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Public Communication in a Promotional Culture

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3.1	The Death of Mad Men	42
3.1.1	Control and Fragmentation of Consumer Information	43
3.1.2	Automation and Algorithms	43
3.1.3	Transformations in Marketing Expertise	45
3.2	We Are Not Our Data	45
3.3	Media Research in the Data Breach	46
	References	48

One of the most pressing questions we face as media scholars is how to reckon with the ways private media companies take users' personal data as a proxy for public life, and with what consequences for public knowledge.

To start wrestling with this issue, we need first to understand how the proliferation of behavioral data as a proprietary asset has allowed several kinds of companies to get into the business of media. The sports apparel company Nike is a classic case. In 2006, Nike introduced an iPod kit. It included a tiny transmitter that fitted into a Nike running shoe, allowing runners to keep track of their time, distance, and pace. The data receiver was located in an Apple iPod Nano. When the iPod was connected to a computer, it transferred runners' data to their profile on the Nike website. Runners' related habits (listening to music, monitoring progress, connecting with other runners for motivation and community building) were now mediated via an integrated series of Nike-branded products – an accelerometer, a GPS app, application programming interfaces (APIs) on

Facebook and Twitter – and those of its business partner, Apple. For Nike, this integrated system constituted “an ‘owned’ media channel for runners” (Wacksman and Stutzman, 2014: 83), one that incentivized a shift for the company toward the development of digital services over sports products.

This phenomenon, since exploited by Google, Amazon, and many other corporate behemoths, is what business leaders like to call an “ecosystem.” Firms seek to expand the grounds for value creation by finding ways to mine aspects of the social and cultural environment in which they operate. Companies mediate their users’ online activities to achieve “functional integration” (Wacksman and Stutzman, 2014), a form of expansion deemed superior to horizontal or vertical integration because of its ability to incorporate public communication and everyday (nonconsumer) habits into its value chain. Nike’s brand value is predicated on both this capacity for ongoing expansion into public life and a concurrent inflexibility: runners’ access to this community is conditional upon the regular purchase of Nike products and the steady provision of personal data.

When companies bank on the commodification of personal data instead of the production of goods, one consequence is the loss of advertising revenue for “traditional” media institutions. As Nike and its peers focus on data, they reduce their advertising budgets for mass media outlets, since their publicity is ensured not through TV or newspaper ads but by “building relationships with loyal groups of consumers who become participants and evangelists for the entire interconnected ecosystem of products and services” (Wacksman and Stutzman, 2014: 73).

A second consequence is the transformation of the advertising business itself, with further implications for media production. The so-called platform economy allows several kinds of organizations to perform many of the creative and media-buying functions of ad agencies, even as the creative storytelling of advertising and its placement are seen as less and less relevant against the economic imperatives of data analytics. Public relations consultancies have decreased their source-building with major news outlets and instead tweet, blog, or create podcasts for clients. Legacy news organizations like the *New York Times* replace retiring journalists with copywriters and art directors to create branded content for organizational customers (Auletta, 2018).

These contexts create new patterns of legitimacy in the public sphere. Numbers of followers or likes, rankings, and other reputational metrics

appear to evaluate their owners' trustworthiness and reliability, even as they work to transform the practices in which their owners engage (Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Petre, 2015). Industries of promotional intermediation (e.g., marketing, public relations, management consulting, lobbying) are now supplemented by a secondary industry that mediates online content through analytics, directories, and management software (with a tertiary "shadow industry" of bots, troll account operators, and "black hat" PR strategists promoting what some scholars call "networked disinformation") (Ong and Cabañes, 2018).

Perhaps the most problematic implication of these transformations is the mounting perception that the personal data on which private media companies increasingly run constitutes the sum of who we are as public people; and that decisions about public policies should be decided on that basis. This perception relies on at least two discordant principles: first, data we provide as individuals in one context is transferable to another and, second, the data we provide is reflective of actual demographics, politics, and priorities.

In this chapter, I want to illustrate the gap between the principles and the practice of personal data mining by private companies and begin to undo the increasingly pervasive "myth of 'us'" (Couldry, 2015) that behavioral data fosters among media producers and analysts. I will do this in three moves. First, I want to review some of the logics by which companies collect user data, in order to reveal the partial, fragmented, and incomplete nature of this data. While it is true, as Lisa Gitelman (2013: 2) writes, that "'raw data' is an oxymoron," it is also the case that most user data is not representative of the human behavior its owners claim to have captured. Data is captured by media companies in contexts of competition for market share, pressure to reduce costs, and anxieties over regulatory compliance. These logics force companies to isolate, hoard, and obfuscate their data relations in an attempt to maintain their value.

Second, I wish to draw on some of my ongoing empirical research to describe a recent attempt by a group of private companies to manipulate user data to address issues of sustainable development. This example demonstrates how personal data, as partial as it is, is nevertheless being actively used to make policy-related decisions with lasting public consequences.

Third, I will consider some of the implications of this state of affairs for our role as media scholars and bearers of knowledge about the ins and outs of the media professions. In the shadow of the "data turn,"

where media companies have reoriented their business models around the steady collection and management of user data, how should our research, teaching, and mentorship address the future of the industries?

3.1 THE DEATH OF MAD MEN

In a number of ways, the advertising business is an ideal model to demonstrate how media companies have been transformed by the quest for data as a primary source of value. Advertising is rarely recognized by media scholars as a media industry in its own right. It is more often characterized as a support system for news organizations and more “legitimate” cultural industries such as music, film, or publishing; and evaluated as either a necessary evil, in terms of its role as funder of these legitimate sources of mediated content, or a liability, in terms of its constant potential to downgrade the quality of public communication (Pickard, 2015).

The dual role of the ad business as both media industry and primary support to other media, however, makes it a doubly relevant exemplar to illustrate the transformation of media companies. As the currency of personal online data gains in value, the traditional ad business – like every other media business – has been upended; and its role as the source of financial support to many other cultural industries means that its shape-shifting risks have even greater consequences for media systems.

The failure of the traditional advertising industry initially appears counterintuitive. Digital advertising is characterized as “the lifeblood of the internet, the source of funding for just about everything you read, watch and hear online” (Manjoo, 2018).

But digital advertising is entirely unlike its legacy form. It is predicated not on building images, brands, or relationships. Neither does its value accrue through storytelling, entertainment, or education. Instead, its value is derived from creating and owning digital territory (including online territory and digital devices in the physical world, per “the internet of things”) to attract consumers and then finding ways to monitor, measure, and eventually monetize whatever activities the consumers engage in while on that territory, all the while directing them to engage in further activities on or annexed to that territory. To this end, the ad industry is undergoing (at least) three changes.

3.1.1 Control and Fragmentation of Consumer Information

Until recently, advertising agencies served an intermediating function across industry sectors. It was standard for a single agency or group of agencies within an advertising holding company to work for diverse clients in sectors such as healthcare, financial services, fashion, tourism, and automotive. Agency expertise was sought after in part for its ability to deploy knowledge gleaned from such cross-sectoral engagement. An insight from a focus group on patient care in a health services organization may help the agency develop a campaign for a clothing brand.

With digital advertising, marketing “insights” are developed through the analysis of consumer data. In principle, the more data points a company can collect about a user, the more valuable the data becomes. But no small- to medium-sized company, and certainly no news organization or publishing company, can generate user data to compete with the internet technology giants Alphabet (Google), Facebook, and Amazon. Instead, companies attempt to harness data that is distinctive to their business and unique within their sector, and to protect this data from being accessed by the internet behemoths.

In this context, companies have increasingly moved to create in-house advertising capacity and to end their relationships with legacy advertising firms. The intermediating function of ad agencies, once a marker of status for a firm, now poses an increasing liability for companies that wish to hoard potential insights that can be used for distinctive, targeted marketing to their clients.

The consequence of this is that many companies’ consumer data is increasingly insular and less broadly applicable. The competitive nature of the data implies that within a single market each company may seek to obtain different data and not to share it. This data is typically only relevant to highly specific behaviors in a predetermined context.

3.1.2 Automation and Algorithms

The 2016 US presidential election offered a stage for the dramatic presentation of Facebook’s structural model for algorithmic advertising and its implications (Tufekci, 2018). Along with other technology platform companies, Facebook has automated many of the functions formerly performed by advertising agencies, such as media buying, ad production, and audience monitoring. Companies not only save

money by replacing their ad agencies with Facebook's services; they also capitalize on Facebook's massive storehouse of user data to select customer characteristics, plan for increased business with "lookalike" audiences (Facebook, 2019), and closely monitor the progress of their consumers toward engaging with (i.e., making a purchase from) the company.

If Facebook's role in the presidential election revealed the capacity of our platforms to monitor us, it also revealed the capacity of the platforms to get things wrong. Researchers have shown that the various persuasion models used by social media sites like Facebook or YouTube to encourage users to stay on the site or invite more friends to join are not necessarily representative of individuals' ordinary or "natural" behavior (Ugander et al., 2011, quoted in Salganik, 2018: 35). The network structures of social media sites are at least partly performative for this reason (Healy, 2015, quoted in Salganik, 2018: 36). The Facebook data on which companies rely to build and target audiences is therefore what Salganik (2018) calls "algorithmically confounded": that is, the data is shaped less by user behavior than by the engineering goals of the systems.

Of course, traditional advertising agencies also regularly got things wrong. The old model of advertising was predicated not on accuracy but rather on a series of intimacies: relationship-building with clients; creating personable, relatable brands; and storytelling (in thirty seconds) to yoke social values to economic value. Despite its modern trappings, professional associations, and cool interior design, most ad agencies owed their power to nineteenth-century invocations of "magic" (Williams, 1980) conjured to give meaning to consumers' lives through the benefits of buying. And advertising expertise was modeled through quasi-occult prescience: the charismatic personalities of advertising "gurus" were looked to as masters of persuasion and creativity.

The magic of "Mad Men"-era advertising was all the more necessary because of the inherent difficulties in measuring advertising effectiveness, captured in the common refrain where the client says, "I know half my budget spent on advertising is working. I just don't know which half."

The difference between the questionable effectiveness of pre-internet advertising and that in the digital era lies primarily in the companies' attitudes toward data collection, which can be summed up as a disturbing fealty to data as a form of knowledge production, and a conviction that our online behaviors say more about us than we could ever say about ourselves (Davies, 2015).

3.1.3 Transformations in Marketing Expertise

Management and professional service consultancies, previously hired for their expertise in accountancy, tax, insurance, and business risk, are developing advertising services, further contributing to the decline in market share for traditional advertising agencies. Companies such as Deloitte, Accenture, PricewaterhouseCoopers LLC, KPMG, and McKinsey have restyled themselves as digital ad agencies, proposing to integrate marketing with their strategic business and technological acumen (Abboud, 2017; Morais, 2018).

These companies are well versed in international regulations and laws around corporate activity and have prior relationships with state governments, in addition to their ability to build technological platforms. They offer consulting in cybersecurity, privacy, intellectual property, and other data-related problems. Online, this know-how can serve a valuable marketing and advertising function; and it can be applied to much earlier phases of their clients' product research and development.

Knowledge of regulatory issues is especially relevant in the context of growing public and political concerns over data protection. The European Union's (EU) General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), for instance, which took effect on May 25, 2018, had a chilling impact on companies that do business in the EU. In the wake of increasing government efforts at data protection, professional consultancies propose extensive control strategies ("privacy by design") for companies to maintain compliance while continuing to harvest and protect their valuable data (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2019).

3.2 WE ARE NOT OUR DATA

Private media companies' data is a competitive asset. As the abovementioned examples show, this means that the value of the data is predicated on its users' adherence to its companies' products. Its value is also built on its inelasticity (Wacksman and Stutzman, 2014: 78), meaning the data is unique to its corporate owner. Both these value attributes limit the data's utility for public knowledge. No one dataset, not even a combination of datasets, could be expected to stand in for the public life of an entire jurisdiction, neighborhood, or nation. We are not our data. And yet arguments that we are in fact our data are informing social and technical choices.

In our ongoing research on the uses of big data for action around climate change, for example, Maria Espinoza and I discovered that transnational organizations like the United Nations are appealing to private companies to “donate” their user data for the “public good” (Kirkpatrick, 2011, 2013). Such “data philanthropy” is presented to business leaders as a form of corporate social responsibility and environmental sustainability, benefiting society as well as the brand. In 2017, UN Global Pulse, in partnership with data storage company Western Digital and the Skoll Foundation, issued a “Data for Climate Action Challenge”: researchers submitted proposals to use anonymized datasets donated by private companies to address the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with a focus on climate change mitigation. Participating companies included Waze (a traffic and navigation application), Orange (a French telecommunications company), BBVA (a Spanish financial retailer), Crimson Hexagon (a US-based social media analytics company), and the Nielsen market research firm (providing data on EnergyStar-labeled product purchases).¹

As a representative from UN Global Pulse told us about his organization’s mission: “This is really about looking at how we can use digital evidence of human behavior to make reliable inferences about what’s happening offline at the household level” (Manjoo, 2018)

But how reliable? And at what price, the gap between the inferences and actual lived experience? The data collected for brand value does not hold the same value for goals of public welfare. At the same time, what these outcomes suggest is the “brandification” of public life such that there is less and less difference between how brand value is assessed and how public concerns are valued.

The elision of brand value and social value redirects our attention toward what seem to me more dubious goals: effectiveness, interpreted as measurable results for social impact, and risk management. To the extent that social values are wrapped up with a brand’s competitive positioning, as articulated in the business guru Michael Porter’s popular concept of shared value (Porter and Kramer, 2011), the social values that are privileged are those that do not test the operating principles or profits of the firm (Aakhus and Bzdak, 2012).

3.3 MEDIA RESEARCH IN THE DATA BREACH

As media and communications scholars increasingly turn their attention to the inequities of our digital platforms, we need to devote more of our

¹ Information available at www.dataforclimateaction.org/.


energy to investigating the disparities between the affordances of these platforms and the actual social and cultural truths of the people using them. We are not our data. Though faced with constant reminders of this fact, our own tendency to take data as a proxy for social or political behavior risks inserting the same blind spots into our research findings. It is not simply the multiplication of anxieties around fake social media user accounts that is not being reflected in our research agendas. When we use Twitter feeds as barometers of public sentiment (to take only one example of academic appropriation of commercial data) we elide the strategic, promotional, or incidental registers that characterize our actual digital media habits.

These conditions challenge scholars to rethink their categories of analysis. Concepts such as public opinion, already problematic in terms of constitution, access, and equal voice, are further scrambled by various proxies for publicity that undermine arguments about democratic participation and deliberation. The task for critical scholars is to develop philosophical, theoretical, and methodological principles to deal head-on with these patterns rather than see them as outliers or anomalies to a more legitimate system of representation.

As a researcher committed to investigating the tenets and practices that make up our promotional culture, I'm struck by the speed and ease with which individuals and institutions adopt corporate marketing methods into their everyday habits. But I am equally struck by the nature of critiques against it. At the heart of our headshaking over the Instagram habits of twelve-year-olds (Lorenz, 2018), the self-branding techniques offered by career counselors on university campuses, and the rabid irredentism of Facebook, I often detect a pained nostalgia for an ideal of public life and democratic deliberation, as though pointing out the smallness of our media selves will lead us to our better angels. But it is not always clear what is meant by these ideals, or how we might realize them.

Calls for deliberation, transparency, or social justice are not in themselves sufficient, if only because private companies have themselves adopted this terminology to describe their own actions (e.g., PayPal's social mission is "financial inclusion" and Facebook's is "participation"). Neither are critiques leveled on the basis of media companies' "fake news," as recent events have demonstrated. The suggestion of fakery or lying as a fetter on public knowledge is especially problematic because it portends its opposite: that stripping away the fake or untrue will reveal the more accurate realities beneath.

Instead of focusing on whether commercial media companies are transparent enough, on the artificiality of contemporary political discourse, or on the pathologies of public opinion, what if we attended to the multifariousness of public lives and the possibilities of media to respond to them? I believe this is what Bruno Latour (2004) means when he invokes the contrast between matters of fact and matters of concern. If the importance of the long-standing and well-established critique of matters of fact was to push over totems, pull back the curtain on the constructivism of hallowed traditions, and question power in precedents, can we recognize a new kind of power in our critical potential, one that seeks to reconcile media and public life by showing how publics want and need them?

Latour (2004: 232) asks, “ we devise another powerful descriptive tool that deals this time with matters of concern and whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care?” To begin with the premise that *what seems real to people matters*, and take it from there? Is it possible to make a new category, one of public care rather than public opinion, which is not summed up by the collection of data but is manifested through what is experienced?

Maybe this is how we can begin to push back against the encroachment of corporate media and the promotional register onto our everyday habits of knowledge: not by opposing it to a realer or more pure existence but by recognizing it as one among many resources, a tool but not a condition of public life.

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