Understanding the Complexity of Detecting Political Ads

Vera Sosnovik and Oana Goga
Université Grenoble Alpes, LIG/SLIDE, CNRS
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Motivation
The rise on online political advertising

• 2012 US election cycle, digital media accounted for 1.5% of political ad spend

• 2016 US election cycle, digital media accounted for 3% of political ad spend

• 2020 US election cycle, digital media accounted for 18% of political ad spend
Misuses of political ads

**Cambridge Analytica**: political ads targeted based on personality

**Russian Internet Research Agency**: foreign interference in elections
Mitigating risks with political ads
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Platforms’ regulations:

• **Facebook**: advertisers have to verify their account, have to self-label their political ads and advertisers can only send political ads in the country they reside

• **Google**: advertisers can only use geographic location, age, gender, and contextual targeting to target political ads

• **Twitter and TikTok**: ban all political ads
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Věra Jourová (European Commission vice-president), Dec 2020
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**Underlying assumption**: we know which ads are political
Key problem

Can we reliably distinguish political ads from non-political ads?
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Christians around the world are suffering for their faith, and there is a critical need for Bibles to help them stand strong. Help us meet our goal to reach 10,150 persecuted Christians with God’s Word and training to disciple more believers.
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Help us force companies to stop the destruction of rainforests caused by the production of palm oil. Greenpeace will see to it that companies keep their promise to use only palm oil that doesn’t come at the cost of clearing forests.
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If socialism is really so great, why don’t socialist professors teach for free??
This paper

Can reliably distinguish political ads from non-political ads?

We take an empirical approach to test the assumption by:

• Analyzing if people agree on what ads are political
• Analyzing the characteristics of ads considered political by ordinary people
• Analyzing the characteristics of ads that lead to disagreement
Do platforms agree what ads are political?
Definitions of political ads

- Made by, on behalf of, or about a candidate for public office, a political figure, a political party or advocates for the outcome of an election to public office; or
- About any election, referendum, or ballot initiative, including "go out and vote" or election campaigns; or
- About social issues in any place where the ad is being placed; or
- Regulated as political advertising.

Social issues: civil and social rights, crime, economy, education, environmental politics, guns, health, immigration, political values and government, security and foreign policy
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Definitions of political ads

**Political actors ads**

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**Election ads**

Social issues: civil and social rights, crime, economy, education, environmental politics, guns, health, immigration, political values and government, security and foreign policy
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Political actors ads
Election ads
Issue ads

Social issues: civil and social rights, crime, economy, education, environmental politics, guns, health, immigration, political values and government, security and foreign policy
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No consensus across platforms

- Facebook and TikTok are considering issue ads as political
- Twitter and Google do not consider issue ads as political
Do users agree on what ads are political?
Data set: ProPublica

- ProPublica is an investigative journalism organization
- Dataset contains labels from volunteers and advertisers
- 55k ads with at least 3 volunteer votes
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Do volunteers agree which ads are political?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Political Ads</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong political ads (fr=1)</td>
<td>26k</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political ads (0.5 ≤ fr &lt; 1)</td>
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**Answer:** No! Volunteers disagree on more than 50% of ads
Do volunteers and advertisers agree?

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<th>Type of Ads</th>
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<th>Officially Not Political</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong political ads</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political ads</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>26%</td>
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Do volunteers and advertisers agree?

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Answer: No! Many ads considered political by advertisers are not regarded as political by volunteers.
What are the characteristics of the ads labeled as political?
Analysis of advertisers’ categories

• Advertisers have to select a page’s category from a pre-defined list
• Extracted categories for 82% of advertisers
## Analysis of advertisers’ categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Political actors</th>
<th>NGOs</th>
<th>Charity</th>
<th>Public Figure</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Business</th>
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Analysis of advertisers’ categories

- Most strong political ads come from political actors
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- Official political ads has a wide variety of advertisers’ categories
Analysis of advertisers’ categories

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- Official political ads has a wide variety of advertisers’ categories
- Implication: specific electoral legislation should not regulate (and impose restrictions on) ads only from political actors (as some countries do)
Observations
• The ice-cream company "Ben and Jerry" (a business) is inciting citizens to vote
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• Center for Reproductive Rights (NGO) is addressing advocacy messages about abortion issues
Observations

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• Center for Reproductive Rights (NGO) is addressing advocacy messages about abortion issues
• World Food Program (a charity) is addressing social issues (do not have association to legislation)
Analysis of ads’ messages

Study ads’ messages:

- 300 random ads with disclaimer and 300 random ads without disclaimer from each group of ads.
- 200 ads without disclaimer from AdAnalyst dataset.
- Each worker labeled 20 random ads from the pool of 2300 ads.
- Each ad was labeled by 3 workers.

For each ad, we asked the following questions:

- Is this ad made by, on behalf of, or about a political actor?
- Is this ad about elections?
- Does this ad refer to a social issue?
**Analysis of ads’ messages**

- A large fraction of ads labeled as political are about social issues (social issues ads do not mention a political actor or elections!)
- Implication: issue ads should be considered political! (Google and Twitter do not consider them political)
A wide range of ads are considered political

Should all ads related to social issues be considered political and have the same restrictions? If not: where should we draw the line between political and humanitarian?
What can we learn from disagreement?
Advertisers vs. volunteers

- Both advertisers and volunteers underreport ads about social issues
  Reason: the definition of social issue ads are too broad which leads to different interpretations among people
- Advertisers mislabel ads as political or non-political
  Reason: advertisers maybe want to avoid scrutiny; they are forced to label their ads as political by enforcement mechanisms
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  • but ... social issue ads create confusion between volunteers and advertisers
• Should we treat ads about more politicized issues differently than ads about less politicized issues?
• Should we treat ads that call for precise actions differently than ads that just inform citizens?
• How much weight should be given to the advertiser's identity?
The end