

## **Anonymous Facebook Groups Targeted Key Battlegrounds, WI, PA, and VA** *Low income, white voters targeted with immigration, racial issues*

*“Facebook’s new transparency measures only cover the most popular pages not typically used by the anonymous groups, so these measures may not be sufficient to fight back against them.”*

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Mark Zuckerberg testified before Congress in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Whistleblowers indicated that Cambridge Analytica, a data analytics firm hired by dozens of political campaigns, including the Trump campaign, harvested 50 million Facebook users’ personal data to influence the election outcomes. The firm is funded by Robert Mercer, who is one of the top billionaire donors for issue advocacy groups (Secure America Now), Super PACs, and political campaigns.

Despite the broad media coverage of this revelation, we still know little about what exactly happened behind the scenes of political campaign operations on Facebook during the 2016 election. So, who were the groups that ran political ads on Facebook and who were the people targeted by these groups?

Our recent paper, *The Stealth Media? Groups and Targets behind Divisive Issue Campaigns on Facebook* (Kim et al., forthcoming *Political Communication*), addresses these pertinent and vitally important questions with an empirical analysis of paid Facebook ads.

Using a user-based, real-time, digital ad tracking app that enabled us to trace the sponsors/sources of political campaigns and unpack targeting patterns, our study examined five million Facebook ad impressions exposed to nearly 10,000 volunteer participants between September 28 and November 8, 2016.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the *first, large-scale, systematic empirical analysis* that investigates who operated political campaigns on Facebook and who was targeted by these campaigns.

### **Key Findings**

#### **I. Groups behind Divisive Issue Campaigns**

- *Anonymous groups ran divisive issue campaigns including candidate attacks*

Our findings revealed that groups that did not report to the Federal Election Commission (FEC) — unidentifiable, unknown “suspicious” groups; astroturfs/movement/unregistered groups; non-FEC-reported nonprofits — ran most of the divisive issue campaigns.

We defined a group (sponsor/sources) as suspicious group if a) the group’s Facebook page or landing page was taken down or banned by Facebook and no information about the group (if the name of the group was indicated in the ad or on the landing page URL) exists; b) the group’s Facebook or website exists but shows little activity since election day and no information about

the group exists elsewhere; or c) the group’s Facebook page or landing page is accessible, but no information about the group exists elsewhere.

In the midst of our data analysis, Facebook announced that they had verified Russia’s election meddling (September 6, 2017). The House Intelligence Committee publicly released copies of some of the Russian ads that ran on Facebook (November 2, 2017), which verified the Russian groups associated with Internet Research Agency. One out of six suspicious groups later turned out to be the Kremlin-linked Russian groups.

- *The volume of the ads run by anonymous groups (non-FEC groups) was four times larger than FEC-groups*

The ads generated by suspicious groups are about the same volume as that of FEC groups. The ads run by non-FEC nonprofits and unregistered groups also outnumber those of FEC groups. With the two categories combined, the volume of ads run by non-FEC groups is almost four times larger than that of FEC groups.

Table 1. Group Frequencies & Ad Frequencies, by Group Type

Group Type	Groups		Ads	
	N	%	N	%
Suspicious Group	102	44.7	4,148	11.2
Suspicious Group, Russian	19	8.3	2,081	5.6
Astroturf/Movement/unregistered	39	17.1	7,443	20.1
Nonprofit (501c3, 501c4) Non-FEC	17	7.5	7447	20.1
FEC-groups	8	3.5	3,958	10.7
News, Questionable	36	15.8	1,935	5.2
News, Extreme Bias	4	1.8	15	0
Other (Click-bait, meme)	3	1.3	9,919	26.8
Total	228	100	36,961	100

- *[Follow-Up Study, In Progress]* Various types of groups appeared to be networked and ran the same campaign without revealing the connection.

We found the exact same ads were run by seemingly unrelated groups. The “network” of groups appear to include various types — unknown, unidentifiable suspicious groups, astrotourf/movement/unregistered groups and questionable news groups.

In one network, for example, four unidentifiable, unknown suspicious groups, Trump for xxxxx, Trump Ixxxxxxxxxxx, Trump Nxxxx, and Trump Lxxxx, ran a campaign, “Support 2nd Amendment? Click LIKE to tell Hillary to Keep Her Hands Off Your Guns”

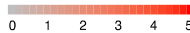
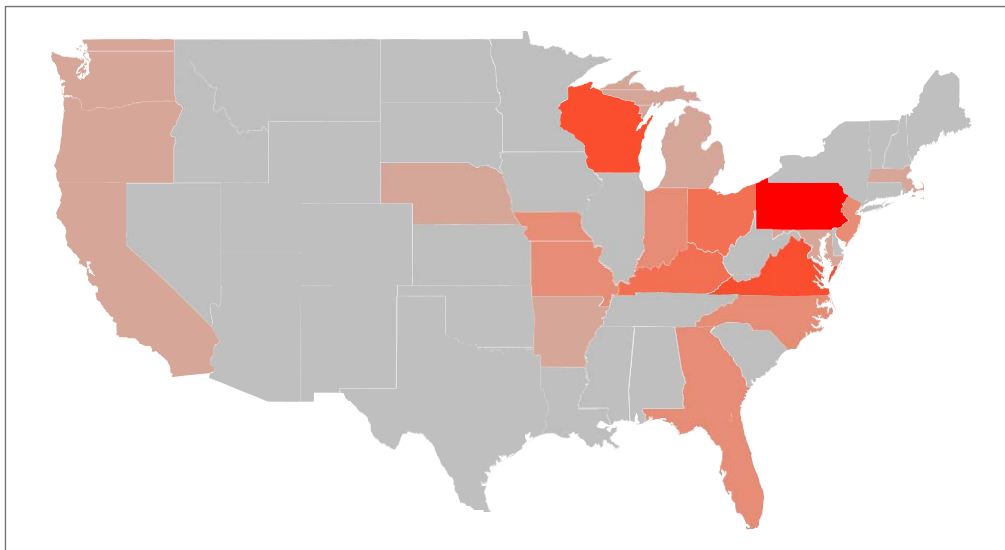
Similarly, another network consisting of ten groups ran the same ad, “I will not vote for Hillary Clinton,” with a group composition similar to the previous network.

## II. Targets behind Divisive Issue Campaigns

- *Non-FEC groups clearly targeted key battleground states including Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Virginia with divisive issue campaigns.*

Notably, the most highly targeted states — especially Pennsylvania and Wisconsin — generally overlap with the battleground states with razor thin margins. To contextualize, the average audience reach of divisive issue campaigns in each of the two most targeted states (7.6%, Pennsylvania; 2.6%, Wisconsin) is well above its Trump vote margin (0.7%, Pennsylvania; 0.8%, Wisconsin) in the 2016 elections.

Figure 1. Geographic Targeting



Notes. A choropleth of states by an index demonstrating the degree to which individuals in those states were exposed to ads across our eight issue categories. Pennsylvania scored the highest on this index showing evidence that it was targeted significantly more than the national average across five out of the eight focused issue domains (HIT=5). Next, Wisconsin and Virginia were targeted in four issue domains (HIT=4). Florida, Kentucky and Ohio show higher issue ad exposure in three issue domains. States colored in grey demonstrate no evidence of targeting in any of the eight focused issue domains. See Table 2 for targeting patterns by specific issue domains.

Table 2. Targeted Individuals, by State and by Issue Domain

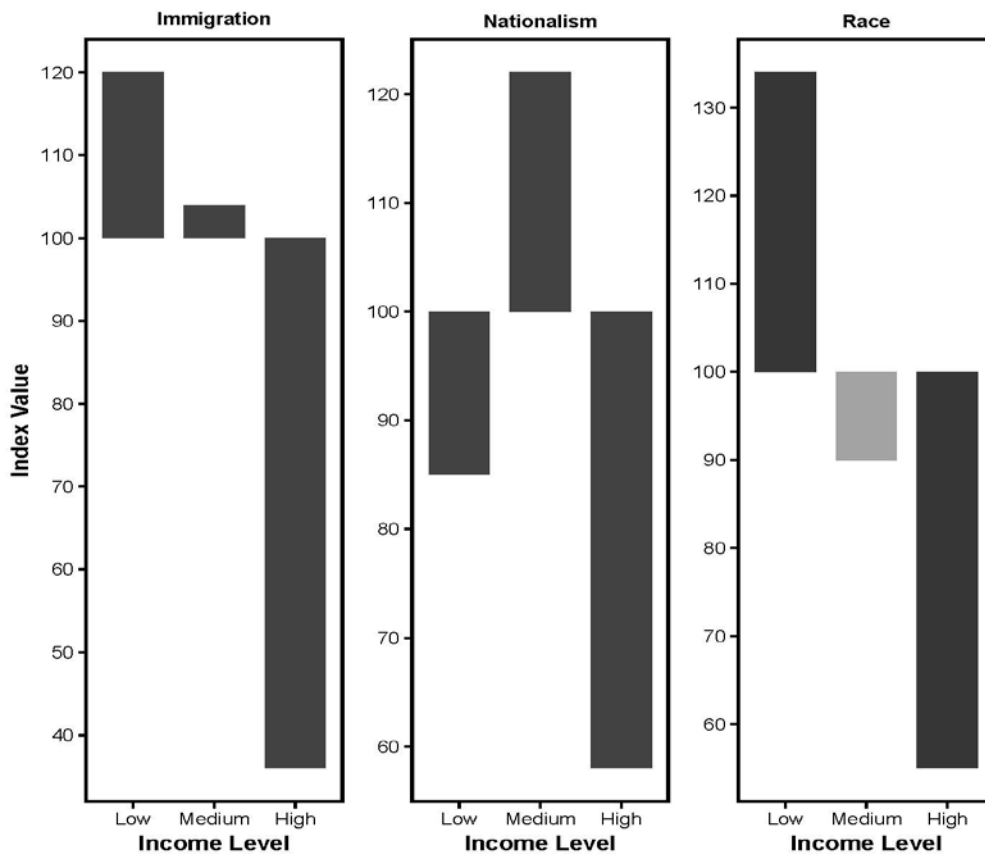
Issue	Battleground	Non-Battleground
Abortion	PA, VA	AR, MO
Gun	PA, WI	IN, KY, OR
LGBT	OH, PA, VA	CA, GA, MD, WA
Immigration	OH, PA	NJ
Nationalism/Alt-Right	FL, VA	MA, NE
Race	NC, WI	IN, KY, MO
Terrorism	MI, NC, WI	NJ
Candidate Scandal	FL, OH, PA, VA, WI	GA, KY

- *Low income, White voters targeted with immigration and racial issues.*

Compared to the national average, low-income (household income <\$40,000) individuals were specifically targeted with ads focusing on immigration and racial conflict.

Whites, compared to other racial/ethnic groups, were also highly targeted with the issue of immigration. Whites received 43.7% more immigration ads than the average of the voting age population. Furthermore, 87.2% of all immigration ads targeted whites.

Figure 2. Targeted Individuals, by Income Levels and by Issue



### III. Why We Did Not Know About All of This Until Now

- *Dark posts: The nature of digital advertising*

Unlike broadcast ads, digital ads, in general, are designed to appear to a particular individual only. Sponsored news feeds or right column ads on Facebook, for example, can be completely hidden from the public unless collected in real time by the user who is exposed to the messages. This makes public monitoring of digital political campaigns almost impossible and poses significant challenges for researchers, journalists, investigators and policymakers.

Such publicly inaccessible digital ads, namely dark posts, illuminate the microtargeting capacity of digital platforms. By gathering a vast amount of data including digital trace data, and by utilizing predictive modeling techniques, campaigns create enhanced profiles that identify and target specific types of individuals and then customize their messages. Different individuals, therefore, are targeted with different messages.

➤ *Multi-level regulatory loopholes*

Dark money groups are on the rise. Since *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (558 U.S. 310, 2010), unlimited campaign contributions from *any* source have been allowed, opening the door for election campaign interventions by any individual or group including nonprofits, corporations and, as an oversight, even foreign entities (Emmer, 2014). *Citizens* also allowed groups including nonprofits with ideological and single-issue groups to use their general revenue to purchase ads calling for the direct election or defeat of a candidate as long as the groups do not directly coordinate their campaigns with candidates, candidate committees or political parties. While Super PACs must be registered with the FEC for disclosure and reporting, nonprofits, whose primary purpose is generally considered non-political, do not have to disclose donors and have few FEC reporting requirements. These groups, hence, have been dubbed *dark money groups*.

Furthermore, political campaigns on popular digital platforms have been exempt from the FEC's disclaimer requirements because digital platforms claimed that digital ads act like "bumper stickers" and are therefore too small to include a disclaimer.

Currently, no law that adequately addresses digital political advertising exists.

## CONCLUSION

*“Does the digital media function as the stealth media — the system enabling deliberate operations of political campaigns with undisclosed sponsors/sources, furtive messaging of divisive issues and imperceptible targeting? The empirical evidence we have accumulated in this research, unfortunately, confirms that that is indeed the case.”*

Unidentifiable anonymous groups were prevalent on digital platforms and targeted particular types of voters with divisive issue campaigns. With the continuing decline in broadcast media and the exponential increase in data-driven, algorithm-based, globally networked digital platforms, we must ask what the dark campaigns of shadow groups on digital media means for the functioning of democracy. Further, the question of how to address the problems we recently witnessed, such as election campaign intervention by a foreign entity, warrants considerably more public debate.