

New app detects malarkey in political ads

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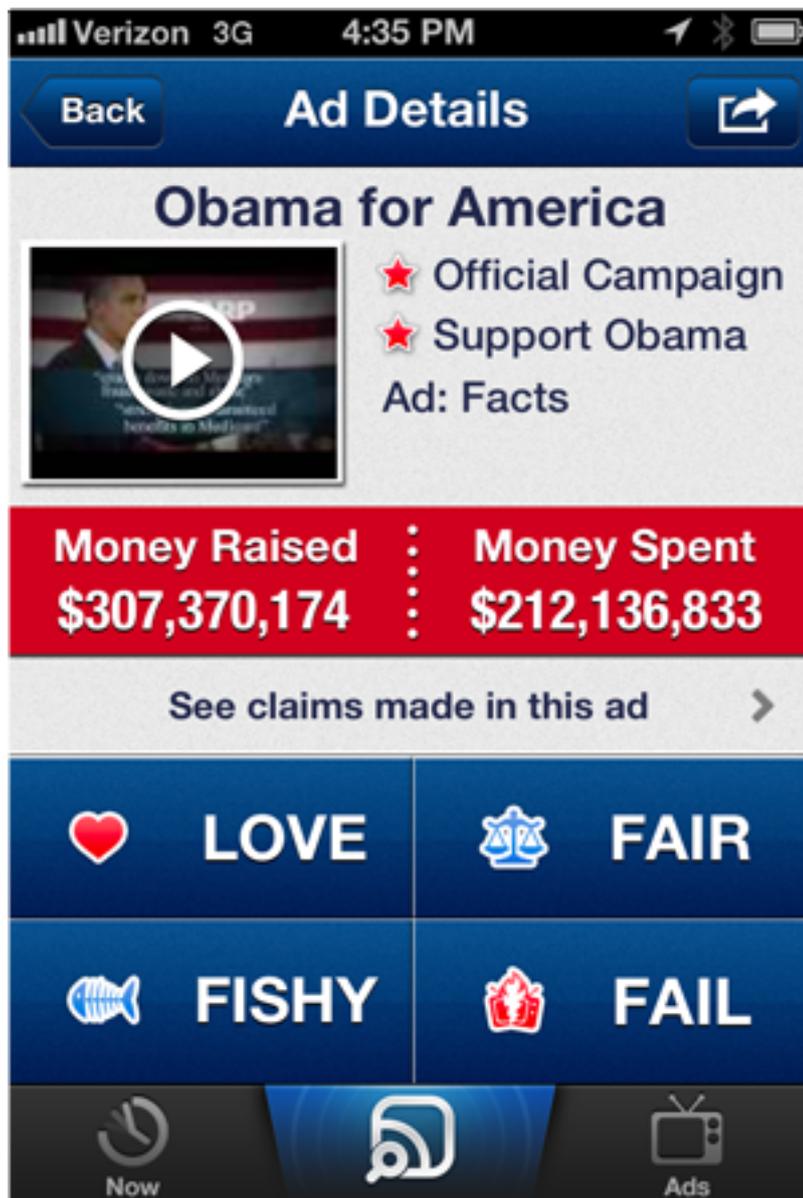


Do politicians lie? Let me rephrase that. Would you like a reliable way to detect the bovine-related animal droppings wafting from political ads? The [Super PAC App](#) [1], from former students at MIT's Media Lab, purports to do just that.

You may have noticed a glut of negative political attacks ads this election cycle — well, more so than usual. That's because of the 2010 Supreme Court Decision in [SpeechNow.org v. Federal Election Commission](#) [2], which ruled PACs (Political Action Committees) that remain officially neutral — no donations to candidates, parties or other PACs — can solicit unlimited contributions for the purpose of independent expenditures (i.e., political ads).

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These "independent-expenditure only committees," or Super PACs, "may not make contributions to candidate campaigns or parties, but may engage in unlimited political spending independently of the campaigns...they can raise funds from corporations, unions and other groups, and from individuals, without legal limits," according to the [description](#) [3] on Wikipedia.

Many of the attack ads dominating the airwaves emanate from these Super PACs. And though it's not terribly difficult to discern which candidate these Super PACs support and which organization funds the ad — both of these are usually explicitly disclosed — many prospective voters struggle with information overload.

According to [Dan Siegel](#) [4], one of the app's co-founders, "The amount of voice you can have is only limited by the amount of airtime you are able to buy. And that's unprecedented. That means that sometime in mid-August or late August, there's going to be, particularly in swing states, no more (nonpolitical) commercials. And I suspect that's going to feel very weird to the average person."

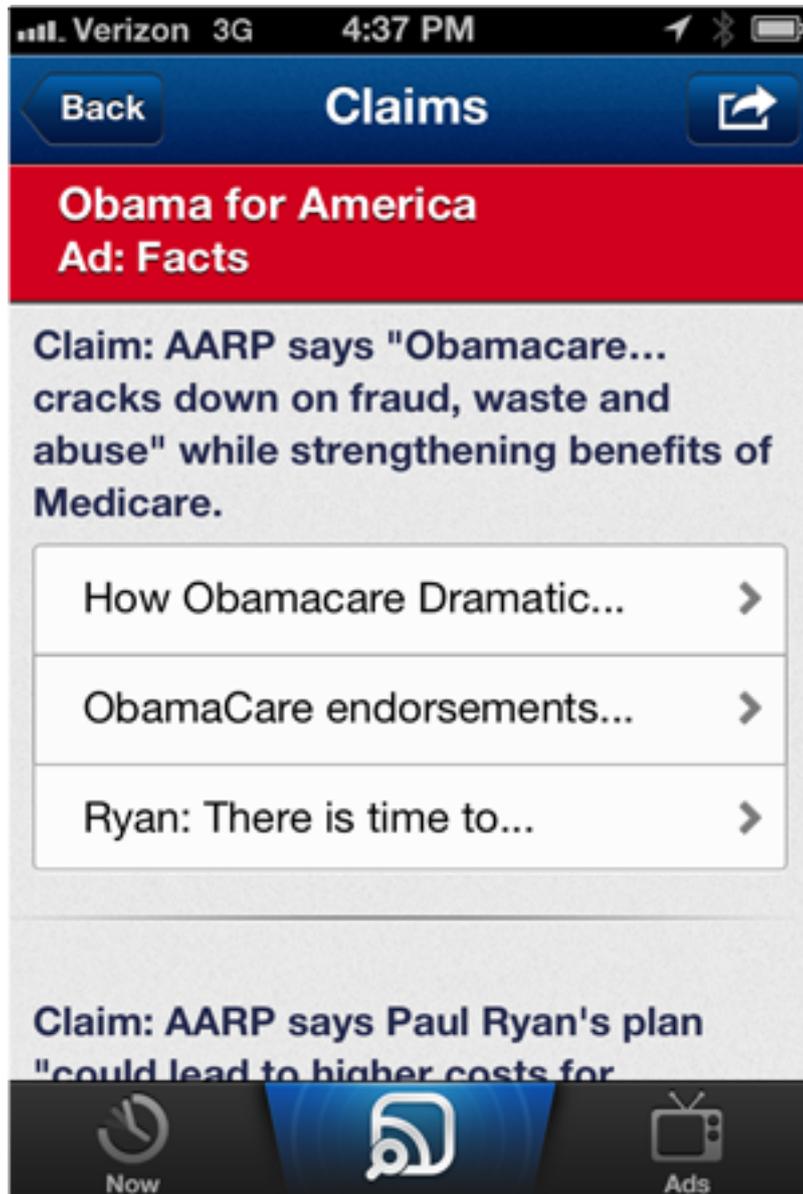
Via a technology called "audio fingerprinting," the Super PAC App analyzes the main claims set forth by specific ads. When you're listening to an ad, the app pours

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through its massive database and — more often than not — returns a match.

On the main screen (see screen cap to the right), it discloses the ad's sponsor, how much money they've raised and spent so far, and it allows users to rate the ad in one of four ways: "Love," "Fair," "Fishy," or "Fail." Considering the polarization in today's political climate, the last feature is nearly useless, but it's instructive to know which side is more tech-savvy.



But the Super PAC App's real bread and butter lies in analyzing specific claims made by the ad. By following the "see claims made in this ad" link, it takes you to a page with a list of statements and supporting or refuting documentation.

"For each of those claims, here are objective, nonpartisan, third-party sources that are talking about that claim," Siegal says.

But it's that "objective, nonpartisan" claim that sticks in the craw.

While the "third-party" sources include reputable sites like FactCheck.org or PolitiFact, it often defaults to opinion pieces from highly partisan organizations like

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the New York Times or Washington Post.

For example, I tested it on the "[Facts](#)" - Obama for America ad [5] from the President's official campaign. Under the claim "AARP says 'Obamacare...cracks down on fraud, waste, abuse' while strengthening benefits of Medicare," it lists three sources: an opinion piece from Avik Roy of Forbes titled "How Obamacare Dramatically Increases the Cost of Insurance for Young Voters," a blog from political operative Dick Morris with the blunt handle "Obamacare endorsements: What the bribe was," and an article from the perspective of Paul Ryan, Republican VP candidate.

I wouldn't call any of those sources "nonpartisan." In this case, I'm not interested in Obama's politics or his opponents', but in the app's claim to fame — verifying political ads with nonpartisan sources. By this measure, the Super PAC App is decidedly mediocre.

The app wasn't this impotent with every ad I tested it on. In many examples, I found a treasure trove of useful, nonpartisan information. But it would seem — at for now — that the best way to verify political ads is to do your own research.

Source URL (retrieved on 07/22/2014 - 8:31pm):

<http://www.ecnmag.com/blogs/2012/08/new-app-detects-malarkey-political-ads>

Links:

[1] <http://www.superpacapp.org/>

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Campaign_finance_evolution_in_2010#SpeechNOW.org_v_FEC

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_PAC#Super_PACs

[4] <http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/22/tech/mobile/super-pac-app-campaign/index.html>

[5] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ljb6tA1cXT0>