UW-Madison: Research provides insight on anonymous organizations targeting Facebook users

Posted on Monday, Apr 9, 2018

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Facebook's new measures towards transparency still not sufficient for fighting back against anonymous groups

The UW-Madison research, "The Stealth Media? Groups and Targets Behind Divisive Issue Campaigns on Facebook," conducted by Professor Young Mie Kim and her team provide valuable insight into the targeting of key voters with divisive political ads on Facebook. This research is the first, large-scale, systematic empirical analysis of groups and targets behind divisive issue campaigns on Facebook.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal has led to many questions about what exactly happened behind the scenes of these political ads, who the responsible groups were and who exactly they were targeting. Kim, a professor from the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Journalism and Mass Communication, and her team Project DATA (Digital Ad Tracking & Analysis) have many of the answers to these questions.

Project DATA investigated the targeting of U.S. voters by suspicious groups ahead of the 2016 presidential election across digital platforms. The study examined Facebook ads collected between Sept. 28 and Nov. 8, 2016, and Kim's team identified thousands of campaign-style ads arousing fear, posing threats and sowing divisions among the public. The majority of the sponsors for those ads were not registered with the Federal Election Commission, violating current campaign finance law.

Furthermore, a significant number of the sponsors for those divisive-issue campaign

messages fit Kim's criteria of being suspicious groups. Of the suspicious groups identified, one out of six later turned out to be Kremlin-linked Russian groups, verified by the data released by the House Intelligence Committee. But this still leaves the source of the majority of these suspicious groups unknown.

"By definition, suspicious groups are unidentifiable, unknown actors. Even with additional research on these groups with FEC, IRS-based data and media watchdog groups, we were unable to identify those sponsors or sources. Most of the groups were taken down by Facebook during the investigation.," Kim said. "This creates little to no evidence of legitimacy for the sponsor, which is part of what Project DATA investigated."

Kim also found a significant volume of nonprofits who did not have FEC reporting requirements (potentially, dark money groups), promoting fearmongering among the public. Altogether, the volume of ads run by these anonymous, non-FEC groups was four times larger than FEC groups.

Interestingly, some of the groups seemed to be connected as they were running the exact same or similar digital campaigns.

Who did those anonymous group target on Facebook with divisive issue campaigns? The research suggests that key battleground states — especially Pennsylvania and Wisconsin — were notably the most highly targeted. Furthermore, the average audience reach of divisive issue ad campaigns in each of the two most targeted states was well above its Trump vote margin in the 2016 elections.

Apart from targeting key battleground states, the political ads on Facebook also targeted specific individuals. Compared to the national average, low-income individuals were specifically targeted with ads on the issues of immigration and racial conflict. Meanwhile, whites, compared to any other racial or ethnic group, were also highly targeted with the issue of immigration.

As the 2016 presidential election occurred more than a year ago, many wonder why this information is just coming to light now. Public monitoring of digital political campaigns on platforms like Facebook is nearly impossible, as digital ads are designed to appear only on a particular individual's timeline. This makes it difficult for researchers, journalists and investigators to locate and trace these ads.

Currently, there are no laws in place that adequately address digital political

advertising. Consequently, unidentifiable anonymous groups including dark money groups, unregistered groups and even foreign entities, are prevalent on digital platforms.

Ahead of Mark Zuckerberg's hearing testimony, Facebook announced new measures of transparency to combat foreign interference with the elections.

"Facebook's new measures are definitely a significant step. However, it still lacks an astute understanding of how unknown actors take advantage of the platform," Kim said. "My research shows that anonymous groups, with a few exceptions, are not popular pages. If Facebook verifies top pages only, we will still not be able to combat foreign interference."

Her research from Project DATA was recently accepted for the publication in the academic journal, Political Communication.

For more information on Kim's research on suspicious Facebook groups' use of targeted political ads in the 2016 election, please contact Joy Martell at joy.martell@wisc.edu or 608-265-4507.