



**ASPEN TECH
POLICY HUB**

PROJECT



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Combating Election Disinformation by Shining Light on Dark Ads

Modernizing disclosure rules for misleading online political ads used to spread disinformation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every day, tens of millions of Americans view political advertisements on social media that are disguised as unpaid content, also known as “dark ads.” According to researchers from New York University, between May 2018 and June 2019, more than half of Facebook pages that displayed U.S. political ads concealed the identities of their backers. The \$1.1 billion spent on political ads on Facebook in that period makes plain that some political organizations are eager to sway the public’s vote without disclosing that they are paying for advertising. This project proposes two solutions: a series of actions that the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and Federal Trade Commission (FTC) could take to make online political ads more transparent and a game that educates potential voters about dark ads.



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THE PROBLEM

“Dark ads” are pieces of paid content on social media platforms that are not labeled explicitly as paid. There are several varieties, including: news sites paying online platforms to silently elevate their stories; influential users resharing ads without “paid ad” labels; and political campaigns paying for the ability to hypertarget direct messages online. Dark ads like these allow malicious actors to spread disinformation without accountability and deny American voters their right to make an informed decision on Election Day.

” *More than half of Facebook pages that displayed U.S. political ads from May 2018 until June 2019 concealed the identities of their backers.*

THE SOLUTION

This project proposes two solutions: a series of policy proposals for the FEC and the FTC and an online game that educates potential voters about dark ads. First, we created a suite of policy proposals for the FEC and FTC that would help make online political ads more transparent. The policy recommendations could be implemented solely by the executive branch, and they focus on making sure online political ads are properly disclosed as such and that funding sources are made clear. Second, we created a game that simulates a social media feed the day after a major (fake) event. Players will be challenged to separate fact from fiction in this feed filled with normal posts, misleading news stories, and dark ads. After a short quiz, players will be shown all the hidden paid influence that helped shape their opinion about the event.

ABOUT THE HUB

The Aspen Tech Policy Hub is a Bay Area policy incubator, training a new generation of tech policy entrepreneurs. We take tech experts, teach them the policy process, and support them in creating outside-the-box solutions to society’s problems.

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