

Facebook's threat to the NYU Ad Observatory is an attack on ethical research | Nieman Journalism Lab

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Late last week, Facebook [sent a legal threat](#) to the [NYU Ad Observatory](#), a research project that collects and studies political ads on Facebook. The timing of this threat could not be worse. The Ad Observatory is one of the best sources available to understand how political advertisements are being deployed on social media. But the threat is also a threat to a critical form of ethical data collection, and an attempt by one of the most powerful and controversial websites in the world to cut off scrutiny of its practices.

Facebook calls what the Ad Observatory does “scraping,” but that’s not what this is. The data source, the “[Ad Observer](#),” is a browser plugin. Researchers often use plugins like these to collect information for data science and algorithmic accountability projects. It isn’t a script serially visiting websites in some independent or autonomous way from a human at a browser. It is a small piece of software, installed by the data subject, that extracts data from the local copy of a webpage that is inherently made when a person loads a website onto a computer.

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