

What the future may hold: Surveillance Capitalism

Today, the rapid expansion of advertising, propaganda, and PR has increased the supply of information and entertainment that consumers can access. But advertisers and propagandists do not just want to tell their story in a way that affects consumers' emotions and, ultimately, their behavior. They also want to collect detailed information about consumers. Of course, they want this information in order to connect to people more directly across the devices and platforms people use. But they also want to collect detailed information in order to more effectively influence and persuade.

In the political realm, data science companies have tried to identify Americans' biases and craft political messages designed to trigger their fears and anxieties to influence voting. Both the Republican and Democratic parties have developed digital campaign tools to gather as much information as possible on potential voters. In 2012, when President Obama directed TV ads to consumers based on data collected from cable set-top boxes, it was considered cutting-edge political communication. In 2016, Republicans used i360, a \$50 million initiative that offered incredibly detailed information on potential voters. Political campaign strategists had access to shopping habits, credit status, homeownership, and religious affiliation, with voting histories, social media content, and any connections users might have had with advocacy groups or other campaigns (Halpern, 2018).

It has been called *surveillance capitalism*: the use of data extraction and analysis through computer monitoring and automation. By personalizing and customizing goods and services to users of digital platforms, companies carry out continual experiments on users and consumers without their awareness (Zuboff, 2016).

Online, many ads are personalized to users' actual needs, which is why users may perceive them as less bothersome, annoying, and intrusive than before. But in his 2011 book *The Daily You*, Joseph Turow, a professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, worries that personalization is actually a form of social profiling that leads to discrimination. For example, if marketers think you buy your clothes at H&M, you probably will not see too many designer clothing ads from Saks Fifth Avenue. Today, much of the media content you experience online is shaped by choices made by marketers, based on what they know about you. Over time, your digital identity may become increasingly calculated by your value to marketers.

Mobile phones are becoming a more powerful device for customizing advertising and propaganda directly to individuals. Because a cell phone is constantly relaying data about its user's location, it can also gather information about the Internet-connected devices nearby. Pervasive tracking of online activity is something that most people have already become accustomed to. But people have different levels of acceptance of online surveillance. Researchers have found that Americans feel differently about online surveillance depending on their political affiliations. In one survey, Republicans were more pleased about surveillance than were Democrats (Singer, 2018).

New debates about surveillance and privacy are emerging in the context of the *Internet of Things*. This term refers to the dramatic rise in the types of products connected to the Internet: TVs, cars, toys, clothing, fitness monitoring watches and jewelry, home security devices, refrigerators and household appliances, and much more.

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How do marketing practices affect your identity and your privacy?

New forms of advertising called *proximity marketing* include targeting mobile-device users with personalized content based on how close they are to a specific location. Using GPS data, advertisers can now send advertising messages to the phones of customers who are within a range of only 3 feet of a specific location.

Such marketing practices raise substantial concerns about protecting consumer privacy. Recently, one of the world's largest manufacturers of Internet-connected televisions was fined \$2.2 million by the Federal Trade Commission when it installed software on its TVs to collect viewing data on 11 million consumer TVs without consumers' knowledge or consent.

Understanding digital marketing practices is now becoming an essential media literacy competency. Proximity marketing, consumer loyalty programs, and retailer apps can be coordinated to build profiles of individuals based on their behavior. In a radio interview, Professor Joseph Turow explains, "We are allowing companies to simply profile us and treat us based upon ideas about us that we have no conception of. They're taking data about us, making these profiles and we have no notion of what they're doing." According to Turow, retailing surveillance is training us in the belief that "to get along in the 21st century we have to give up data" (Gross, 2012). A media-literate individual must ask, "Whose interests are served by this point of view?" As digital devices are used for surveillance purposes, consumers must develop considerably more knowledge about how marketing practices affect their identities and privacy.