



THREAT INTELLIGENCE

ELECTION DISINFORMATION

Spreading Through
Digital Advertising

September 2024

With elections occurring globally in at least 80 countries in 2024 [\[1\]](#), the intersection between digital advertising and disinformation looms large, raising critical questions about its potential impact on electoral processes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TAG Threat Intelligence assesses malicious actors will almost certainly increase their use of digital advertisements to spread disinformation ahead of the 2024 global elections. The existing programmatic advertising system allows threat actors the ability to run misleading ads on reputable sites and even target them to those more susceptible to disinformation. There is also evidence of domestic and foreign actors driving traffic to sites hosting disinformation content in real time. Yet, there are varying standards and guidelines on how to protect online users from such influence campaigns. We have high confidence in our sources, which include reliable news outlets, research studies, and third-party data vetted by trained experts.

MISLEADING VOTERS THROUGH DISINFORMATION

The practice of spreading disinformation during an election season is not a new phenomenon. However, by abusing programmatic advertising and its ability to narrowly target their audiences while also employing the use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), adversaries now have more power to launch disinformation campaigns that could potentially lead to further voter suppression and/or the swaying of election results.

- Programmatic advertising automates the buying and selling of digital ad space, making the process smoother for both advertisers and brands. However, such automation can often lead to a lack of verification that these entities share the same brand safety values. As a result, companies may inadvertently fund online disinformation through programmatic advertising, with their ads appearing on sites that deliberately distribute misleading information. [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#)
- Microtargeting is a method used in previous election campaigns to influence voters in various ways. Many advertising platforms use algorithms to target specific audiences based on demographic and behavioral data. While this serves as a useful tool for advertisers, it also allows threat actors to advertise to those who may be more susceptible to disinformation. [\[3\]](#) During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, one advertising campaign leveraged data gathered on nearly 200 million American voters to dissuade those in battleground states from coming out on Election day. [\[4\]](#)

MISINFORMATION VS DISINFORMATION

Misinformation and disinformation are two terms often used when discussing the spread of false information, particularly on the Internet. The main difference lies in intent: misinformation is spread without intent to harm while disinformation is shared with the specific goal of causing harm or leading individuals astray.

MISINFORMATION	DISINFORMATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inaccurate or misleading information that is shared unintentionally• No malicious goal• Person spreading misinformation may believe it to be true and could be spreading it unknowingly or out of misunderstanding• Can range from simple mistakes in facts to misconceptions or misunderstandings about complex issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Deliberately created and disseminated false information with the intent to deceive or mislead• Goal is to create confusion, influence people's beliefs or behavior, or achieve a specific goal, often political, economic, or social• People or entities spreading disinformation are aware that it is false but continue to propagate it• Often a coordinated and strategic process

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- GenAI now makes for more convincing disinformation campaigns. In May of this year, a U.S. citizen was charged with voter suppression and impersonating a political candidate after thousands of New Hampshire residents received a recorded voice message using the voice of said candidate informing listeners to not vote in the Primary Election that week. [\[vi\]](#)

DRIVING TRAFFIC TO DISINFORMATION SITES

While some threat actors aim to embed false narratives directly into advertisements, others use them to steer users toward seemingly legitimate news sites that actually host disinformation.

- Operation Doppelganger, a Russia-based influence campaign, recently began leveraging Facebook ads, in which threat actors deployed obfuscated URLs that redirected users to domains impersonating Ukrainian and French media outlets. [\[vii\]](#)
- Some political ads have been found to redirect to what have been coined “pink-slime journalism sites”, which disguise themselves as legitimate local news sites. These pink slime sites have undisclosed partisan funding or ties and will use their platform to promote different types of misinformation targeting the opposing political party. [\[viii\]](#) While investigating sponsored political ads, TAG Threat Intelligence analyzed several similar ads that initially appear to be local independent news sites but were later found to be pink-slime sites. [\[ix\]](#)

Library ID: 1431501421085912 ...

Inactive

Mar 18, 2024 - Mar 19, 2024

Platforms

Categories

Estimated audience size: 1K - 5K

Amount spent (USD): <\$100

Impressions: <1K

See ad details

Brookfield Democrats will help choose who will be the next Cook County State's Attorney on Tuesday, heading to the polls to choose between lobbyist Clayton Harris, III and retired Cook County Judge Eileen O'Neill Burke.

Company #1
Screen capture from Meta Ad Library

Library ID: 410540748229253 ...

Inactive

Mar 16, 2024 - Mar 20, 2024

Platforms

Categories

Estimated audience size: 500K - 1M

Amount spent (USD): \$200 - \$299

Impressions: 20K - 25K

See ad details

Cook County State's Attorney candidate Clayton Harris, III said Kim Foxx deserves the highest grade possible for her tenure in the office, and that he hopes she "gets her flowers" for "how's she's done it."

Company #2
Screen capture from Meta Ad Library

Library ID: 380107961646472 ...

Inactive

Mar 18, 2024 - Mar 19, 2024

Platforms

Categories

Estimated audience size: 10K - 50K

Amount spent (USD): <\$100

Impressions: <1K

See ad details

Palatine Democrats will help choose who will be the next Cook County State's Attorney on Tuesday, heading to the polls to choose between lobbyist Clayton Harris, III and retired Cook County Judge Eileen O'Neill Burke.

Company #3
Screen capture from Meta Ad Library

Using a website reliability rating database maintained by trained journalists over at NewsGuard [\[x\]](#), TAG Threat Intelligence found that all three companies running the above ads along with 31 other domains were all connected to a private company based in Illinois. Researchers at NewsGuard found that this company is owned by a well-known political activist with a history of strong

partisanship. The owner is also affiliated with several other similarly aligned individuals and organizations, including one that owns more than a thousand partisan sites that disguise themselves as independent local news.

The screenshot shows a NewsGuard reliability score of 49.5/100. A warning box states: "Proceed with Caution: This website generally fails to maintain basic standards of accuracy and accountability." Below this is a list of criteria with checkmarks or red X's and point values. To the right, a "Flags" box lists several categories of misinformation.

Criteria	Score	Status
Does not repeatedly publish false or egregiously misleading content	22	Pass (Green checkmark)
Gathers and presents information responsibly	18	Fail (Red X)
Has effective practices for correcting errors	12.5	Fail (Red X)
Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly	12.5	Pass (Green checkmark)
Avoids deceptive headlines	10	Pass (Green checkmark)
Website discloses ownership and financing	7.5	Fail (Red X)
Clearly labels advertising	7.5	Fail (Red X)
Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest	5	Fail (Red X)
The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information	5	Pass (Green checkmark)

Flags

- Undisclosed Partisan Funding or Ownership
- Secretly partisan local news
- COVID-19 Misinformation
- Politics Misinformation
- Election or Voting Misinformation
- Health Misinformation
- Vaccine Misinformation

Screen captures from NewsGuard

The Illinois-based organization, along with its 34 associated network of sites, has an extensive history of spreading false information and is currently flagged for several types of disinformation, including election and voting disinformation. NewsGuard rates this network of websites with a reliability score of 49.5/100 and advises users to browse with caution.

TO ALLOW OR NOT TO ALLOW

While various governments and companies have taken steps to combat the rise of disinformation around the upcoming elections globally, there are varying standards applied to blocking ads containing false information.

- Global Witness, and international NGO, investigated the ability of various platforms to identify false ads. Researchers submitted 16 sample advertisements containing disinformation around the EU elections to three top advertising platforms, with one site rejecting all ads and another accepting all 16 ads. [\[xi\]](#) In another trial, all 48 disinformation ads surrounding the Indian election were approved for advertising. [\[xii\]](#)
- The sharing of threat intelligence between governments and companies has been a common practice for years and is crucial as ever in this year's election season. However, just before the start of 2024, the United States government halted communications with companies regarding foreign election interference threats, a common practice and alliance that has existed for years. [\[xiii\]](#) Meanwhile – in stark contrast – the EU introduced new

legislation around transparency with political advertising and promoted awareness campaigns leading up to their elections.^[xiv]

- While large advertising platforms have some level of transparency when it comes to advertising, the standards to which ads are held when it comes to disinformation vary greatly. For example, one major social media platform limits their disinformation policy to content that will affect the upcoming and future elections only, allowing false information around the previous elections to pass through. Meanwhile, another large platform outright bans any political advertising and takes additional precautions by labeling election-related content, working with fact-checking organizations, and more, all in an effort to prevent the spread of misinformation and disinformation. ^{[xv] [xvi] [xvii]}

OUTLOOK

The digital advertising ecosystem – meant to provide a place for efficient business between brand advertisers and publishers – has now become another threat vector for bad actors. With several more elections set to occur and more than half the world's population voting before the end of 2024, online users should remain cautious of the various false narratives circulating, not only through digital advertisements, but through social media, news sites, and other platforms.

GLOSSARY

Disinformation – the deliberate creation and dissemination of false or misleading information with the intent to deceive or mislead and is typically used to manipulate public opinion, sow discord, discredit opponents, or create confusion.

Misinformation – false or inaccurate information that is spread, regardless of intent to deceive.

Digital Programmatic Advertising – the automated process of buying and selling online ad space in real-time through a software platform that utilizes data and algorithms to target specific audiences efficiently.

Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) – a type of artificial intelligence capable of producing unique outputs such as texts, images, videos, and more.

Pink-slime – low-quality news websites that appear to be legitimate local news outlets but are actually created to push specific political agendas or generate ad revenue.

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TAG is the Information Sharing and Analysis Organization (ISAO) for the digital advertising industry, a U.S. Department of Homeland Security designation making TAG the primary forum for sharing cyber threat intelligence in our industry.

The TAG Malvertising Threat Exchange (MTX) enables the TAG Community to share real-time intelligence about threats they see, stay abreast of new and emerging threats that could affect their operations, and protect the digital advertising supply chain.

The MTX enables companies to:

- Leverage a centralized intelligence platform to collaborate within your company, with other companies working to combat the same threat, or with the TAG Community as a whole;
- Share and receive timely, actionable, and highly relevant threat intelligence between trusted parties in the TAG Community;
- Enrich, enhance, and shorten your investigations with high-fidelity intel.

WHAT WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY: AN EXPLANATION OF ESTIMATIVE LANGUAGE

We use phrases such as *judge, assess, and estimate*—and probabilistic terms such as *probably* and *likely*—to convey analytical assessments and judgments. Such statements are not facts, proof, or knowledge. These assessments and judgments generally are based on collected information, which often is incomplete or fragmentary. Some assessments are built on previous judgments. In all cases, assessments and judgments are not intended to imply that we have “proof” that shows something to be a fact or that definitively links two items or issues. In addition to conveying judgments rather than certainty, our estimative language often gives 1) our assessed likelihood or probability of an event; and 2) the level of confidence we ascribe to the judgment.

Estimates of Likelihood. Because analytical judgments are not certain, we use probabilistic language to reflect the Community’s estimates of the likelihood of developments or events. Terms such as *probably, likely, very likely, or almost certainly* indicate a greater than even chance. The terms *unlikely* and *remote* indicate a less-than-even chance that an event will occur; they do not imply that an event will not happen. Terms such as *might* or *may* reflect situations in which we cannot assess the likelihood, generally because relevant information is unavailable, sketchy, or fragmented. Terms such as *we cannot dismiss, rule out, or discount* reflect an unlikely, improbable, or remote event whose consequences are such that it warrants mentioning. The chart provides a rough idea of the relationship of some of these terms to each other.

Remote	Very unlikely	Unlikely	Even Chance	Probably/likely	Very likely	Almost certainly
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Confidence in Assessments. Our assessments and estimates are supported by information that varies in scope, quality, and sourcing. Consequently, we ascribe *high, moderate, or low* levels of confidence to our assessments as follows:

- *High confidence* generally means good quality of information, evidence from multiple collection capabilities, and the possibility of making a clear judgment. However, a “high confidence” judgment is not a fact or a certainty, and such judgments still carry a risk of being wrong.
- *Moderate confidence* generally means evidence is open to several interpretations or is credible and plausible but lacks correlation.
- *Low confidence* generally means the assessment is based on incomplete information or from collection capabilities of dubious reliability.

- ^[ii] Global News Organization; The Guardian; Elections tracker 2024: every vote and why it matters ; retrieved 24 June 2024; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/23/2024-global-elections-tracker-voting-dates-us-india-indonesia-belarus-haiti-pakistan-full-list> (source reliability - high)
- ^[iii] Academic Journal; Nature Portfolio; Companies inadvertently fund online misinformation despite consumer backlash; retrieved 16 June 2024; <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-024-07404-1#Ack1> (source reliability – high)
- ^[iiii] Technology-oriented Magazine; Wired; You Think You Know How Misinformation Spreads? Welcome to the Hellhole of Programmatic Advertising; retrieved 31 May 2024; <https://www.wired.com/story/death-of-truth-misinformation-advertising/> (source reliability – medium)
- ^[v] U.S. - based News site; Axios; How online ad targeting weaponizes political misinformation; retrieved 16 May 2024 <https://www.axios.com/2019/11/17/online-ad-targeting-political-misinformation> (source reliability - high)
- ^[vi] Academic Research; Boston University Law Review; Microtargeted Political Ads: An Intractable Problem; retrieved April 17; <https://www.bu.edu/bulawreview/files/2022/04/KING.pdf> (source reliability - high)
- ^[vii] New Hampshire Department of Justice; Office of the Attorney General; Steven Kramer Charged with Voter Suppression Over AI-Generated President Biden Robocalls; retrieved 31 May 2024; <https://www.doj.nh.gov/news-and-media/steven-kramer-charged-voter-suppression-over-ai-generated-president-biden-robocalls> (source reliability - high)
- ^[viii] Research Program; DFRLab; Doppelganger targets Ukrainian and French audiences via Facebook ads; retrieved 22 March 2024; <https://dfrlab.org/2024/03/12/doppelganger-operation-targets-ukraine/> (source reliability – high)
- ^[ix] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/media/2022/06/05/pink-slime-west-cook-news-school-race-grading/> (source reliability – high)
- ^[x] Ad Database; Meta Ad Library; retrieved 23 April 2024; https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/?active_status=all&ad_type=all&country=US&view_all_page_id=2276140902665820&search_type=page&media_type=all (source reliability – high)
- ^[xi] News Reliability Rating Database; NewsGuard; NewsGuard Technology; retrieved 23 April 2024; <https://www.newsguardtech.com/ratings/rating-process-criteria/> (source reliability – high)
- ^[xii] International NGO; Global Witness; Ticked off: TikTok approves EU elections disinformation ads for publication in Ireland; retrieved 5 June 2024; <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/ticked-tiktok-approves-eu-elections-disinformation-ads-publication-ireland/> (source reliability – high)
- ^[xiii] International NGO; Global Witness; “Votes will not be counted”: Indian election disinformation ads and YouTube; retrieved 5 June 2024; <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/votes-will-not-be-counted-indian-election-disinformation-ads-and-youtube/> (source reliability – high)
- ^[xiv] U.S. – based News Site; The Washington Post; U.S. stops helping Big Tech spot foreign meddling amid GOP legal threats; retrieved 22 March 2024; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/11/30/biden-foreign-disinformation-social-media-election-interference/> (source reliability – high)
- ^[xv] Legislative Body of the European Union; European Parliament; European elections: EU institutions prepared to counter disinformation; retrieved 5 June 2024; <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240603IPR21804/european-elections-eu-institutions-prepared-to-counter-disinformation> (source reliability - high)
- ^[xvi] Social Media Platform; Meta; Information on prohibited ads related to voting and ads about social issues, elections, or politics; retrieved 25 April 2024; <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/253606115684173> (source reliability - high)
- ^[xvii] Video Media Platform; YouTube; An update on our approach to US election misinformation; retrieved 25 April 2024; <https://blog.youtube/inside-youtube/us-election-misinformation-update-2023/> (Source reliability – high)
- ^[xviii] Video Media Platform; TikTok; Protecting the integrity of elections; retrieved 26 August 2024; <https://www.tiktok.com/transparency/en-us/protecting-elections/> (Source reliability - high)



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