

# A Side-by-Side Comparison of the Claims Made by Facebook and NYU Researchers

Prepared by the Institute for Data, Democracy & Politics  
George Washington University

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Claim made by Facebook	Rebuttals offered by NYU researchers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The Ad Observer tool collects private user data, such as names and comments, in violation of Facebook privacy policy and standard data ethics practices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The tool collects data on the ads shown to Ad Observer users, not the users themselves.</li> </ul> <p>The private user information that Facebook is referencing is that of its advertisers. The NYU researchers do not consider data such as advertiser names to be private, as any advertiser who places content about social issues, politics, or elections automatically consents to inclusion in Facebook’s publicly accessible Ad Library.</p> <p>Multiple independent reviews, including <a href="#">two conducted by Mozilla</a>, have confirmed that Ad Observer does not collect any personally identifiable data about the individuals who use the tool. Users are able to choose the degree of demographic information they share and can view the full slate of data collected by the plugin.</p> <p>The tool’s source code is publicly available.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The Ad Observer extension collects data about Facebook users who have not installed it or consented to the collection.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The Ad Observer tool operates based on informed consent. Data collected from users who volunteer to install the browser extension is anonymized and limited in scope. Information such as names, account numbers, or user interaction with specific ads is not recorded. Information on the type, provenance, and targeting of ad content shown to individuals who have installed the tool is the only data collected.</li> </ul> <p>Aside from Ad Observer users, the only accounts which may be subject to data collection are those belonging to political advertisers, whose information has already been made public by Facebook.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Facebook was compelled to shut down accounts associated with the project in order to comply with a consent decree from the Federal Trade Commission relating to the company's past infringements on user privacy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The Acting Director of the Bureau of Consumer Protection issued a <a href="#">letter</a> asserting that Facebook's "insinuation" that an FTC consent decree required the deactivation of researcher accounts was "inaccurate." The letter went on to express support for the NYU project's adherence to "good-faith research in the public interest."</li> </ul> <p>Facebook has since retracted its claim that the removal of the researchers' accounts was necessary for FTC compliance.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Accounts associated with the Ad Observer were closed because in "studying political ads using unauthorized means" NYU researchers violated Facebook's Terms of Service. The Ad Observer is employing "unauthorized scraping."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ The NYU researchers do not believe that the tool infringes the user privacy protections outlined in Facebook's TOS. The tool interfaces with advertising data that is already publicly viewable. Only users who volunteer to install the browser extension are subject to data collection on ad targeting. No personally identifiable information is collected from these users. The tool's code is open source and can be independently verified.</li> <li>○ The researchers also contend that the Ad Observer does not in fact "scrape" data. Edelson <a href="#">argues</a>, "Scraping is when I write a program to automatically scroll through a website and have the computer drive how the browser works and what's downloaded. ... That's just not how our extension works. Our extension rides along with the user, and we only collect data for the ads that are shown to the user." Though no consistent definition of scraping exists, Edelson's interpretation is supported by Bennett Cyphers of the Electronic Frontiers Foundation (see linked article).</li> <li>○ Facebook's construal of the project as "unauthorized" obfuscates the fact that the company could have undertaken an ethics and TOS compliance review and approved the Ad Observer, if it chose to do so.</li> </ul> <p>Facebook's decision to block the project by closing researcher accounts instead of pursuing legal action to dismantle the Ad Observer tool also brings into question the validity of the TOS infringement argument. Facebook has not in fact blocked, broken, or otherwise shut down the Ad Observer itself but has instead punished the researchers involved by closing their personal accounts and thereby blocking their access to the public data (via CrowdTangle and Ad Library) that feeds their larger</p>

	<p>research agenda. This has had the effect of shutting down work examining vaccine misinformation, Facebook’s role in the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection, and more.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Facebook has offered NYU a number of “privacy-protective methods” to collect and analyze data in accordance with its Terms of Service. Facebook’s researcher platform offers “a more comprehensive data set than the one [NYU] created by scraping data on Facebook.”</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ While Facebook publicly provides information about ads pertaining to social issues, politics, and elections via its Ad Library, it does not furnish data on content outside of these topic areas. The Ad Library API also does not include information about ad targeting, which is a crucial part of the picture for those studying misinformation and other potential individual and civic harms.</li></ul> <p>Furthermore, initial findings from the NYU project suggest that more than 100,000 ads that should be archived in Facebook’s Ad Library are missing. Without independently developed tools like Ad Observer, this discrepancy would not be brought to public attention.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ The additional data Facebook provided, which does offer ad targeting information, is only available to approved academic researchers, includes data from just the three months prior to the November 2020 election (i.e., is not continuously updated), and excludes ads seen by fewer than 100 people, a substantial and essential part of the relevant ads data.</li></ul>