On Microtargeting Socially Divisive Ads: A Case Study of Russia-Linked Ad Campaigns on Facebook

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2016 U.S. Presidential Elections

Social Media "Targeted" Advertising

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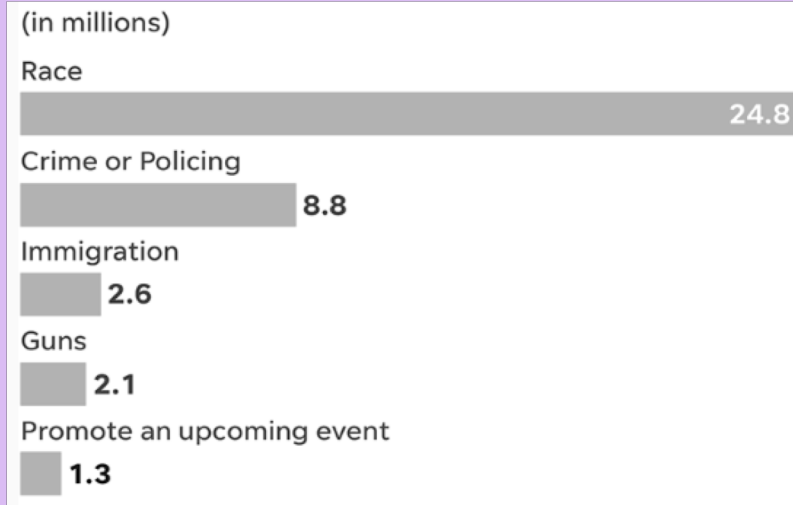
HOUSE DEMOCRATS RELEASE 3,500 RUSSIA-LINKED FACEBOOK ADS

ON THURSDAY, DEMOCRATS on the House Intelligence Committee published more than 3,500 Facebook and

These ads…

- exploited Facebook's targeted advertising platform

- mostly contained divisive or polarizing content

(in millions)	
Race	24.8
Crime or Policing	8.8
Immigration	2.6
Guns	2.1
Promote an upcoming event	1.3

Views by topic (Source: USA Today)

Targeted Advertising

- Facilitates selecting ad audience

- These websites gather detailed **demographic**, **behavioral**, **location**, and **interest** profiles of their users

- Enables "microtargeting": choose small number of users with very specific attributes

Demographics

Find people based on traits like age, gender, relationship status, education, workplace, job titles and more.

Location

Reach people in areas where you want to do business. You can even create a radius around a store to help create more walk-ins.

Interests

Find people based on what they're into, like hobbies, favorite entertainment and more.
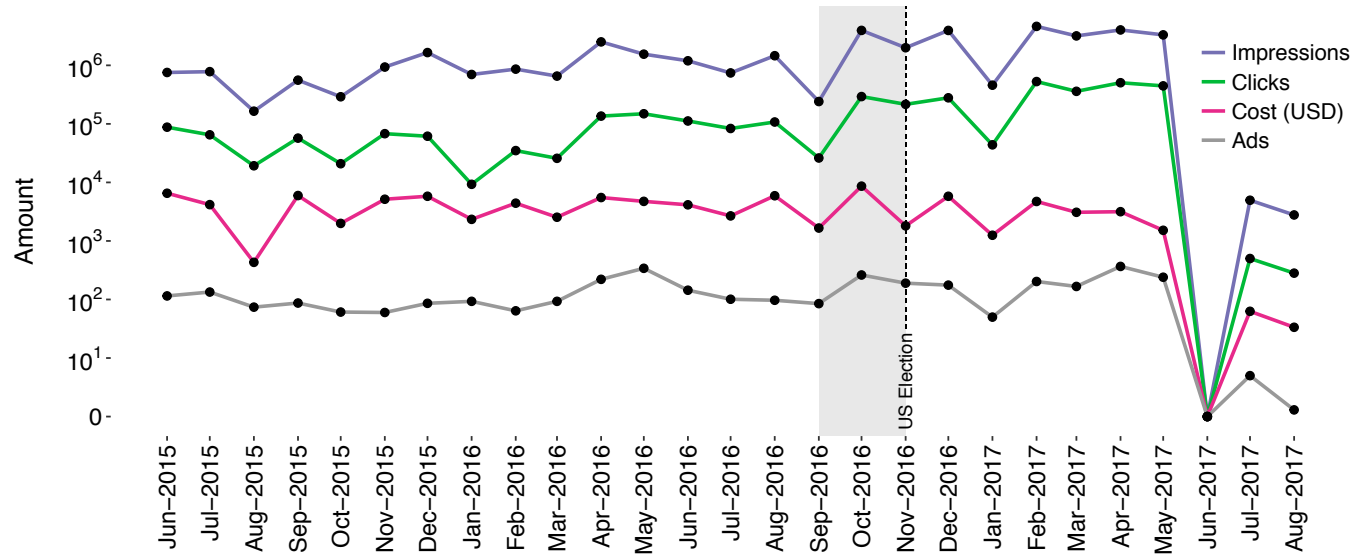
Behaviors

Reach people based on their purchase behaviors, device usage and other activities.
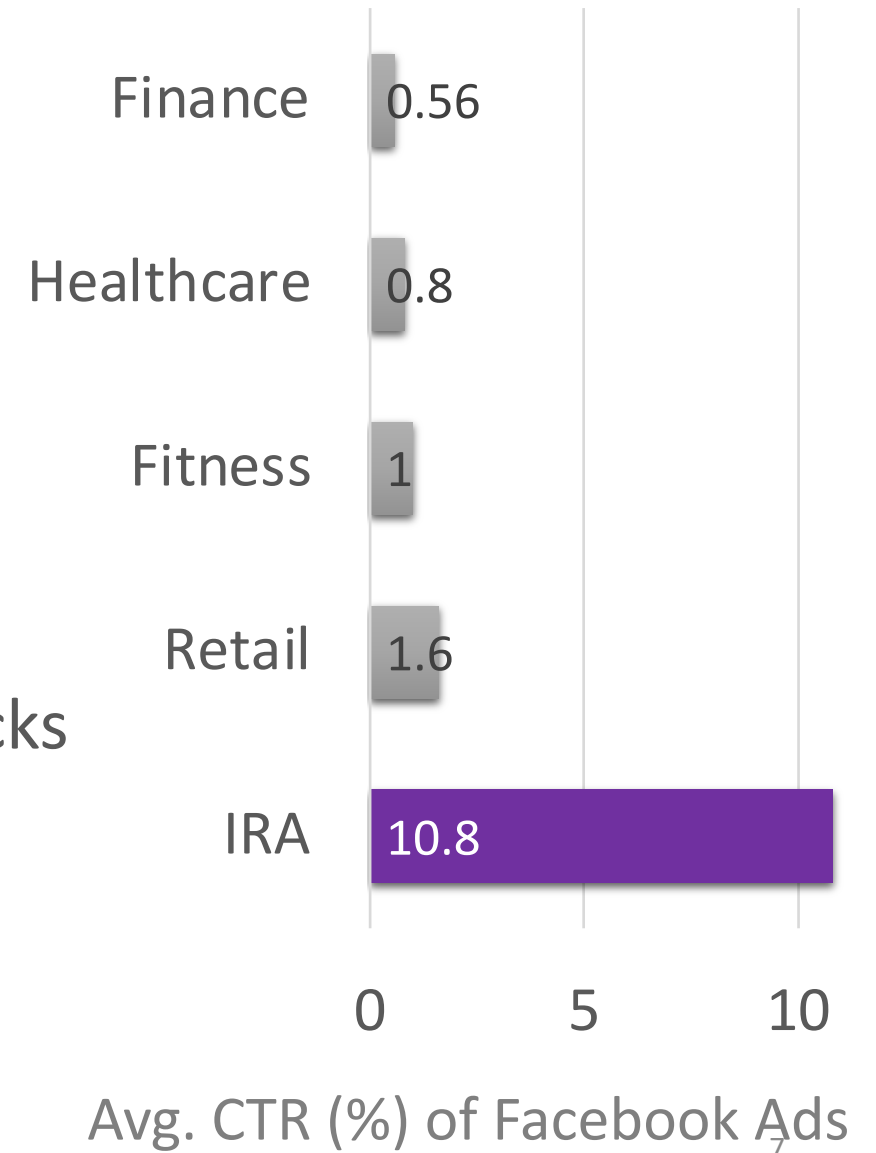
Research Objectives

- How divisive is the content of the IRA ads?

- Were the targeting of the ads effectively done?

- What features of the Facebook Ads platform were leveraged in targeting the audience of the ads?

DATA

- 3,517 Ads
- Each with corresponding cost, impressions, clicks
- Avg.
  - Cost per Ad: 34.5 USD,
  - Impressions: 11,536,
  - Clicks: 1,062

Avg. CTR (%) of Facebook Ads

High Impact Ads

- Union of top 10% ads in each of cost, clicks, impressions, and CTR
- Run prior to the 2016 U.S. Elections
- >80% of cost, clicks, impressions
- **485** such ads

RQ1: Divisiveness of the IRA Ads

- U.S census-representative surveys (40% liberals, 40% conservatives, 20% moderate or neutral)
- 15-30 responses per ad
- Total 2,886 unique respondents

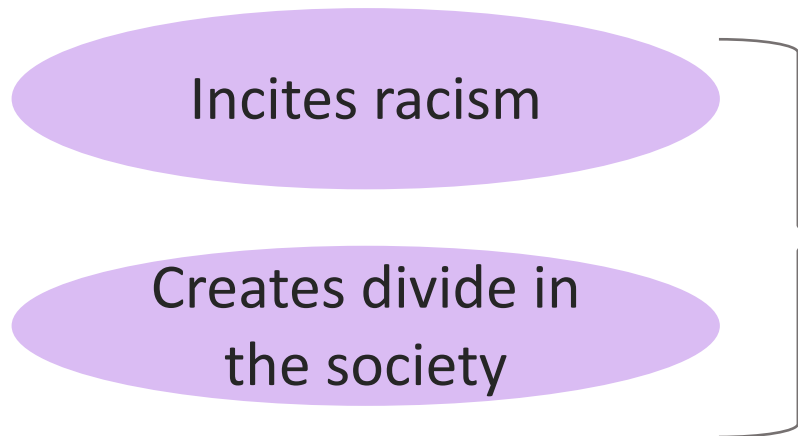If they would report the ad shown

Reaction: Approval / Disapproval

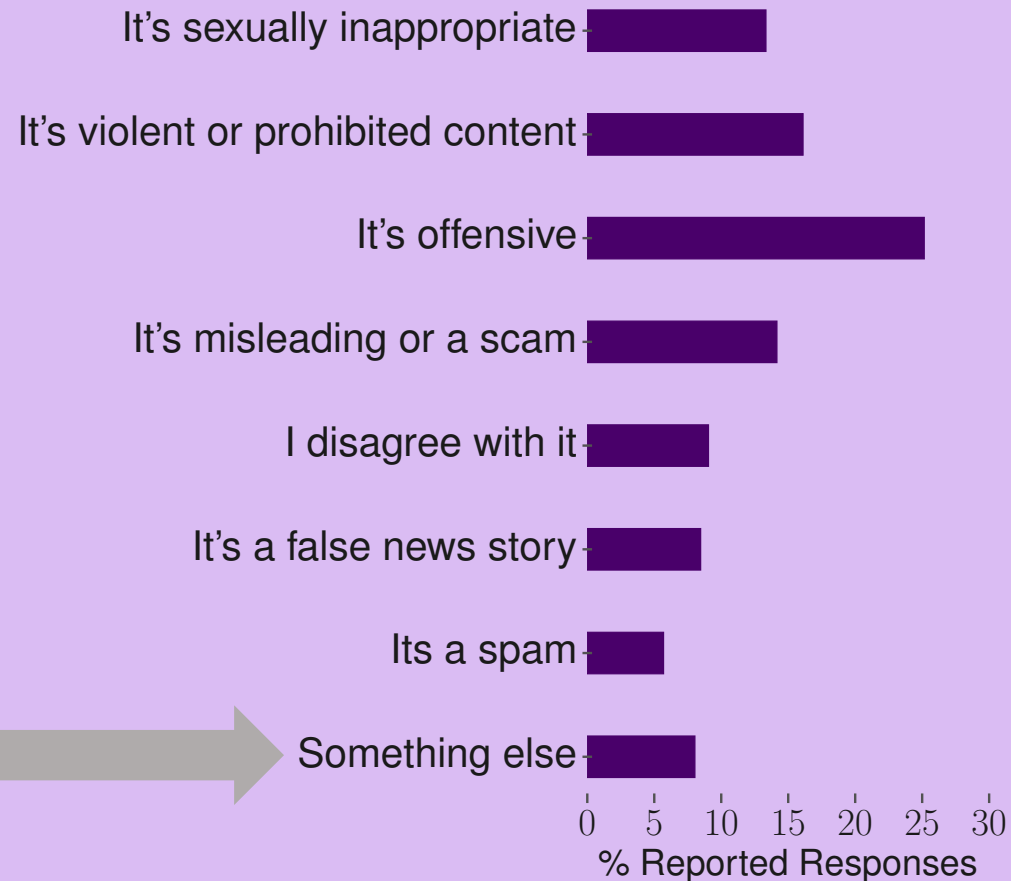If they could identify false claims

Reporting

Approval

False Claims

Reporting

- Whether they would "report / flag the content" of the ad shown.
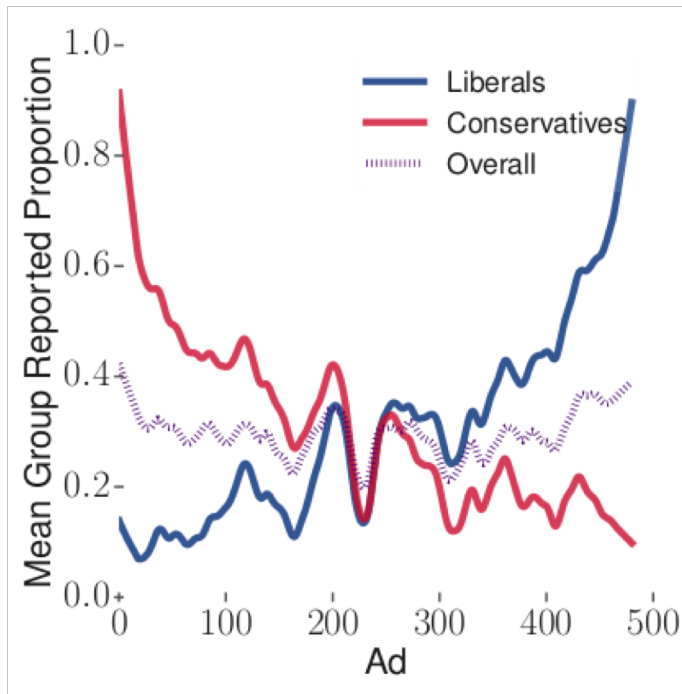
- If they would, why do they find the ad inappropriate

Incites racism

Creates divide in the society

For over 73% of the ads, at least 20% respondents reported the ad.

It's sexually inappropriate

It's violent or prohibited content

It's offensive

It's misleading or a scam

I disagree with it

It's a false news story

Its a spam

Something else
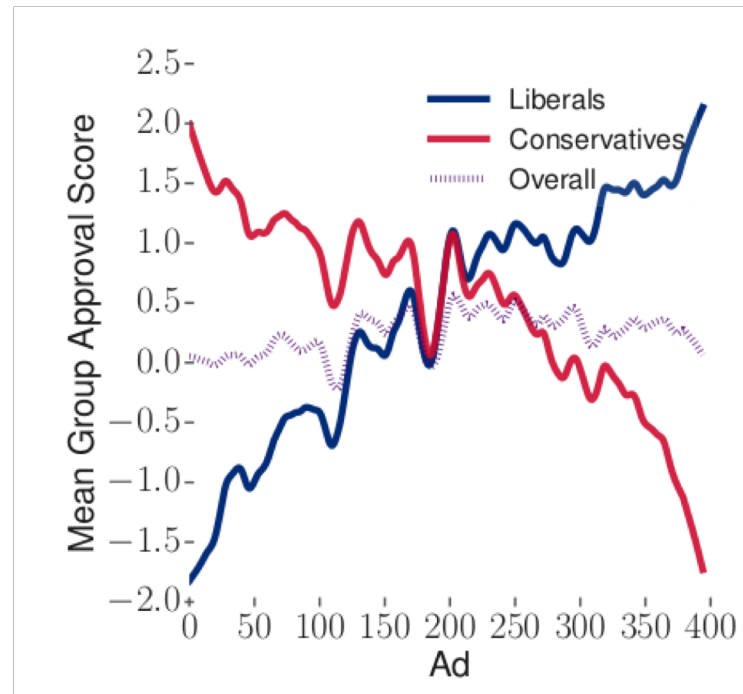
0   5   10   15   20   25   30
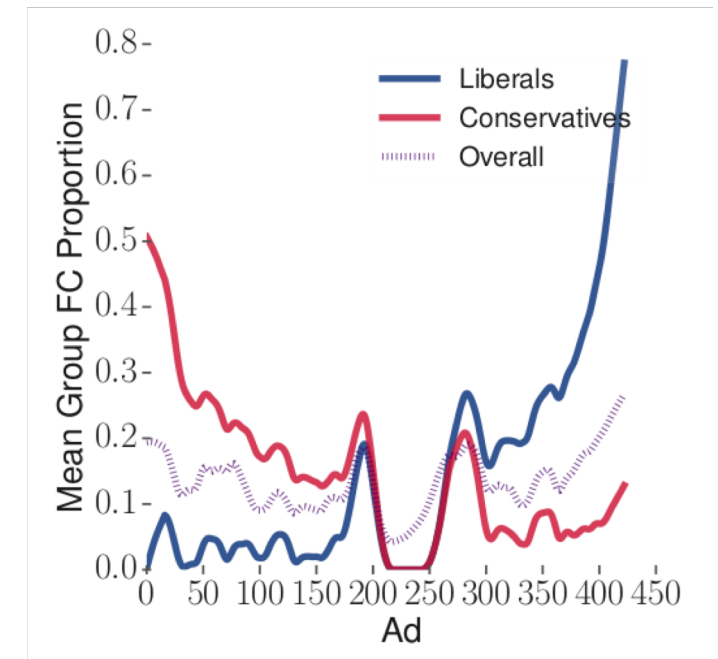% Reported Responses

RQ1: Divisiveness of the IRA Ads

Ideological divisiveness

Reporting

Approval

False Claims

Parasite is an organism that lives in or on another organism and benefits by deriving nutrients at the host's expense.

About 20 million parasites live in the United States illegally. They exploit Americans and give nothing in return. Isn't it time to get rid of parasites that are destroying our country?

IT'S TIME TO GET RID OF PARASITES!

STOP ALL INVADERS

We Muslims of the United States are subject to Islamophobia from the media where regularly

TOP SCAPEGOATING MUSLIMS
May 29 at 12:00 pm, Washngton DC

**Reported by the Liberals
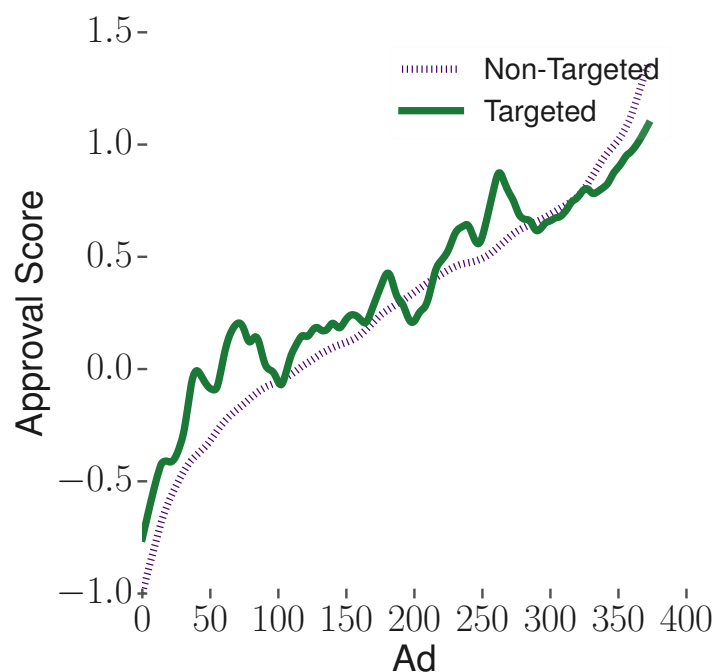Not Reported by the Conservatives**

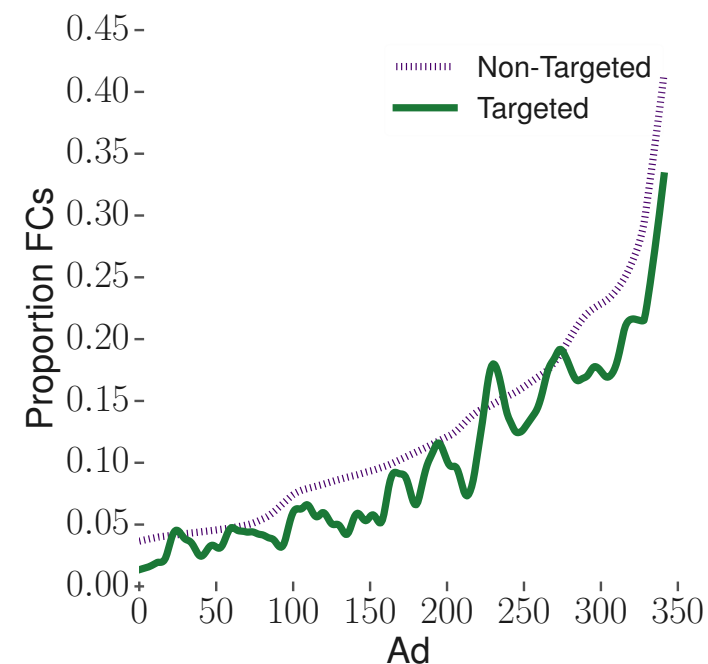**Reported by the Conservatives
Not Reported by the Liberals**

RQ2: How well was the targeting done?

Reporting

Approval

False Claims

RQ3: How the Facebook Ads Platform helped?

Attribute-based targeting

- Demographics (gender, age, location, language)

- Interests (eg. interested in African-American civil rights movement)

- Behaviors (eg. Individuals with ethnic affinity: African-American)

Facebook attribute suggestion. (eg. similar pages with demographic skewness): 64% of the ads used this feature

Implications

- Characterized the Russia-linked ad campaign on Facebook

- These ads were ideologically divisive

- Ten times more effective than a typical Facebook ad

- Biased especially in race and political leaning

- Ads targeted the users who are less likely to identify the inappropriateness

- Facebook Ads platform can likely be abused to create social discord

Filipe N. Ribeiro, Koustuv Saha, Mahmoudreza Babaei, Lucas Henrique, Johnnatan Messias, Fabricio Benevenuto, Oana Goga, Krishna P. Gummadi, and Elissa M. Redmiles. 2019. On Microtargeting Socially Divisive Ads: A Case Study of Russia-Linked Ad Campaigns on Facebook. In Proceedings of the Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency (FAT* '19). ACM, New York, NY, USA, 140-149. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1145/3287560.3287580

http://www.socially-divisive-ads.dcc.ufmg.br/

Thank You

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