MEDIA RELEASE

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Advance Australia uses old news to spread malinformation through advertising campaigns on Facebook

For the past two months, conservative lobby group Advance Australia's "Election News" Facebook page has used targeted advertising to publish hundreds of links to older news articles that cast the Greens party in a deeply negative light.

ARC Centre of Excellence of Automated Decision-Making and Society digital communications expert Professor Daniel Angus said the practice is a textbook example of a "malinformation campaign", where true information is removed from its appropriate context and then spread with the intent to cause reputational harm or sow confusion.

Professor Angus said that the use of old news articles is a very common tactic in spreading malinformation.

"Common tactics can be to share news about older crimes, past scandals, or other negative news, presenting them as current to inflame emotions, stoke fear, or manipulate public perception.

"The strategy capitalises on how audiences may only read headlines and lead paragraphs but fail to check publication dates and appreciate that these issues may have long been resolved."

"The decontextualisation of the original information makes it highly insidious, as it uses facts in ways that seek to erode trust and foster harm in the target, and there are no straightforward antidotes," he said.

Hidden advertising on digital platforms

The links from Advance Australia are being posted as ads on Facebook, meaning they only appear on the news feeds of target audiences and are largely hidden from public scrutiny.

Whilst Meta provides "transparency" libraries where the ads placed by advertisers on the platform can be viewed. The accessibility, searchability and durability of these archives vary with extremely limited information for advertising that falls outside of the category of political advertising.

Improving observability of online advertising

Professor Daniel Angus has been working with fellow researchers at the ADM+S to tackle this issue through the Australian Ad Observatory project.

Through the project ADM+S researchers have developed a range of computational methods for improving the observability of platform-based advertising that extend existing ad data transparency initiatives. This enables forms of observation that could facilitate advertising accountability by industry, regulators, researchers, and civil society.

The latest work of the ADM+S Australian Ad Observatory team was published this week in the field-leading Journal of Advertising, as part of a special issue that examines the latest advances in approaches to study computational advertising.

"No single method alone solves the limitations of platform-provided transparency initiatives, so we have designed a suite of tools to address advertising observability across four key benchmarks."

The four key benchmarks for methods of advertising observability:

- Enabling the systematic observation of ads published;

- Collecting advertiser information and meta-data;

- Assembling user demographic information associated with each ad;

- Observing patterns of ads as they unfold within social media feeds;

Professor Angus urged Meta to "strengthen its policies regarding the placement of 'misleading and illegal advertising'".

These and countless other examples that we have discovered through our work on the Australian Ad Observatory reveal how Meta's ad environment is regularly used to spread scam, misleading, and illegal advertising.

"If Meta are unwilling to clean up their advertising ecosystem, the government needs to step in with regulation and enforcement actions to force their hand," he said.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

The ADM+S Centre

The ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S) is a cross-disciplinary, national research centre, which aims to create the knowledge and strategies necessary for responsible, ethical, and inclusive automated decision-making (ADM). Funded by the Australian Research Council from 2020 to 2027, ADM+S is hosted at RMIT in Melbourne, Australia, with nodes located at eight other Australian universities, and partners around the world. The Centre brings together leading researchers in the humanities, social and technological sciences in an international industry, research and civil society network. The Centre aims to contribute to the mitigation of the social and economic risks in the development and implementation of ADM, and to improve outcomes and efficiencies in four key focus areas where automation is already well advanced: news and media, mobilties, health care, and social services.