Note: Images available at:
Immediate Release

New, enhanced AdObservatory.org provides transparency & insights on digital political spending

Free, public research tool, available in English & Spanish, features data viz on paid messaging across Facebook & Instagram.

BROOKLYN, New York, Wednesday, August 3, 2022 – Ahead of the U.S. midterm elections, projected to draw some $1.2 billion in digital political spending, NYU Cybersecurity for Democracy (C4D) at the NYU Tandon School of Engineering today launched a new, enhanced version of Ad Observatory – AdObservatory.org – available in both English and Spanish, with increased search functionality.

This public, free dashboard provides journalists and researchers with the ability to search digital political ad spending across Meta (formerly Facebook) properties, see visualizations of spending patterns, and search researched topics such as abortion, guns, and immigration. C4D unveiled the new site today in conjunction with the NABJ/NAHJ annual convention in Las Vegas.

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Ad Observatory dashboard: AdObservatory.org

This updated version of Ad Observatory builds on the project's success in the 2020 elections, when the site was used by dozens of researchers and journalists to identify spending by political candidates, demonstrate shortcomings in Facebook's transparency, and to research investigations about scams and political extremism. For this new version of Ad Observatory, the C4D team met with journalists and researchers to find out what kinds of questions they want to answer that they can't find with other tools. An interest in Spanish-language ads topped the list, as did the need for data visualizations providing insights on the messaging within the ads, via topics and keyword searches.

"We know that in 2020, Spanish-language political misinformation popped up as a major problem on digital platforms, but that transparency tools were not tuned to be able to capture it." said Laura Edelson, co-director of NYU Cybersecurity for Democracy, and postdoctoral researcher in Computer Science at NYU's Tandon School of Engineering. "With this new version of Ad Observatory, journalists and researchers can track and analyze trends with both English and Spanish-language political ads."

"The lack of transparency on political advertising on Meta and other digital platforms means that the public is vulnerable in ways that we don't even understand sufficiently," said C4D co-director Damon McCoy. "With Ad Observatory we're shining some light in corners so that researchers and journalists can find these weak spots and suggest ways to make online spaces safer."

In recent elections, political advertisers have increasingly turned to digital platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, to influence voters; in 2020, one out of five campaign dollars was spent on digital ads. In the absence of mandated transparency, the public remains vulnerable to decisions by private platforms on what information they make public and how they do it.

For more details, please visit: https://cybersecurityfordemocracy.org/ad_observatory

About Ad Observatory

Ad Observatory is a project of NYU Cybersecurity for Democracy, a research-based, nonpartisan, and independent effort to expose online threats to our social fabric — and recommend how to counter them. It is a part of the Center for Cybersecurity at the NYU Tandon School of Engineering.

About the New York University Tandon School of Engineering
The NYU Tandon School of Engineering dates to 1854, the founding date for both the New York University School of Civil Engineering and Architecture and the Brooklyn Collegiate and Polytechnic Institute. A January 2014 merger created a comprehensive school of education and research in engineering and applied sciences as part of a global university, with close connections to engineering programs at NYU Abu Dhabi and NYU Shanghai. NYU Tandon is rooted in a vibrant tradition of entrepreneurship, intellectual curiosity, and innovative solutions to humanity's most pressing global challenges. Research at Tandon focuses on vital intersections between communications/IT, cybersecurity, and data science/AI/robotics systems and tools and critical areas of society that they influence, including emerging media, health, sustainability, and urban living. We believe diversity is integral to excellence, and are creating a vibrant, inclusive, and equitable environment for all of our students, faculty and staff. For more information, visit engineering.nyu.edu.

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