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Contact: Kirsten Kukowski, kk@K2andcompany.com

AAPC Foundation Unveils “The Disclaimer Effect” Research Project

AMELIA ISLAND, FL – Artificial intelligence is rapidly transforming nearly every aspect of how society communicates - and political advertising is no exception. As campaigns and candidates adapt to both the technology itself and the evolving regulatory landscape designed to protect voters, the AAPC Foundation commissioned "The Disclaimer Effect" to examine how AI disclaimers in political ads affect viewer trust and perception.

The Disclaimer Effect is the first nonpartisan study of its kind conducted in partnership with veteran political practitioners – professional ad-makers and ad-testers affiliated with both major political parties – and is designed to address this critical knowledge gap.

Findings from the initial phase of a three-phase research initiative reveal that AI disclaimers may not function as policymakers intended. Rather than informing viewers, disclaimers measurably increase mistrust and skepticism toward the advertised message. Many viewers fail to notice disclaimers altogether, while others misinterpret their meaning or remain uncertain about what AI use in a given ad actually signifies. These findings raise important questions about disclaimer efficacy, transparency in political advertising, and voter media literacy.

“Protecting voters from AI-generated deepfakes and synthetic manipulation is a legitimate and important goal - one the AAPC Foundation fully supports,” said Trey Richardson, President of the AAPC Foundation. “Using artificial intelligence to deceive voters undermines the integrity of our democratic process. But good intentions require good evidence, and The Disclaimer Effect makes clear that the current approach simply isn't working.” Richardson added “Campaigns and candidates have a fundamental right to reach voters, and voters deserve confidence that the information they're receiving is honest and trustworthy. We can have both, but it requires disclosure frameworks that are clear, consistent, and grounded in evidence. The AAPC Foundation is proud to provide the evidence-based groundwork from which that work can begin.”

“What makes this research so compelling is that it was built from the ground up with practitioners from both parties, because protecting voters from deception and protecting the integrity of political speech aren't partisan issues,” noted Larry Huynh, AAPC Foundation Board Member and Immediate Past President of the American Association of Political Consultants. Huynh emphasized “AI is not inherently bad; it's a tool, and how it's used is what matters. The Disclaimer Effect gives policymakers real evidence that the current approach needs rethinking,

but it also points to something equally important: voters need better resources to understand how AI is used and how to evaluate what they're seeing. Smarter regulation and stronger media literacy aren't competing priorities. They're both essential.”

Analysis of viewer responses to AI disclaimers in political advertising yielded four principal findings, consistent across testing methods:

- AI disclaimers create a measurable “disclaimer effect” - reducing viewer trust and ad effectiveness, regardless of whether the ad used artificial intelligence or not.
- Disclaimer size determines viewer awareness – small disclaimers are frequently missed entirely and produce no measurable effect on trust.
- Viewers interpret AI disclaimers in dramatically different ways, with many confused about what the disclaimer actually signifies.
- Technology familiarity shapes how viewers respond, with higher-tech and lower-tech audiences experiencing the disclaimer effect differently.

What's Ahead?

In the coming weeks, the AAPC Foundation anticipates releasing a comprehensive report on The Disclaimer Effect, providing a deeper examination of Phase 1 findings, detailed methodology, and implications for voters, policymakers, platforms, and the broader political consulting community. Subsequent research phases will extend these findings with the goal of producing an empirically grounded body of evidence to inform more effective approaches to AI transparency in political advertising

What is the AAPC Foundation?

Established in 2006, the AAPC Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to championing and protecting the right to political expression through research, education, and leadership development in the digital age. As the charitable arm of the American Association of Political Consultants (AAPC), the AAPC Foundation is uniquely positioned at the intersection of policy and practice. The AAPC Foundation is proud to bring academic rigor to questions that matter most to democracy in the digital age – including how political speech is created, regulated, and understood by voters.