The need for Universal Digital Ad Transparency

Social media platforms began disclosing some political ad data after U.S. Congressional hearings on Russian disinformation efforts aimed at the 2016 election. The data they share, however, is inadequate for comprehensive independent study. Gaps include lack of ad targeting information, delayed release of data, and limiting disclosures to certain categories; for a platform-by-platform summary, visit this link. In addition, a recent audit of Facebook’s political ad identification algorithm found it did a poor job, failing to identify political ads while erroneously flagging other ads as political. These gaps—together with the direct-to-consumer nature of digital ads; the documented illegal, discriminatory, misleading and manipulative content they may contain; the absence of FCC regulations; and the enormous growth of the digital ad industry, point to the urgent need for independent researchers and journalists to study both ad content and the platform practices that govern it.

How Universal Ad Transparency would work

The standard proposes that platforms disclose all types of compensated content, including traditional digital ads, branded content and native advertising. Transparency would be triggered if any one of three conditions are met:

- A platform allows ads to run without human review;
- A platform allows advertisers to microtarget audiences; or
- A platform has a reach greater than one-third of the U.S. adult population.

The standard describes in detail which data fields should be included and proposes that the federal government establish and maintain an online warehouse for this data, offer programmatic access via a searchable public API, and publish regular data summaries. Key information would include:

- **Advertiser information**—to help fight fake accounts;
- **Non-identifying targeting parameters**—to monitor predatory activity, such as targeting minors;
- **Ad creative data**—to understand the context of the ads;
- **Other information**—granular data on ad spending, dates active, indication of deletions or takedowns, as well as ad impressions, or number of times content enters screens.

Privacy concerns

Privacy is a top concern, and the standard proposes specific steps that platforms, researchers and the government should take to protect both user and advertiser privacy.

Platforms and services reviewed in developing the standard:

To view the Universal Digital Ad Transparency standard in full, visit A Standard for Digital Ad Transparency, published by Knight First Amendment Institute, December 2021, and authored by Laura Edelson, Cybersecurity for Democracy; Jason Chuang, Mozilla; and Erika Franklin Fowler, Travis Rideout and Michael Franz of Wesleyan Media Project.

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