On Microtargeting Socially Divisive Ads: A Case Study of Russia-Linked Ad Campaigns on Facebook

2016 U.S. Presidential Elections

What is the Trump-Russia Connection?
Investigate #Putingate

PUTIN
TRUMP
MAKE RUSSIA GREAT AGAIN!

2016
Social Media “Targeted” Advertising
These ads...
- exploited Facebook’s targeted advertising platform
- mostly contained divisive or polarizing content

<table>
<thead>
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<th>(in millions)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crime or Policing</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Immigration</td>
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<td>2.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guns</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Promote an upcoming event</td>
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<td>1.3</td>
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# Views by topic (Source: USA Today)
Targeted Advertising

- Facilitates selecting ad audience
- These websites gather detailed demographic, behavioral, location, and interest profiles of their users
- Enables “microtargeting”: choose small number of users with very specific attributes
Research Objectives

- How divisive is the content of the IRA ads?
- Were the targeting of the ads effectively done?
- What features of the Facebook Ads platform were leveraged in targeting the audience of the ads?
- 3,517 Ads
- Each with corresponding cost, impressions, clicks
- Avg.
  - Cost per Ad: 34.5 USD,
  - Impressions: 11,536,
  - Clicks: 1,062

Avg. CTR (%) of Facebook Ads
High Impact Ads

- Union of top 10% ads in each of cost, clicks, impressions, and CTR
- Run prior to the 2016 U.S. Elections
- >80% of cost, clicks, impressions
- 485 such ads
RQ1: Divisiveness of the IRA Ads

- U.S census-representative surveys (40% liberals, 40% conservatives, 20% moderate or neutral)
- 15-30 responses per ad
- Total 2,886 unique respondents

If they would report the ad shown

Reporting

Reaction: Approval / Disapproval

Approval

If they could identify false claims

False Claims
Reporting

- Whether they would “report / flag the content” of the ad shown.

- If they would, why do they find the ad inappropriate

For over 73% of the ads, at least 20% respondents reported the ad.

- It’s sexually inappropriate
- It’s violent or prohibited content
- It’s offensive
- It’s misleading or a scam
- I disagree with it
- It’s a false news story
- It’s a spam
- Something else
RQ1: Divisiveness of the IRA Ads

Ideological divisiveness

**Reporting**

**Approval**

**False Claims**
Parasite is an organism that lives in or on another organism and benefits by deriving nutrients at the host's expense.

About 20 million parasites live in the United States illegally. They exploit Americans and give nothing in return. Isn't it time to get rid of parasites that are destroying our country?

IT'S TIME TO GET RID OF PARASITES!

We Muslims of the United States are subject to Islamophobia from the media where regularly

TOP SCAPEGOATING MUSLIMS
May 29 at 12:00 pm, Washington DC

Reported by the Liberals
Not Reported by the Conservatives

Reported by the Conservatives
Not Reported by the Liberals
RQ2: How well was the targeting done?

**Reporting**

Proportion Reported

**Approval**

Approval Score

**False Claims**

Proportion FCs
RQ3: How the Facebook Ads Platform helped?

Attribute-based targeting

- Demographics (gender, age, location, language)
- Interests (eg. interested in African-American civil rights movement)
- Behaviors (eg. Individuals with ethnic affinity: African-American)

Facebook attribute suggestion. (eg. similar pages with demographic skewness): 64% of the ads used this feature
- Characterized the Russia-linked ad campaign on Facebook
- These ads were ideologically divisive
- Ten times more effective than a typical Facebook ad
- Biased especially in race and political leaning
- Ads targeted the users who are less likely to identify the inappropriateness
- Facebook Ads platform can likely be abused to create social discord

http://www.socially-divisive-ads.dcc.ufmg.br/

Thank You

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