT
What is the URL of the company's political ad database?	Here	Here	Here	Here
What timeframe of political ads are included?	May 7, 2018 – present	May 31, 2018 – present	June 28, 2018 – present	June 25, 2018 – present
How often is the company's political ad archive updated?	Daily	Weekly	Daily	Daily
How long are ads kept in the company's archive?	7 years	Unclear	At least 7 days, but no set time frame beyond that. Additionally, ads can disappear from the database if they are deleted by the sponsors, and they can also disappear if the Twitter account that sponsored them is suspended or deleted.	Unclear
Is the company's political ad library searchable online?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No (you must download the data to search it)
Is data from the company's ad database downloadable?	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Does the company disclose the aggregate amount spent on political ads in its database?	Yes	Yes	No	No (but it isn't hard to calculate in the downloadable spreadsheet)
Does the company disclose the aggregate number of political ads in its database?	Yes	Yes	No	No (but it isn't hard to calculate in the downloadable spreadsheet)
What is disclosed about an ad's cost?	Cost of ads given in a broad range; aggregate spent by each page is shown online and in the downloadable files	Cost of ads given in a broad range; aggregate spent by each advertiser is shown in the downloadable files	For ad buys exceeding $100, the exact cost is disclosed	Exact cost is disclosed
What is disclosed about ad impressions?	Number of impressions an ad makes is given in a broad range	Number of impressions an ad makes is given in a broad range	For ads earning at least 1,000 impressions, the exact impression count is disclosed, rounded to the nearest hundred	Exact impression count is disclosed
How can the company's online ad library be searched?	- By "active" or "inactive" ads - By candidate name - By disclaimer - By group name - By keyword - By page name - By platform (Facebook vs. Instagram) - By timeframe (all dates, last day, last 7 days, last 30 days, or last 90 days)	- By amount (within ranges) - By candidate or advertiser - By format (image, text, or video) - By number of impressions (within ranges) - By specific date or date range	By the name of the Twitter account sponsoring ads (which is usually, but not always, the same as the advertiser). No additional sorting or filtering options.	Not applicable. You must download the data to search it.
What do you need to know about using the downloadable data files?	Aggregate spending and ad counts totals by sponsor for the last day, the last week, the last 90 days, or since the start of the database in May 2018 — for all Facebook properties or by state. You cannot filter any of these datasets by date or date range outside of these four categories, but you can sort by number of ads or total spent.	Datasets on advertisers, ads, campaigns, targeting, and keyword spending can be downloaded showing all records since May 2018. You can filter for more specific timeframes after you download the entire database, and you can sort by date, cost, number of impressions, etc.	Nothing can be downloaded.	The downloadble files and easy to use and sort. There is one file for 2018, and one file for 2019. Each show the following: - the exact amount spent on each ad - the exact number of impressions - the date the ad began running - the date the ad stopped running - the organization name of the ad's sponsor - the ad sponsor's billing address (if they provided it) - targeting information for each ad - a unique ID for each ad - a unique URL for each ad