

An Audit of Facebook's Political Ad Policy Enforcement

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

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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.



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”)



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TAKE THE

FIRST STEP TO

Facebook's **political ad policy enforcement**

- › **Catch undeclared** ads that are political

The screenshot shows a Facebook ad interface. At the top, it indicates the ad is 'Inactive' and ran from 'Sep 18, 2018 - Sep 18, 2018'. Below this, it lists 'Platforms', 'Categories', and 'Impressions: <1 d.'. A notification icon is next to the text 'This ad ran without a disclaimer'. The ad ID is '469652216872448'. A red-bordered box highlights a message: 'This ad ran without a disclaimer. After the ad started running, we determined that the ad was about social issues, elections or politics and required the label. The ad was taken down.' Below the notification, the ad is attributed to 'Donald J. Trump' as a 'Sponsored' post. The ad content includes the text 'Get Your Tickets NOW' and 'NEVADA TRUMP RALLY THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 20'. The main text of the ad reads: 'President Trump asked us to invite YOU to his campaign rally in NEVADA on Thursday, September 20 @ 7 pm.' At the bottom, there is a partial view of a crowd of people at a rally.

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

Detected as political by Facebook

Not detected by Facebook

40,191 *

False positive
(subsection 5.2)

32,487 *

True positive
(subsection 5.1)

116,963 §

False negative
(subsection 6.3)

Not political

Actually political

Precision: 0.45

Recall: 0.22

F₁ 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

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

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

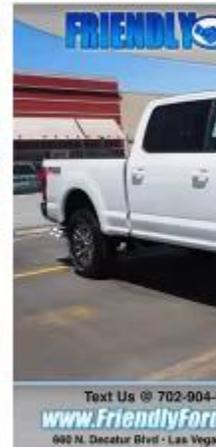
Example falsely flagged ads

 **Friendly Ford - Las Vegas**
Sponsored
ID: 3631264633564503

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



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



2020 Ford F-250 Super Duty | For only \$66,800

 **The News Break - News Break**
Gesponsord
ID: 3230741887020937

US News: Silky Peanut Butter Pie Recipe. Install news app trusted by millions to stay informed of latest US local news!

Never Miss Any Trending NEWS

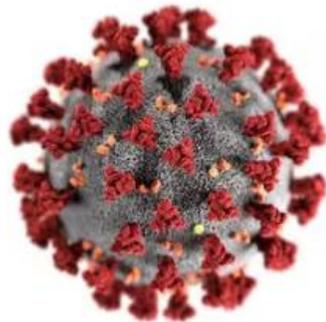


WWW.NEWSBREAKAPP.COM
Breaking news from US!
Connecting to the iTunes Store.

Nu installeren

 **SmartNews : Local Breaking News**
Gesponsord
ID: 272146773868279

11 new cases of COVID-19 confirmed in Madison County; 3,031 total cases. Install SmartNews for free to read more.



[HTTPS://APPS.APPLE.COM/US/APP/SMARTNEWS-LOCAL-BREA...](https://apps.apple.com/us/app/smartnews-local-breaking-news/id1467738682)
Local Madison County News
SmartNews is the award-winning news app downloaded by 40+ million readers in 100+ countries! SmartNews analyzes...

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: 969996336828420

Geen moskee in onze gemeente. LIKE als je het eens bent!



Vlaams Belang
Political Party, Organization
604,813 people like this

Like Page

MR - Mouvement Réformateur
Sponsored
ID: 3294645283949556

Inscrivez-vous au Libre Débat et abordons ensemble les thématiques clés de l'avenir du pays ! Évènement 100% en ligne, accessible à tous !



LE LIBRE DÉBAT

Elizabeth Warren
Sponsored
ID: 812272636232502

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.



ENDS AT MIDNIGHT
20% OFF EVERYTHING
Use code ShopFromHome20

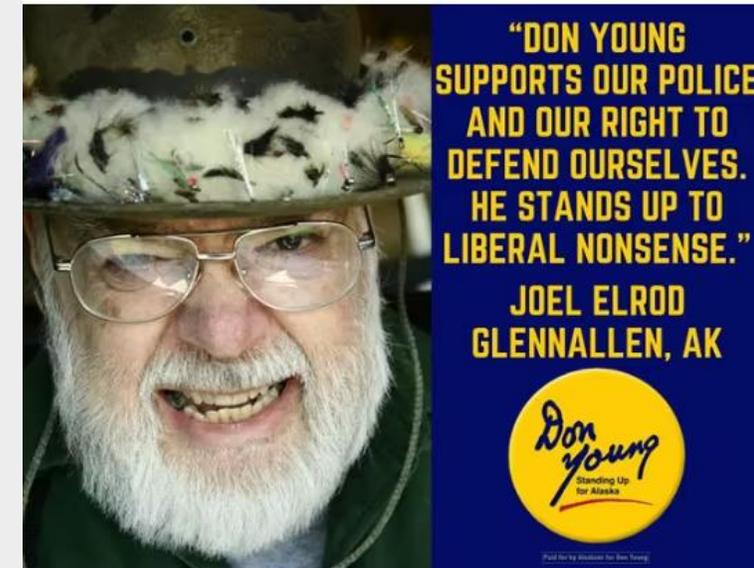
Progressive Turnout Project
Sponsored
ID: 2783976068510291

100% of proceeds support our work.



VOTING MATTERS

Don Young
Sponsored
ID: 589568758425595



"DON YOUNG SUPPORTS OUR POLICE AND OUR RIGHT TO DEFEND OURSELVES. HE STANDS UP TO LIBERAL NONSENSE."
JOEL ELROD GLENNALLEN, AK

Don Young
Standing Up for Alaska

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://www.instagram.com/VictorLePochat)

<https://osf.io/7tw3e/>

<https://lepoch.at>



NYU Ad Observatory

By NYU Cybersecurity for Democracy

adobservatory.org

KU LEUVEN

DistriNet

fwo



NYU

TANDON SCHOOL
OF ENGINEERING

**CYBERSECURITY
FOR DEMOCRACY**

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