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Induction Ceremony Keynote Speech: What Facebook Knows about You that You Don't Know they Know

Melinda Messineo
Ball State University

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What Facebook Knows about You that You Don't Know they Know.¹

The Power of Big Data

Has this ever happened to you? A student in my Sociology of Media course shared in class an example of an advertisement she received on Facebook that illustrated the power of digital. The advertisement was for a women's t-shirt from an online company that sells personalized clothing. The image on the black t-shirt consisted of white block text with a red heart that read "This girl loves her TRAVIS." The veracity of the shirt's claim was not what was at issue here. The girl in question did in fact "love her TRAVIS" but there was no way that this clothing company should know of her affection. What our "Travis loving girl" later learned was that the advertisement used data obtained from her Facebook activity to determine that he was her significant other.

Following this revelation, the class erupted into a discussion of dozens of other examples. Students described seeing their own names on countless products in random locations. One student shared how he had been "stalked" by shoes viewed on one site that followed him to other sites until a purchase was made. Many shared how products they viewed on Target.com infiltrated their online perusal and Gmail users shared how topics of previous e-mail messages would prompt ads reflecting the topics of those conversations in later searches. Another student was surprised when Amazon contacted her one afternoon to remind her

that she had some “amazing” items in the digital shopping cart she had abandoned earlier that day. The “coincidences” go on but what students were describing is what is known as retargeting (display ads) or remarketing (if it is through direct to consumer e-mail) to consumers. These widely used Online Behavior Advertising (OBA) marketing strategies are how advertising space and access to consumers is sold in digital environments. The OBA models consist basically of strategies to re-engage not yet committed consumers, upsell to loyal consumers, and anticipate or prospect for consumers that have not yet shown an interest in a product or service but look a lot like others who have made the purchase ‘leap.’ You may have seen this prospecting strategy used when purchasing books or products online when the company displays prompts that say “shoppers who purchased the item you are now looking at also purchased these items.” Did it work? The company is hoping so and paying billions of dollars a year to increase the odds that it does work.

Retargeting and Remarketing

Services like retargeting and remarketing are provided by third party advertising networks or ad exchanges like Googles AdWords and AdChoices and the model has dramatically changed the digital and mobile marketing landscape. Powerful analytic tools make data capture and analysis possible like never before. The volume of data available for use in targeted advertising includes demographics like age, sex, race, behavioral data, like browsing history, online

and offline purchases, and psychographic data, including personality traits, values, hobbies and lifestyle. Research suggests that the strategies are effective, to a point. A recent survey of consumers revealed that three or fewer retargeted contacts are about the limit.² After that, consumers were more likely to feel annoyed or that their privacy had been compromised. The report describes consumers viewing their online activity as being almost as personal as their home address with 69 percent of consumers being uncomfortable with advertisers knowing which websites they've visited, slightly lower than knowing their home address (72 percent) and current location (71 percent).³ Despite these limitations, companies find that being able to connect with their most likely consumers is worth the cost and potential risk of irritation. Moderation appears to be critical to success in the digital environment and these strategies are getting increasingly sophisticated.⁴

Does it Matter?

Consumers might say...yes, our information is used for targeted advertising, but does it matter? The gathering and analysis of data and OBA strategies does matter but I would argue that not necessarily in the way one might think. Of course privacy is a concern. As the InSkin Media survey suggests, consumers do get a feeling that they are being watched a little too closely or at the very least their data is being used in some intrusive ways, but in what other ways are these technological developments significant?

I would argue that privacy is not our greatest concern when it comes to these marketing strategies and instead consumers should be more concerned about what it is that is...missing. Let me provide some context, the past forty years has without question witnessed a dramatic transition in the media landscape. In television alone we have gone from three major networks with one or two public stations to a highly segmented environment with hundreds of stations. Add to that the internet which is then coupled with the power of mobile and the amount of media outlets is endless. As a result, marketers have transitioned from a generalist to a specialist approach to advertising and programming in all formats.⁵ The transition to a specialist approach means that audiences are viewed as increasingly targetable demographically identified groups and advertising becomes more specialized toward the anticipated target. Some targeting was, of course, always done when day-part was the frame that was used for selling advertising time. “Day-parts” refer to the time of the day when viewing happens. More television viewing happened after the workday, less during the afternoon or after midnight. Day-part was also connected to who was viewing during that particular time of day. For example, at one time, afternoon viewers were more likely to be females with children compared to the primetime demographic which would consist of more working males and the predicted viewership defined how advertising dollars would be spent. However, gone are the days when a company could predict that over 50 percent of all television viewers on a given night would

see their ad in the second spot on the *I Love Lucy* show. Currently *Sunday Night Football* takes the largest share at just over 12 percent of the viewing audience.⁶ The slices of the pie are much smaller, differences between groups are much more precise, and when and where media is consumed has changed dramatically.

In-groups and Out-groups

One of the outcomes of this transition to highly specific niches is the heightening of in-group versus out-group distinctions among consumers. The targeted audience is the highly valued in-group and is set in contrast to the out-group; the “othered” group in comparison. Consumers are encouraged to distinguish themselves from the “masses” through their savvy purchases. The unhip, unstylish, unacceptable ‘other’ is presented in contrast to the in-group individual who knows how to shop well. Social science research reveals that in-group and out-group distinctions are powerful frames that lead to the devaluing of out-group members. The process of devaluing others is often coupled with the homogeneity effect whereby the out-group member is perceived as less distinctive than in-group members making them more interchangeable and less individualized. This de-valuing makes it easier to discriminate between groups based on membership alone.⁷

The question then becomes, how does market segmentation impact the nature of in-group out-group representations? Early hopes were that market segmentation in general and the internet in particular was going to be the great

equalizer in media representations. No longer would under-represented groups be considered too small of an audience share. Size mattered less than specificity. If a group could be located then specific messages could be tailored and sent to those audiences. The result would be an overall more diverse media landscape. Greater representation and diversity of images was inevitable. The promise of new media was appealing and in practice a great deal can be said for the greater access and increased diversity made possible.

However, another concern emerged as a result of market segmentation. With so many voices and representations available, it is difficult to hear any messages at all. Choices needed to be narrowed to interests and specific audiences made and targeted niche media ran the risk of creating an echo-chamber. What the specificity of the niche market created was a world where your ideas beliefs and preferences were reflected back at you...much as words shouted into a canyon echo back, the risk of targeted media was that it would reflect consumers ideas back at them without critique and with unapologetic confirmation.⁸

As the technologies become more precise, the better the data, the more affirmation a consumer receives. Personalized radio, niche magazines, topical blogs, website preferences, settings selected by the consumer and as my student learned, not selected but identified by data gathered. You can imagine how affirming the modern media world is to the consumer. Individuals from severely

under-represented and marginalized groups finally saw themselves in media and could get their voice heard. This is powerful and potentially positive outcome, however, false consensus bias is inevitable because our perceptions of the degree of agreement over time is distorted. Eventually cookies and preferences and retargeting strategies select for news stories, advertisements, products and songs that all speak to our personal preferences. Moreover, the transition can be so subtle that we might not always notice the decline of the “non-relevant.” Instead it is just familiar and comfortable. That comfort, however, could also be a source of isolation. What is missing from your media landscape?

What happens when the out-group disappears or becomes so homogenous that no significant rebuttal to your echo chamber occurs? The outcomes of online market segmentation have been connected to polarization in the political news landscape⁹. This, compounded by a twenty-four hour news cycle, is related to the way that we consume information and how information is targeted to us as consumers. The isolation of populations makes dialogue difficult and dialogue is necessary for democracy.¹⁰ Sunstein uses the phrase “cybercascade” to describe the potential for group think to dominate social media conversations. Alternative positions are not fully considered as much as they are lambasted by the cascade of dissent. The “other” side’s position is oversimplified, all members of a group are thrown together in a homogenous mob, and true engagement and discourse is stifled. The sides present arguments in parallel planes as opposed to in shared

spaces. What discourse that does occur in shared spaces is often hostile and anonymous further contributing to the “othering” of the out-groups.

A related aspect of market segmentation is the risk of having an overinflated sense of your grasp of issues because your slice of the information appears to represent a large piece of the whole. I am reminded of a pie graph image I saw that shows the body of all possible knowledge. A small slice of the pie represents our general awareness. We have an understanding of what we realize we know and it is fairly small. There is another slice, this one larger, which represents the things we realize we do not know. The rest of the pie, the largest piece by far, is made up of the things we do not realize that we do not know. Market segmentation makes it harder for us to grasp all there is out there that we do not know, we do not know.

If we try, we can get a little glimpse into this “vastness of the unknown.” There is an activity that I do in my sociology of media classes that asks students to take three minutes to brainstorm all of the things they know based on personal experience. They cannot write down anything that they know through mediated experience or acquisition. They cannot include anything they learned from the internet, television, books, or other people’s experiences. They can only write down things that they know from their own personal experience. Students are typically stumped. The things they begin to write down include “I know the sun on my skin feels warm,” and “my cat’s tongue is rough.” Some students share

things like, “I know what turbulence in a plane feels like,” another wrote “I know what it feels like to fall in love.” What these responses show us is that our understanding of the world is almost entirely mediated. The fact that we are unaware of that which we do not know further impedes our ability to see that which is missing from our mediated landscape.

What can be done?

As I think of my student’s experience, I know that there are things she could have done to reduce her exposure to the “big data” gleaning engine of the digital world. I also know that in the time since the class was held, Facebook has added new facial recognition tagging features to its site which raises new privacy concerns. There is an increased awareness about privacy concerns in general, and consumers have methods to protect their privacy, but as technology changes it becomes more and more challenging for consumers to be informed. Consumer Reports offers nine ways to protect yourself on Facebook including un-public your wall, review privacy settings regularly and turn off “tag suggest.”¹¹ On the internet in general, consumers can reset their browsing history at each log out, remove and reject cookies regularly, limit the personal data shared and use opt out features on companion ad companies Aboutads.info, NAI, Shared Endorsements settings page in Google. This of course is a great deal of work and it is extremely difficult to navigate internet commerce without the use of cookies and other features. If a user does not agree to the terms and conditions of an app or site,

they don't get access. This "all or none" choice has caused other countries to demand greater accountability and higher privacy protection from Facebook¹² and other agencies including the "right to disappear"¹³ so it is possible that US consumers may become similarly mobilized.

Until such mobilization occurs, however, the general advice given is "user be aware," don't over-disclose, and use the highest privacy settings possible in all contexts. More importantly, however, I think that our concerns about what Facebook and other purveyors of 'big data,' "know about us that we don't know they know" is how isolated we are from the other demographic categories, the out-groups to our in-groups, that we do not fit into and how the digital mechanisms by design create isolation. Isolation with a false sense of empowerment is not dialogue and dialogue is necessary for a healthy democracy. In order to avoid this isolation, we need to seek out opinions different than our own. We need to take classes and have experiences that expand our perspectives. We need to consume news and other media from multiple sources (NPR, CBS, BBC, Aljezeera English, etc.; See <https://www.ohio.edu/global/news-events/international.cfm>). We also need to better understand where our positions on issues stem from and understand why we hold those views. We also need to become better listeners. Our listening skills have become dulled by the resonance of the echo chamber. We need to learn how to listen for understanding not rebuttal.

In closing, I am happy to report that my former student and Trevor are still going strong. I wonder how often they encounter the “coincidences” that remarketing makes possible. I hope that they...in fact I hope that we all... are able to find a way to break out of the echo chambers that new technology makes possible. In fact, the new technology can be our path out of isolation, if used by informed consumers.

ENDNOTES

¹ Keynote Address for the LeMoyné College Honor Societies Induction Ceremony 2015. Presentation made possible by the generous support of Phi Gamma Mu and Alpha Kappa Delta.

² “Familiarity, Frequency and Fine Lines.” InSkin Media.

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³ “Familiarity, Frequency and Fine Lines.”

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⁴ Anja Lambrecht and Catherine Tucker, “When Does Retargeting Work? Information Specificity in Online Advertising” *Journal of Marketing Research*: 5, n.5 (October 2013) 561-76.

⁵ Hershey H. Friedman, Tomas Lopez-Pumarejo, and Linda Weiser Friedman, “A New Kind of Marketing: Creating Micro-niches Using Resonance Marketing” *Journal of Internet Commerce*, 6, no.1 (2007), 83-99.

⁶ Alex McNeil, *Total Television*, 4th ed., (New York: Penguin, 1996) 1143–61.

⁷ Mark Rubin and Constantina Badea, “Why Do People Perceive Ingroup Homogeneity on Ingroup Traits and Outgroup Homogeneity on Outgroup Traits?” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 33, no. 1 (2007): 31–42.

⁸ E. Gilbert, T. Bergstrom, and K. Karahalios, "Blogs are Echo Chambers: Blogs are Echo Chambers," in *System Sciences. HICSS '09. 42nd Hawaii International Conference*, 1-10, 5-8 Jan. 2009

⁹ Norman H. Nie, Darwin W. Miller, III, Saar Golde, Daniel M. Butler and Kenneth Winneg, "The World Wide Web and the U.S. Political News Market American" *Journal of Political Science* 54 (2010): 2428–39.

¹⁰ Cass Sustein, "Exposure to Other Viewpoints Is Vital to Democracy" *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 16, 2001): B10 & Cass Sunstein, *Republic.Com 2.0*. Princeton University Press (2007).

¹¹ Consumer Reports. "Facebook & your privacy: Who sees the data you share on the biggest social network?"

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¹² David Cohen, "Facebook Quietly Brings Back Tag Suggest in Europe, But It Only Works on U.S. Users." <http://www.adweek.com/socialtimes/tag-suggest-europe-us-users/437508>. (Accessed January 19, 2016).

¹³ Jason Walsh, "When it comes to Facebook, EU defends the 'right to disappear'." <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2011/0406/When-it-comes-to-Facebook-EU-defends-the-right-to-disappear>. (Accessed January 19, 2016).