10/28/2020

**Dear Mark Zuckerberg,**

Voting has already begun in one of the most consequential elections in U.S. history. More than ever before in American politics, the members of the public need to know who is trying to influence them and how.

Yet at this critical moment for the country, Facebook has threatened to shut down an independent research effort studying political ad targeting on the platform. In a cease + desist letter, Facebook directed New York University to shut down its Ad Observer browser plug-in, a tool that allows Facebook users to volunteer to contribute information about the ads and ad targeting they encounter on the platform. Facebook also demanded that the project delete all the data it has collected.

Ad Observer allows journalists and researchers to better understand the political misinformation and manipulation that spreads daily on your platform. It has been a resource for substantive reporting on the upcoming election, used by dozens of newsrooms, from Florida to Utah, from outlets like the Houston Chronicle and Missouri Independent to Buzzfeed and The Markup.

Facebook claims its motive for threatening Ad Observer is that browser plugins and extensions, like Ad Observer, could violate Facebook users' privacy. But Ad Observer only collects information about the ads people see, not personal posts or users' personal information. What *is* true is that the Ad Observatory project has revealed serious flaws in Facebook's advertising transparency policies. The Ad Observatory project helped researchers and journalists demonstrate that Facebook:

- Routinely fails to include political ads in the Facebook Ad Library;
- Allows political campaigns to use targeting in manipulative ways to reach voters;
- Provides confusing and contradictory information on how much is being spent on political ads;
- Provides ways for foreign governments to reach U.S. voters with manipulative content;
- Gives opportunities for dark money groups across the political spectrum to use Facebook to spread misleading messages;
- Still sells discriminatory ads — despite promising to stop after a lawsuit from civil rights groups.

Facebook professes to be dedicated to advertising transparency. But its actions against Ad Observatory are part of a record revealing otherwise. Ahead of the EU elections last year, Facebook blocked similar tools, which were also designed to address similar gaps and flaws in Facebook's Ad Library.

Preserving a healthy democracy requires that the public, journalists and policymakers have access to credible, verifiable information and research. Facebook and all other platforms should stop interfering with researchers and journalists who are studying the platform in the public interest.

**We call on Facebook to withdraw its cease and desist demand for the Ad Observer plug-in tool.**

Instead, Facebook should use the findings from Ad Observer and other monitoring tools to improve political ad transparency, including Facebook's own tool which The New York Times has dubbed "effectively useless." Indeed, Facebook along with other platforms should publicly disclose advertising on their platforms, including ad spending and targeting.

The world is watching. Facebook must do better.

**Signed,**

**Access Now**

**Accountable Tech**

**AI Now Institute at NYU**

**American Press Institute**

**Arab American Institute (AAI)**

**ARTICLE 19**

**Association of Alternative Newsmedia**

**Benton Institute for Broadband & Society**

**Center for American Progress Action Fund**

**Center for Democracy and Technology**

**Center for Digital Democracy**

**Colorado Media Project**

**Colorado News Collaborative**

**Common Cause**

**Common Sense Media**

**Consumer Federation of America**

**Consumer Reports**

**Data & Society**

**Electronic Frontier Foundation**

**Fight for the Future**

**Free Press**

**Freedom of the Press Foundation**

**Global Project Against Hate and Extremism**

**Global Witness**

**Harmony Labs**

**Institute for Data, Democracy & Politics at George Washington University**

**Institute for Nonprofit News**

**Institute for Strategic Dialogue**

**Internet Archive**

**Maplight**

**The Markup**

**MediaJustice**

**Mother Jones**

**Mozilla Foundation**

**National Conference on Citizenship**

**National Hispanic Media Coalition**

**New America's Open Technology Institute**

**New Mexico Local News Fund**

**North Carolina Local News Lab Fund**

**NYC Media Lab**

**Online News Association**

**Open Media and Information Companies Initiative (OPEN MIC)**

**Open the Government**

**PEN America**

**Public Knowledge**

**Public News Service**

**Ranking Digital Rights**

**Society of Professional Journalists**

**Stop Online Violence Against Women Inc.**

**The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies**

**UCLA Center for Critical Internet Inquiry**

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