Twitter Thread by Claire Ryan



Claire Ryan
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Great bit of journalism here by Sophia :) fun fact, we had some verrrrry interesting conversations about what exactly the Trump campaign might be doing on TikTok.

So let's talk about that!

> Donald Trump has spent the last few months trying to ban TikTok.
>
> But I've found videos that suggest his re-election campaign might be using a TikTok hype house to track how well pro-Trump messaging performs on there. My story and a \U0001f6a8 thread \U0001f6a8 below. https://t.co/2XWLTRKLqq
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> — Sophia Smith Galer (@sophiasgaler) October 6, 2020

Super glad I could be of help btw :P

Anyhoo: my background = senior web dev, data analysis a specialty, worked in online marketing/advertising a while back

You've got this big TikTok account that's ostensibly all volunteer, just promoting Trump's app because they're politically minded and all that.

Nooooooope. They're being paid.

Sophia says it's just possible (journalist speak I assume) but I know exactly what I'm looking at and these guys, Conservative Hype House, are getting paid to drive traffic and app installs for Trump.

So how do you know that, Claire?

Welp, they're using an ad tracking system that has codes assigned to specific affiliates or incoming marketing channels. These are always ALWAYS used to track metrics for which the affiliate is getting paid.

Like, if Team Trump just wanted to know what traffic is coming from TikTok, there are ways to do that (incoming referrer links) that don't involve setting up ad tracking that, in my experience, is finicky at the best of times.

Point being: Team Trump is tracking what app installs and traffic come SPECIFICALLY from Conservative Hype House. In my professional opinion, this is due to them being paid by Team Trump for the same. Typical affiliate setup.

There are alternative explanations, like for example, Team Trump is doing extra data analysis of some kind, but personally I don't believe them for a second. I know what I'm looking at here. I used to be the dev setting this shit up and making sure it worked.

And it is very profitable BTW. There's a reason influencers are a thing. If you can push good traffic that converts for a brand then you are sitting on a fucking goldmine.

So: Trump is banning TikTok, but his campaign is undoubtedly paying TikTok influencers for traffic and app installs, which makes them massive hypocrites.

Conservative Hype House are being paid for political influence and not disclosing the fact.

P.S. TBH the big story here for me anyway is how social networks are the literal Wild West of advertising, despite the efforts of lawmakers to ensure their paid relationships are correctly disclosed.

But the tech always points the way when people want to get paid. Always. There is a LOT of web dev that must be done publicly (meaning in a way that makes system operations visible) just to work at all.

The nature of the Internet makes it so.

URLs are visible. Cookies are visible. Local storage data is visible. API calls are visible.

If you know what you're looking at, you can extract a ton of information about how a system works. Devs have to prioritize "working" over "hide what you're doing".

Anyway tune in next week to hear about the time I hacked the Google Maps JS API to make it do weird non-standard stuff because my boss asked me "can we make a box appear over here"