BRIEF

Disinformation in swing states: Facebook's allowing Super PACs to show false and misleading adverts to voters ahead of 2020 elections.

Top pro-Trump Super PAC and pro-Democrat Super PAC paid Facebook roughly $287,500 and $45,000 respectively to run ads spreading false and misleading content weeks ahead of the election, earning more than 10 million estimated impressions on its platforms.

Executive Summary

Facebook allowed top Trump-supporting Super PAC, America First Action, to spend around $287,500 to run at least 451 ads[1] on Facebook's platform between 19 August and 16 September, featuring disinformation content about Presidential Candidate Joe Biden in four key swing states.[2] The ads shared claims debunked by independent fact-checkers or reputable newspapers, including that Presidential Candidate Joe Biden's trade deals with China had cost Wisconsin nearly 89,000 jobs, that Joe Biden will raise taxes on all income groups, and that he wants free healthcare and tuition for illegal immigrants. The ads, often running in groups, collectively earned over 9 million impressions[3] (9,481,000) in swing states Wisconsin, Arizona, Florida, and Pennsylvania.[4] The majority of ads identified were run in Wisconsin (328), but the biggest spend was recorded for ads in Florida -- which received more than half of the total impressions (5,476,000).

Facebook also allowed Pro-Democratic Super PAC Stop Republicans to spend around $45,000 to run at least 30 ads on Facebook, which started running on 30 July and were still active as of 17 September, with the misleading claim that The U.S. Postal Service will be G-O-N-E by the end of the year unless Congress immediately delivers billions of dollars. The fact-check, which was published by a Facebook fact-checking partner before the ads started running, noted it was "unlikely" that the Postal Service would be shut down without intervention. The US House of Representatives subsequently passed a Bill in August to fund the US Postal Service.[5] These ads, which were still running at the time of writing, earned around 1.3 million (1,350,000) impressions and were run nationally.

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[1] Note, the original number of ads identified was 453, but after analysing Facebook's ad library, we identified two unique ad IDs that had been included in more than one group, so appear to be replications. Thus we subtracted these two ads from our final count.

[2] We define disinformation content as verifiably false or misleading information which has the potential to cause public harm for example by undermining democracy, or encouraging discrimination or hate speech.

[3] Facebook defines an impression as the "number of times that your adverts were on-screen." Its policy adds that an impression "is counted as the number of times an instance of an ad is on screen for the first time" and notes this may include multiple views by the same people.
https://www.facebook.com/business/help/675615482516035

[4] These states were won by Trump in 2016 by just 22,748; 44,292; 91,234; and over 112,991 votes respectively.

[5] It has been reported that Republican-led Senate has no plans to act on the legislation.

These ads containing false and misleading content appear to be in violation of Facebook's political [advertising policies](#). Facebook also makes it [clear](#)that Super PACs are covered by their third-party fact-checking programme.[6] By allowing disinformation-spreading adverts to run on its platforms, Facebook appears to be undermining its own [promises](#) to "secure the integrity of the US elections, by encouraging voting, connecting people to authoritative information, and reducing the risks of post-election confusion."

These findings come days after America First Action announced a [$22 million spending spree on digital and TV ads](#) that will target key battleground states of Florida, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Ohio, ahead of the US 2020 Election.

As of the time of writing, Facebook has removed only 41 of the total adverts that we have identified as containing false or misleading claims -- all with videos that took [Joe Biden's statements on taxes out of context](#) -- although the platform does not specify why an ad is removed, simply noting that the ad in question "was taken down because it goes against Facebook [Advertising Policies](#)." Notably, while Facebook removed some ads within each group, other identical ads were left up on the platform, and America First Action was allowed to run versions of the same ad after the initial ones were removed (see below for more detail).

Examples of disinformation in America First Action's political ads

1.

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[6] Politicians are exempt from Facebook's third-party fact-checking programme.
https://about.fb.com/news/2019/09/elections-and-political-speech/

This ad claims that "Joe Biden will RAISE TAXES on all income groups." Biden has himself said in multiple interviews that he will not raise taxes for all, telling ABC News: "I will raise taxes for anybody making over $400,000," and anyone making less than that would face "no new taxes." Facebook's fact-checking partner USA Today also found the claim that Biden's and Harris' tax plans would raise rates on a family making $75,000 or $3,000 biweekly, "False." It said: "A taxpayer making $75,000, or making $3,000 biweekly, would not move to a higher tax bracket, as claimed. Analysts concluded that Biden's tax plan would apply to wealthy individuals and corporations." The Washington Post also finds that there "is broad agreement among the five tax models that Biden's tax increase would fall almost entirely on the very wealthy. For technical reasons, the corporate tax increase is deemed to filter through to almost all income groups, giving the Republicans an opening to misleadingly claim that Biden is raising taxes on most Americans."

This ad also includes a misleading video which takes a Biden clip out of context, as debunked by PolitiFact. It shows Biden apparently saying: "Guess what, if you elect me your taxes are going to be raised not cut," but in fact this clip was cut and refers to a specific conversation Biden was having with a member of a crowd who said they had benefited from the Republican-led tax bill. Biden responded: "Guess what, if you elect me, your taxes are going to be raised, not cut, if you benefited from that." He did not say he would raise taxes on everyone.

Among the adverts we analysed, 41 ads with video clips containing this out-of-context statement have been removed by Facebook as of the time of writing, but identical ads still remain on the platform.

2.

Ads such as this one include the text: "With Joe Biden, 82% of Americans will see a tax increase." It links to an article on the American Herald website which repeats this same misleading information. However, the claim that "Joe Biden wants to raise taxes on 82% of all Americans" has been labelled False by Facebook's third-party fact-checking partner PolitiFact, which notes that this inaccurately refers to an analysis from the Penn Wharton Budget Model. The fact check finds: "The 82% is a calculation made using the model's estimates that represents the percentage of people whose after-tax incomes would change under Biden's plan. But there's a difference between a tax increase and the share of corporate tax increases borne by individual taxpayers in the form of lower investment returns or incomes. Biden has pledged not to directly raise taxes on people earning less than $400,000 per year."

3.

America First Action
Sponsored · Paid for by America First Action

Joe Biden wants free health care and free tuition for illegal immigrants.

"How's that gonna help us? Our kids need better healthcare. Our kids need help with college." -Michelle

Joe Biden wants free health care and free tuition for illegal immigrants.

PAID FOR BY AMERICA FIRST ACTION AND NOT AUTHORIZED BY ANY CANDIDATE OR CANDIDATE'S COMMITTEE. WWW.A-AFAC.ORG

AMERICAN-HERALD.COM
Joe Biden Doesn't Get It.
The Times Are Tough. The Man Is Weak.

Learn ...

This ad claims that "Joe Biden wants free health care and free tuition for illegal immigrants" and repeats this claim in a video and in a linked article from the America Herald. But these claims have been debunked by FactCheck.org, which found that Trump's claim that Biden wanted "federal student aid," "free community college," "welfare" and "government health care for illegal aliens" was misleading. If we look at the "free healthcare ... for illegal immigrants" claim, the fact-check finds that: "The task force also "recommends extending Affordable Care Act coverage to DACA recipients, [and] allowing undocumented immigrants to purchase unsubsidized coverage in the ACA marketplaces." It concludes: "That's not the same as providing "government health care for all illegal aliens."' When it comes to "free tuition," the fact-check finds that Biden hasn't proposed federal student aid and free community college for everyone who came, or comes, to the U.S. illegally. It finds: "Biden's education plan specifically says he would make so-called Dreamers eligible for federal financial aid if they otherwise meet the requirements. Dreamers are a specific group of individuals who are already in the country and were brought here illegally as children by their parents." While the American Herald article does mention the Dreamers further down in its copy, the ad itself just runs with the misleading claim of "free health care and free tuition for illegal immigrants."

America First Action has repeatedly run disinformation before

America First Action has run false or misleading adverts in the past, for example one that includes a video falsely suggesting Biden supported efforts to defund the police. America First Action reportedly ran at least 397 ads on Facebook and Instagram with this message since July 24, earning over 5.7 million impressions. This ad was reportedly removed from Facebook six

days after it was fact-checked by PolitiFact.[7] However, Facebook reportedly told Fox News at the time that "the videos can, instead, run as original content on the group's page."

Notably, America First Action also cross-posted ads containing disinformation on other platforms, such as Google. The Google Transparency Library includes this ad, targeting North Carolina, which shows a video with 1m - 10m impressions claiming Biden would defund the police; the same ad was removed from Facebook and is marked in the ad library for violating Facebook's ad policies after fact-checkers debunked it.

America First Action has also aired a commercial including the out-of-context clip of Joe Biden, saying if he is elected president, "your taxes are going to be raised, not cut." FactCheck.org found that the Super PAC "selectively edits" Biden's words -- and yet, as our analysis illustrates, videos with the cut clip still appear in a number of ads by the Super PAC on Facebook's platforms. A video with this clip also appears without a fact-check on America First Action's Facebook Page.

All of the ads from America First Action identified in this analysis directed Facebook users to a website called The American Herald, which describes itself as "a conservative news platform designed to bring you all the news the liberal media doesn't want you to know." While the website shares stories designed to read like regular news content, a disclaimer at the bottom of its page notes that it is paid for by the Super PAC, America First Action, Inc. No such disclaimer appears on the American Herald's Facebook page, although ads posted by 'American Herald' on Facebook include a disclaimer showing they were paid for by America First Action, as per Facebook's policies.

Avaaz's analysis found a number of articles on the American Herald website that contain verifiably false or misleading information, pushing a pro-Trump/anti-Biden narrative, including claims that 82% of Americans will see a tax increase under Biden, debunked by Facebook fact-checking partner PolitiFact, or that Joe Biden's trade deals with China cost Wisconsin nearly 89,000 jobs, debunked by Facebook fact-checking partner USA Today. It is notable that in a number of ads shared by America First Action, there is no misinformation in the creative or text of the ad, but a link is included which directs the viewer to an American Herald article that includes false or misleading content. American Herald's Twitter account has reportedly been suspended.

America First Action is reportedly said to be committed to spending more than $200 million in the 2020 election cycle to assist Trump's bid for reelection. It has invested at least $36 million already, according to the nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics. Between 7 May 2018 - 14 Sep 2020, America First Action's Facebook page spent $2,248,027 on political ads and $44,236 on American Herald's Facebook page.

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[7] See also fact-check by Reuters:
https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-factcheck-misleading-biden-ad-defund/fact-check-political-ad-saying-biden-wants-to-defund-the-police-is-misleading-idUSKCN252248

America First Action is chaired by Linda McMahon who previously served in President Trump's Cabinet as Administrator of the Small Business Administration. Its Communications Director, Kelly Sadler, also served in the White House as director of surrogate and coalitions outreach. The Justice Department investigated donations made to the Super PAC by Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman, two associates of Rudolph W. Giuliani who were accused of conspiracy and making false statements to the FEC. Parnas and Fruman are currently under indictment.

Example of disinformation in Stop Republicans political ads

1.

This ad includes the claim that The U.S. Postal Service will be G-O-N-E by the end of the year. This ad was still active as of the time of writing, despite a similar claim that it will close in June being debunked by USA Today before this advert started running. The fact-check found that "[t]he coronavirus pandemic has seriously impacted the financial stability of the U.S. Postal Service, to the point that the agency is expected to run out of cash on hand sometime this summer. It is unlikely, however, that whether without intervention the agency would shut down completely. Experts and advocates close to the industry, while cognizant of the urgency of the situation, are skeptical of closure." The US House of Representatives passed a Bill in August to

fund the US Postal Service, although it is reported that the Republican-led Senate has no plans to act on this legislation.

Stop Republicans describes itself as "an accountability campaign of Progressive Turnout Project, is a grassroots-funded effort dedicated to resisting the Republican Party and Donald Trump's radical right wing agenda." It is founded by Harry Pascal, who according to his bio, is also the Founder of Progressive Turnout Project and affiliated organizations Progressive Takeover and Stop Republicans and "has served as Treasurer and Senior Advisor to some of the most high-profile congressional campaigns in the country."

Between 7 May 2018 - 14 Sep 2020, Stop Republicans spent $17,903,631 on political ads on Facebook.

Our research did not find any reports or other examples of Stop Republicans or Progressive Turnout Project sharing false or misleading content before in political advertising.

Facebook is failing to implement its own basic policies on political ads

Our analysis suggests that Facebook is failing to meet even its own basic standards on stopping political advertising from sharing misinformation.

Facebook has a scattershot approach to removing ads that violate its advertising policies. As of the time of writing, Facebook has removed only 41 of the adverts that we have identified as containing false or misleading claims -- all with videos that took Joe Biden's statements on taxes out of context -- although the platform does not specify why an ad is removed, simply noting that the ad in question "was taken down because it goes against Facebook Advertising Policies."

These ads ran in 7 groups across Facebook's platforms, with a total of 106 adverts -- their spend was around $189,800 and in total they earned an estimated 5.6 million impressions, as of 17 September. Notably, while Facebook removed some ads within each group, other identical ads were left up on the platform, and America First Action was even allowed to run versions of the same ad again after the initial ones were removed.
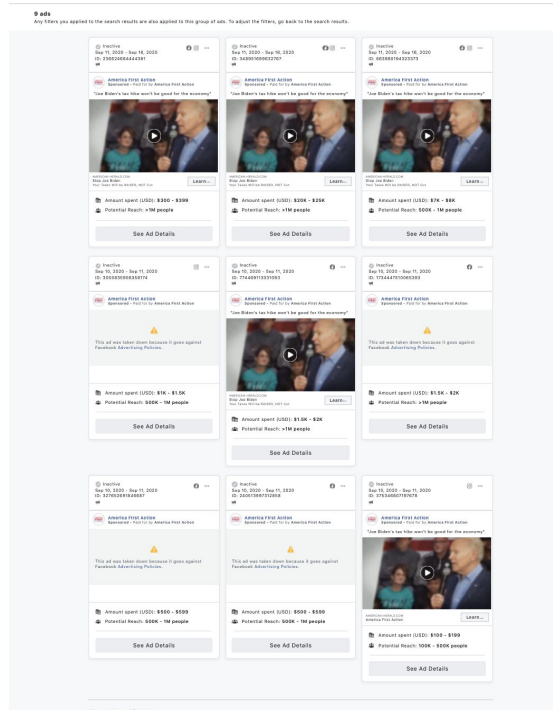
The screenshot above, taken on 16 September, shows one group containing 9 identical ads. While 4 ads have been removed by Facebook, 5 remain on the Facebook ad library.

Facebook's Advertising Policies prohibit ads with debunked claims

According to Facebook's own policy, the platform "prohibits ads that include claims debunked by third-party fact-checkers or, in certain circumstances, claims debunked by organisations with particular expertise." Facebook adds that: "Advertisers that repeatedly post information deemed to be false may have restrictions placed on their ability to advertise on Facebook."

Facebook's fact-checking policy also dictates that the platform identifies false news, clearly labels misinformation and informs users about it, ensures that fewer people see misinformation, and importantly in this case, takes action against repeat offenders. The policy notes: "Pages and websites that repeatedly share misinformation rated False or Altered will have some restrictions, including having their distribution reduced. They may also have their ability to monetize and advertise removed, and their ability to register as a news Page removed for a given time period."[8]

Facebook also makes clear that "[f]ormer candidates for office or former officials continue to be covered by our third-party fact-checking programme" and notes "[t]hat remains true for

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[8] More on Facebook's disinformation policy can be found here:
https://about.fb.com/news/2018/05/hard-questions-false-news/

organisations such as Super PACs or advocacy organisations that are unaffiliated with candidates".[9]

Facebook is clear that while in most cases misinformation is demoted and not removed, it will remove content if it violates their Community Standards, including misinformation and unverified rumours that could contribute to the risk of imminent violence or physical harm, voter and census interference content, and certain manipulated videos that are the product of artificial intelligence or machine learning and that would likely mislead an average person to believe that the subject of the video said words they did not say. These policies are not reliant on fact-checkers' ratings, and politicians are not exempt from their Community Standards.

Facebook has taken action in the past, temporarily banning a Republican political action committee, the Committee to Defend the President, from advertising, after it repeatedly shared content that was deemed false by external fact-checkers. Facebook has also removed ads by pro-Trump and a Pro-Biden Super PAC for violating its policies, and reportedly directed other ads by a Super PAC to independent third-party fact-checkers to verify their claims about states purging voter rolls.

Facebook's ad policies are woefully inadequate and not in keeping with the rest of the tech world

Facebook's policies on political ads are controversial, with the company exempting politicians from their third-party fact-checking programme. Mark Zuckerberg has said: "We don't fact-check political ads," adding that: "We don't do this to help politicians, but because we think people should be able to see for themselves what politicians are saying. And if content is newsworthy, we also won't take it down even if it would otherwise conflict with many of our standards."

US lawmakers have criticised Facebook for this approach and the platform's own employees have spoken out against this policy, warning in an Open Letter that Facebook's position on political advertising is "a threat to what FB stands for."

Facebook is becoming increasingly out of step with other online platforms -- such as Twitter and TikTok who announced a ban on all political ads, Snapchat who said it will fact-check them, and Google who announced they would limit election ads audience targeting. Traditional media companies, such as CNN, MSNBC, and CNBC, reportedly started to take a harder line to airing political ads with false content last year.

Recently, in a bid to help protect the US elections, Facebook announced it would not accept new political ads in the week ahead of Election Day. But this briefing demonstrates this is not enough to meet their objective and "secure the integrity of the US elections", given that false

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[9] Politicians are exempt from the third-party fact-checking programme.
https://about.fb.com/news/2019/09/elections-and-political-speech/

and misleading content can be advertised to millions of Facebook users for weeks without the platform detecting it.

The solution: *Correct the Record*

Facebook should be vigilant and implement its own policies effectively. These policies prohibit any ads containing misinformation. Facebook's precedential policy implementation for similar violations would suggest that the platform should restrict America First Action's (and its affiliate American Herald's) ability to advertise, and remove their ability to register as a news Page, for repeatedly sharing misinformation.

In a decision to ban ads from The Committee to Defend the President PAC on 6 August 2020, Facebook's spokesperson, Andy Stone, stated, that: "As a result of the Committee to Defend the President's repeated sharing of content determined by third-party fact-checkers to be false, they will not be permitted to advertise for a period of time on our platform." Avaaz has submitted this brief to Facebook, and has requested clarity on whether the platform will apply its misinformation policies as relates to the content and actors identified in this report.

Facebook should also investigate Stop Republicans, to determine whether they have repeatedly shared false or misleading content. If they are determined to be a repeat offender, Facebook should apply the same policies as outlined above.

Facebook must ensure that *all* political adverts undergo a thorough fact-check before running on its platforms.

To protect the 2020 elections, Facebook must also *Correct the Record* on all political ads which share disinformation so that the US electorate is well-informed and not misled or lied to. The ads identified in this analysis ran on Facebook's platforms over a number of weeks and earned more than 10 million impressions (10,831,000) in total -- this is not an insignificant number, particularly when the majority of these ads were targeted to people in swing states that have been won in the past by tens of thousands of votes. Facebook monitors ad targeting and impressions, and can ensure that the same subgroups of its users that were targeted with these false and misleading ads receive corrections in their news feeds.

"Correct the Record" would require platforms to retroactively distribute corrections from independent fact-checkers to every single person exposed to false or misleading information, which can be used to disinform voters. Facebook's anti-misinformation policies currently require the application of labels to fact-checked content, but generally do not require the retroactive issuance of corrections to the hundreds of millions of people who have seen the initial falsehood in their News Feeds before these labels are applied.[10] Facebook needs to not only remove

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[10] Facebook has begun to provide retroactive notifications to users who have engaged with harmful Covid-19-related misinformation, but does not provide clear and direct corrections to this misinformation.

disinformation-spreading political adverts, but also issue retroactive corrections for ads that were removed, so that people who have already seen the disinformation are notified.

Correct the Record **would cut belief in misinformation by almost** <u>**half**</u>

An academic study, commissioned by Avaaz and conducted by Dr. Ethan Porter of George Washington University and Dr. Tom Wood of Ohio State University, found that providing social media users who have seen false or misleading information with direct corrections from fact-checkers <u>can decrease belief in disinformation by an average of almost 50% and by as much as 61%</u>.

With less than two months left to the election, and fears of increasing violence and uncertainty, Facebook has a choice. The platform can continue to act reactively, apologizing for its "<u>operational mistake[s]</u>" while it is being weaponized to cause great harm to US democracy. Or, the platform can act proactively, applying the solutions above in addition to enforcing its existing policies, and thus truly helping to protect and inform Americans at this tumultuous time.

Methodology

The Avaaz anti-disinformation investigative team is conducting daily, non-partisan monitoring of false and misleading content being shared across Facebook ahead of the US 2020 Presidential elections.

The investigative team monitored the ads run on Facebook's platforms by pro-Biden and pro-Trump Super PACs, looking at impressions from 13 August to 14 September, and looking specifically for examples of disinformation content. We used <u>Facebook's ad library</u> to search for adverts run by pro-Biden and pro-Trump Super PACs, as well as monitoring the top PACs by spending, and collected any adverts with disinformation content that appeared in our time range, as visible on Facebook's ad library. We searched for active and inactive ads across all of Facebook's platforms in the United States (note: some of the groups within this date range included ads that had run previously and were still running within our time frame, or were running beyond our time frame, and if so, we included them as this is how the Facebook ad library presents the data in search results).[11] We looked at active and inactive ads across all platforms.

The pro-Trump Super PACs that we looked at were **America First Action, American Crossroads, FedUp PAC, and Preserve America PAC**. All of the Super PACs were identified

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[11]For example, for the two groups of adverts containing disinformation paid for by Stop Republicans, the ads had started running from July 30th, although the group appeared on Facebook's ad library when we searched for impressions from 13 August to 14 September. Likewise, a number of the America First Action ads were shown to be running on 16 September, even though they were included in our search for impressions between 13 August and 14 September. Thus, these ads were included in our analysis and final numbers.

by the non-partisan [Centre for Responsive Politics](#) as having made "independent expenditures" in the 2020 cycle. We only identified ads containing disinformation content in the political adverts run by America First Action, as outlined in more detail above. We either found no political adverts on the Facebook Pages of the other Super PACs, or adverts that did not appear to include disinformation content.

The pro-Biden Super PACs that we looked at were **American Bridge 21st Century, Unite the Country, PACRONYM (and its associates, Four is Enough and The FYI), Nuestro PAC, and Priorities USA (and its associates, Cost of Chaos, Vote By Mail 2020, Facts First, and We the People 2020),** most of which have been found by the Centre for Responsive Politics to have [spent money on Facebook ads](#) supporting Biden, or having made [independent expenditures](#) in the 2020 cycle. We found [two](#) groups of adverts by Nuestro PAC, as well as [an ad](#) from Cost of Chaos that had been removed by Facebook for breaching the platform's advertising policies, but did not appear to include disinformation content. We did not find any other examples that appeared to include disinformation content on these Super PACs over the time period we analysed.

We also looked at [top Super PACs, by spending, on Facebook](#) (over the last thirty days): **Stop Republicans PAC, Progressive Turnout Project, and Defending Democracy Together.** We found two groups of nearly identical ads from Stop Republicans that included disinformation content as outlined above, but no other ads that appeared to meet our definitions in the other Super PACs.

For the purpose of this analysis, we define **disinformation content** as verifiably false or misleading information which has the potential to cause public harm for example by undermining democracy, or encouraging discrimination or hate speech. All adverts we identified that included disinformation content that had at least one claim either in the main advert, or in the link they shared, which has been debunked by third-party fact-checkers, or reputable newspapers.

America First Action and Stop Republicans were the only Super PACs we identified that ran ads containing false and misleading content during the time period over which the analysis was conducted. We analysed all adverts they paid for within the specified time range. It is possible that Super PACs identified in our sample did run ads containing disinformation that have been missed in this analysis. We welcome any feedback from independent third-party fact-checkers.

Once we had our sample of adverts containing disinformation content, **we added up the total number of adverts, and the estimated impressions and spend, as indicated by Facebook**, as well as noting the locations which they targeted. Facebook usually gives a range when it estimates impressions and spend, and we always chose the lowest range, when multiple

options were presented.[12] It is also notable that for groups of active adverts, statistics can fluctuate between days. Our cut off date for updating all statistics was 17 September -- which likely means our estimate is conservative.

Facebook notes in its ad library that "[a]dvertisers often use the same image or video and text to create ad campaigns with different start dates, locations or budgets." When ads create the same image or video and text with different start dates, locations, or budgets, Facebook clusters the ads in groups. If one group includes 6 identical ads, for example, Facebook counts each ad separately. We have followed this policy, so our sample of ads containing disinformation content includes many ads with identical creatives and text.

END

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[12] If Facebook estimated an advertiser spent >$100, and/or estimates that impressions reached >1m, and gave no additional range, we counted the spend as $100 and impressions as $1m.