Laura Edelson
2018

• Begin collecting data from Facebook, Google, and Twitter political ad transparency tools. First to make aggregated statistics of Facebook and Twitter publicly available, before the companies did.

• Piloted real-time monitoring of political ad spending during an election (not publicly accessible)
  • Are these tools good enough for real time monitoring? Barely, but yes!
• “An Analysis of United States Online Political Ad Transparency”
  • Analysis of Facebook, Twitter, and Google’s political ad transparency offerings
  • Identified policy enforcement issues, unusual geographic/demographic distributions of spend

• Begin building Ad Observer – browser extension to crowdsource ad observations

• Monitored 2019 Canadian election: publicly visible website with aggregated statistics (Top Spenders, Geo/Demo distributions)
2020

• “A Security Analysis of the Facebook Advertising Library”
  - Identified security vulnerabilities and identified patterns of abuse using Facebook’s Library for Ads on Social Issues, Elections, and Politics.

• Released Ad Observer browser extension
  - Received C&D from Facebook in October 2020

• Released Ad Observatory, public website with visualizations of spend on Facebook ads by candidate, race, state, etc. Provided aggregated statistics and ad-level data
2021

• Understanding Engagement with (Mis)information News Sources on Facebook
  • Found engagement with content from misinformation news sources was 6x that of non-misinformation sources

• Facebook terminated our accounts

• A Standard for Universal Digital Ad Transparency
2022

• An Audit of Facebook’s Political Ad Policy Enforcement
  • Enforcement accuracy varies widely globally. In US, low false negative rate, but very high false positive rate. Elsewhere, the reverse is true.
  
• (Completed PhD, woo hoo!)

• Released new version of Ad Observatory, now allowing complex visualizations of spend by keyword or topic in addition to elections, spenders, and regions
The Team

Laura Edelson
Laura Edelson is a Postdoctoral Researcher at New York University with the Cybersecurity for Democracy project. She leads the Ad Observatory and Ad Observer projects, which aim to increase public transparency of digital advertising, particularly during elections. Her research focuses on studying the spread of misinformation and other forms of harmful content in both paid and organic content on Facebook.

Damon McCoy
Damon McCoy is an associate professor of Computer Science and Engineering at the New York University Tandon School of Engineering. His research focuses on the intersection of cybersecurity issues with society. He received his Ph.D., MS, and BS in Computer Science from the University of Colorado, Boulder. McCoy is the recipient of an NSF CAREER award and a former NSF CRA/CCC Computer Innovation Fellow.