Ukraine as a Political Tool
in Facebook Sponsored Content

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Abstract—This work provides an investigation of the narratives in Facebook sponsored content about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Advertisers used Ukraine to promote narratives related to their goals. Different types of advertisers spent their money on varying demographics, and some reached more viewers while spending less money.

Index Terms—Ukraine, Russia, Facebook, Advertisements, Sponsored Content

I. INTRODUCTION

We examine the narratives in advertisements about Ukraine posted on Facebook just before and during the Russian invasion. Similar work has studied narratives with data from the Facebook ad library, including topics like COVID-19 and the 2019 Spanish General Elections [1], [2]. Sponsored content gives a unique look into how various groups spent their money to serve political narratives to billions of Facebook users during the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

II. METHOD

First we collected political advertisements from January 1, 2021 – June 6, 2022, with a list of almost 40 English, German, Russian, and Ukrainian keywords relevant to the invasion. We found the top 5% of advertisers posted 78% of advertisements, so we focused on just these advertisers. We classified these advertisers as "Charity," "Religious," "Left," "Right," or "None" and rated their credibility when available.[1]

III. RESULTS

Advertisers used the Russian invasion of Ukraine to promote narratives related to their goals, for example to attract readers to their content. This can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, where the most common terms like "read," "full," and "news report" direct users to other content posted by the advertiser. Additionally, as shown in Figure 3, left-leaning advertisers urge viewers to "fight," "defeat," and "take" GOP seats.

Figure 4 presents statistics about the numbers of ads and impressions, expenditures, and targeted demographics for the different categories of advertisers. Not surprisingly, charities dominate. Right-leaning advertisers spent less on fewer ads but

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[1]Ratings for credibility and political leaning of websites were taken from Media Bias/Fact Check (https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/).

Fig. 1. Content of low-credibility advertisements. Larger word size indicates higher frequency.

Fig. 2. Content of right-leaning advertisements. Larger word size indicates higher frequency.

Fig. 3. Content of left-leaning advertisements. Larger word size indicates higher frequency.
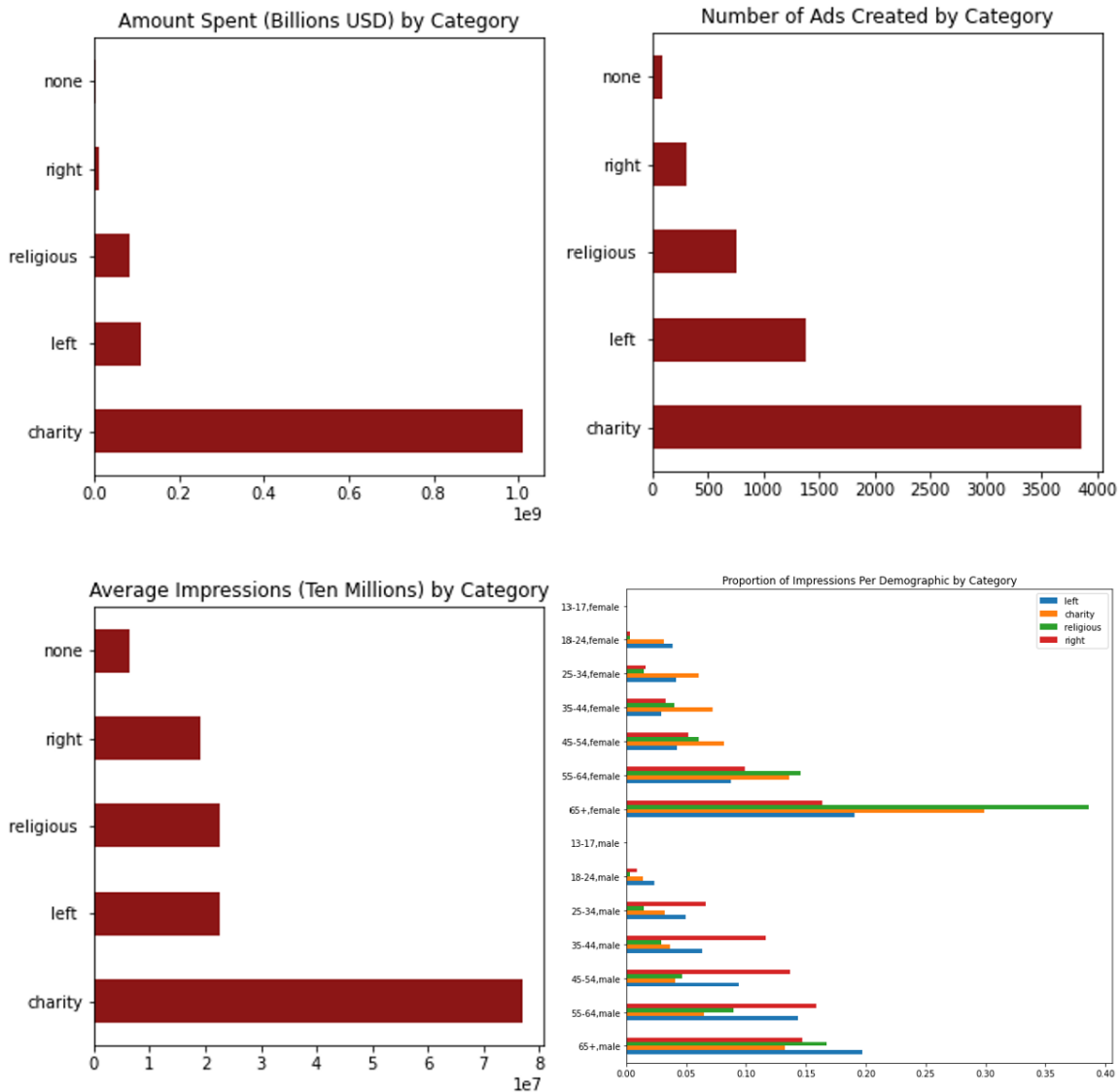
Fig. 4. Impressions, number of advertisements, amount spent, and demographics for each category of advertiser.

reached a similar number of users as left-leaning advertisers. Right-leaning advertisers also targeted a higher proportion of younger male viewers than left-leaning advertisers. Finally, charitable and religious advertisers targeted mostly older female users.

IV. CONCLUSION

This work investigates narratives in Facebook sponsored content about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We found that advertisers used Ukraine to promote narratives related to their goals. We also found that different types of advertisers spent their money on varying demographics, and some reached more viewers while spending less money.

Future research could include a more in-depth look at the narratives promoted to different demographics, for example the narratives that right-leaning advertisers promoted to younger male viewers. The phenomenon of right-leaning advertisers spending less money than left-leaning advertisers and reaching more impressions also warrants further investigation.

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