

Facebook Political Advertising Transparency Report | Illuminating

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Campaign advertising is predicted to break spending records this election cycle. Online, advertisers have already spent over \$605 million running ads on Facebook and Google alone, while total digital advertising for the 2020 presidential election cycle is projected to reach at least \$1.82 billion.

The importance of analyzing digital campaign advertising in particular is punctuated by heightened concerns about unethical and/or illegal online advertising behaviors, from the spread of misinformation, to spending by dark money groups, or the possibility that foreign actors may seek to interfere in the election cycle.

Journalists and researchers have cautioned that Facebook does not provide the type of data availability and transparency that is required to provide comprehensive reporting on campaign advertising.

Facebook's Ad Library was created to store copies of ads that are purchased and run on Facebook and Instagram, and to make this information more accessible and transparent to the public. Since its inauguration in 2018, the Ad Library has been embroiled in controversy: the library's use-value to journalists and researchers has been mitigated by widespread bugs; the library makes available limited data; and the policies on campaign advertising are weak, which limits the ability to regulate dark money spending and the circulation of misinformation.

This report summarizes the challenges and concerns that the Illuminating project's team encountered when using Facebook's Ad Library to conduct research on the 2020 U.S. presidential election. After introducing and contextualizing the Illuminating project and Facebook's Ad Library, we review three critical problems that we encountered ...

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