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# Americans Roundly Reject Tailored Political Advertising—At a Time When Political Campaigns Are Embracing It

## **Disciplines**

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# Americans Roundly Reject Tailored Political Advertising

**AT A TIME WHEN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS  
ARE EMBRACING IT**

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**Joseph Turow**, Ph.D., is Robert Lewis Shayon Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. Among his several books are *The Daily You: How the New Advertising Industry is Defining Your Identity and Your Worth* (Yale University Press, 2011), *Niche Envy: Marketing Discrimination in the Digital Age* (MIT Press, 2006) and *Breaking Up America: Advertisers and the New Media World* (University of Chicago Press, 1997). Since 1999 he has conducted national telephone surveys that have moved forward public discourse on digital media, marketing, and privacy.

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## Overview

The 2012 election marks a watershed moment for online advertising. In unprecedented ways, and to an unprecedented extent, campaign organizations across the American political spectrum are using hundreds of pieces of information about individuals' online and offline lives to ensure the "right" people are being targeted with the "right" advertising. Yet, contrary to what marketers claim, the vast majority of adult Americans—86%--do not want political campaigns to tailor advertisements to their interests. Moreover, large majorities of Americans say that if they learn a candidate they support carries out one or another real-life example of tailored political advertising, it will decrease their likelihood of voting for the candidate.

These are two findings from the first nationally representative telephone (wireline and cell phone) survey to explore Americans' opinions about targeting and tailored advertising by political campaigns. *Targeting* refers to the analysis of data about a population to determine who should receive a persuasive message, how, when and for what reasons. *Tailored* advertising refers to shaping a persuasive message for a particular individual based on conclusions the targeting process generated about that person's interests and values. Critics of the new advertising regime have lambasted it for threatening privacy and undermining democratic values. Marketers have defended the practice by insisting it gives Americans what they want: political advertisements and other forms of content that are relevant to their concerns.

We conducted this survey to determine what Americans say. We found that the percentage who do not want "political advertising tailored to your interests" (86%) is far higher than the still-quite-high proportions of the population who reject "ads for products and services that are tailored to your interests" (61%), "news that is tailored to your interests" (56%), and "discounts that are tailored to your interests" (46%). Moreover, we found that the rejection of targeted political ads is unrelated to political-party affiliation or political orientation. It also cuts across gender and age, and it while does vary with race and ethnicity the numbers opposing tailored political advertising are high across the board. The survey uncovered other noteworthy attitudes by Americans toward the targeting and tailoring of political advertising. For example:

- 64% of Americans say their likelihood of voting for a candidate they support would decrease (37% say *decrease a lot*, 27% say *decrease somewhat*) if they learn a candidate's campaign organization buys information about their online activities and their neighbor's online activities—and then sends them different political messages it thinks will appeal to them. [This activity is common during the 2012 election.]
- 70% of adult Americans say their likelihood of voting for a candidate they support would decrease (50% say *decrease a lot*, 22% say *decrease somewhat*) if they learn a candidate's campaign organization uses Facebook to send ads to the friends of a person (Sally in the example) who "likes" the candidate's Facebook page. The ads contain Sally's photo and proclaim her support of the candidate. [This activity, too, is taking place during the 2012 election.]
- 77% of Americans agree (including 35% who agree strongly) that "If I knew a website I visit was sharing information about me with political advertisers, I would not return to the site." [Many sites, independently or through third parties, do share such data.]

- 85% agree (including 47% who agree strongly) that “If I found out that Facebook was sending me ads for political candidates based on my profile information that I had set to private, I would be angry.” [Facebook does do this.]

These findings and others in the following pages represent a national statement of concern. What we have is a major attitudinal tug of war: the public’s emphatic and broad rejection of tailored political ads pulling against political campaigns’ growing adoption of tailored political advertising without disclosing when they are using individuals’ information and how. Our survey shows that in the face of these activities, Americans themselves want information.

- A majority wants to know what political campaigns know about them that lead to a tailored ad, and how they learned it. When asked “If a political campaign sends you an online ad that’s relevant to you, would you want to know what the campaign knows about you that led to the ad, or do you not care?,” 65% say they would want to know. Further, when asked if they “would want to know where the campaign got the information to make it relevant, or do you not care?” 76% say they would want to know.
- A majority also wants political candidates’ websites to ask permission when using their information. 91% of Americans say no when asked if it’s OK for a political candidate’s website to sell information they provide to the site. 63% of them say no even when told that the site’s privacy policy would inform them it was selling the information. But when Americans are given the opportunity to “opt in” every time a candidate’s political website wants to sell information they provided to the site, the percentage who then say no drops to 38% of the entire sample.

It’s hard to escape the conclusion that our survey is tapping into a deep discomfort over behavioral targeting and tailored advertising when it comes to politics. Political campaigning is moving in a direction starkly at odds with what the public believes should take place. At the end of this report we suggest how this divide may in coming decades erode citizens’ beliefs in the authority of elections. We also suggest steps toward lifting the hood on the new world of political marketing in the interest of public discussion regarding Americans’ understanding of their evolving political system and where they would like to see it go.

## ***Background***

Political advertisers have long had an interest in targeted advertising and tailored messages. As early as 1892 Republican National Committee chairman James Clarkson boasted that he had “with two years of hard work, secured a list of the names of all the voters in all the important States of the North, in 20 or more states, and lists with the age, occupation, nativity, residence and all other facts of each voters’ life, and had them arranged alphabetically, so that literature could be sent constantly to each voter directly, dealing with every public question and issue from the standpoint of his personal interest.”<sup>1</sup>

The rise of mass media dampened enthusiasm for individual targeting during the first half of the twentieth century. By the early 1960s, though, the introduction of market segmentation to the field of commercial advertising was influencing political marketing. In his 1960 primary campaign, John F. Kennedy collected large amounts of data about the opinions and values of voters, using it to hone his message for different audiences and transform himself from a relative unknown to his party’s eventual nominee.<sup>2</sup> Political campaigners increasingly turned to pollsters to help identify messages that would resonate with various voter segments. These initiatives drew on the development of psychographic marketing, which relied on a combination of demographic and psychological information to create homogeneous market segments. In the early 2000s, campaigns began to adopt techniques from commercial advertising where individual voter behavior could be predicted through analyzing masses of consumer data. Among the first to use the technique was Mitt Romney in his successful 2002 run for Governor of Massachusetts. Romney’s consultant Alexander Gage deployed a tactic known as *microtargeting*.<sup>3</sup> It involved finding and combining information about individuals’ political preferences and consumer habits. These were then added to the Republican Party’s comprehensive database of information on voters. These individuals could then be targeted – usually by the traditional avenues of phone and direct mail – with messages designed to appeal to them.

## **Tailoring and Targeting in the Digital Era**

Far from inventing targeted and tailored advertising techniques, then, organizations involved in political advertising via digital media build on strategies used by political campaigners for decades. The spread of the web and mobile phones during the 2000s has, however, transformed those practices in three key ways. One is a campaign’s unprecedented ability to gather enormous amounts of information about individuals by getting them to register on websites, purchasing information about them, following their activities on the web, and noting the geographical locations of their digital devices—their desktop computers, laptops, tablets, mobile phones, and even gaming consoles. Another game-changer is the ability to create sophisticated computer models that use enormous amounts of data to identify the most and least desirable individuals and groups from the standpoint of a particular political campaign strategy. The third is the ability to reach those people via a variety of digital platforms—advertising on websites, ads on Google and Bing search engines, email, social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and more—at the particular moment a campaign believes such pinpointing is useful.<sup>4</sup>

These three sets of practices occur without letting the American public—the citizens who are the targets as well as the source of the information for targeting—know the details. Campaign organizations and political data-management firms buy and trade individuals’ information

regularly. These practices are entirely legal in the United States. In fact, beyond certain areas of health and financial information, few regulations govern the gathering, exchange and use of data about people in the digital realm. The Federal Trade Commission encourages companies that use people's data toward a self-regulatory regime around the principles of notice/awareness, choice/consent, access/participation, integrity/security, and enforcement/redress.<sup>5</sup> Political marketers may claim to be exempt from even these weak rules under First Amendment rights, though this has not been tested. Though their work is largely hidden from public view, it has grown in detail and texture even over the last four election cycles. In addition to selecting people by demographic and psychographic characteristics, political campaigns increasingly rely on behavioral targeting—that is, the buying and selling of data about users' online, and offline, activities.<sup>6</sup> Put simply, advertisers, often in partnership with ad networks, drop data packets called cookies into a user's browser when they enter a website. When that user enters another website that is monitored by the ad network, the network reads its cookie in the user's browser and decides if it wants to serve an ad. This method can be used for market segmentation—to target pregnant women wherever they appear, for example. But campaigns can also use it to go beyond market segmentation to target any *individual* with the “right” product or message at the “right” time – a message that may be different from the one served to her neighbor or friend. Borrowing heavily from the practices of commercial marketers, this strategy allows for the creation of customized campaigns that help create a personalized online experience for each user regardless of where that person travels online.

### **How Campaigns are using these Techniques**

As early as 2008, political organizations used “web behavior” including news articles read, blogs visited or search terms entered to target people likely to be sympathetic to their political messages.<sup>7</sup> The trade magazine *Campaigns & Elections* outlined how a group of online marketing and analytics companies used a series of targeting techniques to help Senator Harry Reid beat Sharron Angle in 2010.<sup>8</sup> Reid's campaign organization targeted voters based on what the campaign knew about their demographics and online behavior. It then tailored the message: each voter received an advertisement about Reid's health care plan that was most relevant to that individual. In the 2012 election cycle political-marketing organizations are innovating by combining online and offline data – particularly information found in the voter file – to try to ensure that the “right” people are being targeted with advertising that suits them.

In addition to tracking people's behaviors on and off the web in the interest of tailored communication, campaigns show growing sophistication in their use of social networking sites. For example, Facebook has introduced ZIP-code specific advertising, which may be useful for politicians looking to target advertisers in specific districts.<sup>9</sup> Microtargeting techniques are used by political campaigns to gather information about individuals from social networking sites – including interests, employment, ethnicity, language and age – and send highly targeted ads to those deemed beneficial by the campaign.<sup>10</sup> Harry Reid's election organization used Facebook to target young people as well as individuals identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender through profile information like age and relationship status.<sup>11</sup> Campaigns are even able to tap into friendship networks to help build their list of targets.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, many candidates have Facebook pages where they invite voters to “like” them. These pages will send campaign information to those subscribed to the page.<sup>13</sup> It may not be



clear to those who sign up that they may become stars in targeted, tailored ads. If a candidate pays Facebook, the social networking site will send advertisements called *sponsored stories* to the Facebook friends of people who are fans of the candidate. These tailored ads often include the fan's Facebook photo. They tell those receiving the message that their friend supports the candidate.<sup>14</sup>

The 2012 campaign is also seeing an unprecedented role for mobile advertising. Campaigns have for several years encouraged people to sign-up with their mobile phone number to receive text-message updates about the campaign or candidate. Now politicians are able to target advertisements to mobile phones and tablets based on location. Campaigns are reportedly using hyper-local targeted advertisements—those that reach neighborhoods or areas within neighborhoods—to send particular messages to certain types of voters, even certain individual voters, in swing states who might be swayed in the campaigns' direction.<sup>15</sup> New ways of tracking individuals' phones and tablets without cookies (using the devices' electronic identification signals, for example) portend a future ability to identify and follow individuals across devices, space, and time, often without the person's full understanding of what is happening.

### **Critics Worry Tailored Political Advertising Undermines Privacy and Threatens Democracy**

These developments have stirred concern among advocates of a transparent and fair political process. In a February 2012 *Stanford Law Review Online* article Daniel Kreiss, a Journalism professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, concisely summarized critics' views about why “the proliferation of political data undermines political privacy and threatens democratic practice.” First, there is the risk of data breaches and the unauthorized dissemination of sensitive citizen information. Another concern is that citizens in future years will hesitate to discuss politics in digital venues if they believe their comments are being collected for analysis by and even sale to political marketers. A third concern is that the high cost of political data and related political consulting activities add yet another bar to political races for all but the well-heeled or their good friends. And a fourth issue is the use of data to routinely “redline the electorate, ignoring individuals they model as unlikely to vote, such as unregistered, uneducated, and poor voters.”<sup>16</sup> A corollary of this concern is what might be called *rhetorical redlining*: the likelihood that individuals will receive ads from candidates based on what the campaign's statisticians believe they want to hear—shutting them off from messages that the statisticians determined might make them waver in their support.

Responding directly to Kreiss, three Campaign Grid executives argued generally that “relevant online ads support democracy.” They contended that “A positive aspect of relevant campaign ads is that the ads are more relevant to the voter receiving them: voters receive ads about issues they are most likely to care about, with easily accessed links to click-through to learn more.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite growing press discussion in recent months regarding the rise of tailored political advertising, no one has asked the citizens themselves whether they think it's a good idea. A study that comes closest to this topic is a national landline-and-cell-phone survey of 1,000 Americans that one of us (Joseph Turow) conducted in 2009 with researchers at the University of Pennsylvania and Berkeley Law School with the help of Princeton Survey Research Associates

International.<sup>18</sup> The central finding was that contrary to what many marketers claimed: most adult Americans (66%) do not want to receive advertisements “tailored to their interests.” Moreover, when Americans are informed of three common ways that marketers gather data about people in order to tailor ads, even higher percentages—between 73% and 86%—say they would not want such advertising.

Our central question for this study was whether Americans would express the same disinclination toward tailored *political* advertising. Related questions tumbled out. Would people who oppose political advertising be against it because they dislike online advertising generally or because they dislike tailored political advertising? Are there certain circumstances where Americans support tailored advertising more than other circumstances? Do they believe that such activities are actually occurring (they are)? If they knew a candidate they support uses their information to send them political ads tailored to their interests, would it increase or decrease their likelihood for voting for that candidate? How do these answers vary by Americans’ age, gender, education, and party affiliation?

### ***The Study and Its Population***

We explored these questions as part of a larger survey of Americans’ opinions about and understanding of a variety of online privacy issues. We cast our population net broadly. We included people in our study if they were 18 years or older said yes to one of the following questions: “Do you go on online or use the internet, at least occasionally?” and “Do you send or receive email, at least occasionally?”

The survey was conducted from April 23 - May 6, 2012 by Princeton Survey Research Associates International. PSRAI conducted telephone interviews with a nationally representative, English and Spanish speaking sample of 1,503 adult internet users living in the continental United States. The interviews averaged 20 minutes. A combination of landline (N=901) and cellular (N=602, including 279 without a landline phone) random digit dial (RDD) samples was used to represent all adults in the continental United States who have access to either a landline or cellular telephone.

For the landline sample, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest adult male or female currently at home based on a random rotation. If no male/female was available, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest adult of the other gender. This systematic respondent selection technique has been shown to produce samples that closely mirror the population in terms of age and gender when combined with cell interviewing. For the cellular sample, interviews were conducted with the person who answered the phone. Interviewers verified that the person was an adult and in a safe place before administering the survey. Cellular respondents were offered a post-paid cash reimbursement for their participation.

**Table 1: Characteristics of U.S. Adults in Sample (N=1,503)\***

<b>Sex</b>	
Male	49
Female	51
<b>Age</b>	
18-24	15
25-34	19
35-49	27
50-64	25
65-97	10
Don't Know/Refused	3
<b>Race</b>	
White	75
Black or African American	11
Asian or Pacific Islander	4
American Indian or Alaskan Native	1
Mixed Race	2
Other/Don't Know/Refused	7
<b>Hispanic or Latino Background?</b>	
No	88
Yes, born in US	7
Yes, born outside US	4
Other/Don't Know/Refused	3
<b>Household Income</b>	
Under \$30,00	25
\$30,000 to under \$50,000	17
\$50,000 to under \$75,000	14
\$75,000 to under \$100,000	10
\$100,000 to under \$150,000	10
\$150,000 or more	8
Don't Know/Refused	16
<b>Region of the Country</b>	
Northeast	19
Midwest	22
South	35
West	24
<b>Education</b>	
Less than high school graduate	5
High school graduate	29
Some college/associate degree	29
College graduate	37

\*When the numbers don't add to 100%, it is because of rounding error.

Based on a 7-callback procedure and using the American Association of Public Opinion research (AAPOR) method, a standard for this type of survey, the overall response rates were a typical 12 percent for the landline sample and 12 percent for the cellular sample. We note that the cooperation rate for both the landline and cellular samples was 20% and that 92% of the landline and 95% of the cellular respondents completed the interviews once they started.

Statistical results are weighted to correct known demographic discrepancies. The margin of sampling error for the complete set of weighted data is  $\pm 2.8$  percent at the 95% confidence level. The margin of error is higher for smaller subgroups within the sample.

Table 1 provides an introductory snapshot of our internet-using population. As the table indicates, women slightly outnumber men; 75% designate themselves as White; 11% identify themselves as blacks or African American; Asian Americans make up 4%; and Native Americans comprise about 1%. Hispanics (white and black) comprise about 11% of the sample. About 61% are under age 49. Most have at least some higher education, and 28% report over \$75,000 household income while 25% list it as below \$30,000; 16% did not want to reveal their household income.

## ***The Findings***

### **Americans Reject Tailored Political Content and Behavioral Tracking**

The telephone interviewer asked all these people the following questions:

- Please tell me whether or not you want the websites you visit to show you ads for products and services that are tailored to your interests.
- Please tell me whether or not you want the websites you visit to give you discounts that are tailored to your interests.
- Please tell me whether or not you want the websites you visit to show you news that is tailored to your interests.
- Please tell me whether or not you want the websites you visit to show you political ads that are tailored to your interests.

We had asked the questions about ads, discounts, and news in the 2009 study; the question about political ads is new with this survey. So that the respondent would note the distinction between ads and political ads, we asked the query about “ads for products and services that are tailored to your interest” first. We asked the other questions in a randomly rotated manner.

If a respondent answered “yes” to any of the above questions, we then asked its corresponding question below:

- Would it be OK or not OK if these ads [discounts/news/political ads] were tailored for you based on following what you do on the website you are visiting?

- Would it be OK or not OK if these ads [discounts/news/political ads] were tailored for you based on following what you do on OTHER websites you have visited?
- Would it be OK or not OK if these ads [discounts/news/political ads] were tailored for you based on following what you do OFFLINE—for example, in stores or your magazine subscriptions?

If the person answered yes to wanting “political ads tailored to your interest,” we added two additional questions:

- Would it be OK or not OK if these political ads were tailored for you based on the political party you belong to?
- Would it be OK or not OK if these political ads were tailored for you based on whether you voted in the past two elections?

Tables 2 and 3 present the findings. Table 2 shows that fully 86% of adult Americans do not want political advertisements tailored for them. Three other points stand out. First, the 86% saying no to tailored political ads is especially startling in view of substantially lower (yet still high) percentages who reject ads for products and services (61%), news (56%), and discounts (46%). Second, Americans’ reactions to commercial ads, news, and discounts are not one-time flukes. The percentages saying no to tailoring in this survey are quite similar to those numbers in our 2009 survey. Third, the numbers indicate the population clearly considers political ads to be different from the other categories of tailored content: far more people reject political ads at the outset.

**Table 2: Please Tell Me Whether Or Not You Want Websites You Visit to... (N=1,503)\***

	No, Would Not (%)	Yes, Would (%)	Maybe/ DK (%)	No, Would Not, in 2009 (%)
Show you ads for products and services that are tailored to your interests.	61	37	2	66 **
Give you discounts that are tailored to your interests.	46	53	1	49
Show you news that is tailored to your interests.	56	42	1	57
Show you political ads that are tailored to your interests.	86	13	1	NA

\*See text for explanation. When the numbers don’t add to 100%, it is because of rounding error.

DK=Don’t Know; NA=Not Asked

\*\* In the 2009 survey the phrasing was “Show you ads that are tailored to your interests.” We added *for products and services* this time to make clear the distinction between this question and the one about political ads.

Table 3 shows that the percentages of Americans who reject political ads remain higher than those who reject commercial ads, news, and discounts when the interviewers tell them how the information to facilitate tailoring would be gathered. Two interesting patterns arise. One is that for each topic—political ads, commercial ads, discounts, and news—the increase in the proportion of people saying no is lower when told that the tracking would take place “on the website you are visiting” compared to tracking based on “*other* websites you have visited” and on “what you do *offline*—for example, in stores and magazines.” Another notable pattern is for advertisements, discounts, and news, over 75% of the respondents reject tailoring either outright or when they learn they will be followed at other websites or offline.

So, for example, 61% of the 1,503 respondents said no to tailored ads before being told about the forms of tracking. When told the tailored advertising would be based on following them on other websites they have visited, 22% *more* of those 1,503 respondents said no to tailored advertising. That means that 83% of the respondents rejected tailored ads outright or when they found out it would happen through tracking them on other sites. The corresponding numbers for discounts and news are 76% and 80%, respectively.

Despite the huge proportions of the population saying no to tailored commercial ads, discounts, and news when informed how the tailoring takes place, the proportions of people saying no to tailored political advertising is consistently higher. Table 3 shows what happens when the 14% of Americans who accept tailored political ads at the outset are told of five ways campaigns might gather information about them in order to carry out the practice. Many of those who were OK with the activity initially change their minds, and Americans’ rebuff of tailored political advertising rises to between 89% and 93%.

### **Americans Note Displeasure over Targeting and Tailoring by Even a Favored Candidate**

Americans’ broad unhappiness with the use of data about themselves for political advertising is clear in their responses to scenarios we presented to them of activities that political campaigns actually carry out:

- Scenario 1 focused on targeting: *Let’s say that a political campaign buys information about where you go online and what you buy on the web. The campaign uses this information to draw conclusions about your political beliefs and voting preferences.*
- Scenario 2 highlighted distinctively tailored messages: *Now let’s say a candidate’s campaign organization uses information it has bought about you to send you online political ads with messages it thinks will appeal to you. It sends your neighbors different online ads, based on the information that the campaign bought about THEM.*
- Scenario 3 brought social media into the tailoring activity: *Imagine Sally visits the Facebook page of a political candidate and clicks that she “likes” the page. The campaign organization then pays Facebook to send ads to the Facebook pages of Sally’s friends. The ads contain Sally’s name and photo and proclaim that Sally supports the candidate.*

**Table 3: Would it be OK or not OK if .... (N=1,503)\***

	OK (%)	Not OK (%)	Maybe/DK (%)	Didn't Want Tailoring (%)	Not OK + Didn't Want Tailoring (%)
<i>these political ads were tailored for you based on</i>					
following what you do on the website you are visiting.	11	3	**	86	89
following what you did on other websites you have visited.	8	6	**	86	92
following what you do offline—for example, in stores. ...	7	7	**	86	93
the political party you belong to	10	4	**	86	90
whether or not you voted the in the past two elections	9	5	**	86	91
<i>these ads were tailored for you based on</i>					
following what you do on the website you are visiting.	30	7	2	61	68
following what you did on other websites you have visited.	15	22	1	61	83
following what you do offline—for example, in stores. ...	14	23	2	61	84
<i>these discounts were tailored for you based on</i>					
following what you do on the website you are visiting.	46	7	1	46	53
following what you did on other websites you have visited.	23	30	1	46	76
following what you do offline—for example, in stores. ...	22	31	1	46	77
<i>this news was tailored for you based on</i>					
following what you do on the website when you are visiting.	33	9	1	56	64
following what you did on other websites you have visited.	18	24	1	56	80
following what you do offline—for example, in stores ...	16	27	1	56	83

\*See text for explanation. When the numbers don't add to 100%, it is because of rounding error.  
DK=Don't Know

We did not tell the people we interviewed that the scenarios are realistic. Instead, for each one we asked them whether knowing that a candidate *that they supported* was using online information in that way would affect how they voted for the candidate. Table 4 presents the findings. It shows that learning of these targeting activities does not sway everyone from the candidate he or she supports; between 25% and 34% of respondents say it would neither increase nor decrease the likelihood of voting for that person. Nevertheless, between 57% and 70% of Americans do say it would decrease the likelihood of voting for their candidate either a lot or somewhat. And very few people say it would increase their desire to vote for someone engaged in these sorts of political targeting.

The targeting activity that the highest percentage of respondents say would decrease their likelihood of voting for a candidate they support is the one that obviously involves tailored advertising in a social media context: a campaign's use of information about a political supporter to tailor a Facebook ad for that supporter's friend. Fully half of our respondents answered *decrease a lot* when told of a candidate who sends Facebook ads to Sally's friends with Sally's photo and a proclamation of Sally's support for the candidate. When asked if they thought "any candidates have used Facebook information in this way," 70% of our respondents said yes (10% said no, and 20% said they were unsure).

Clearly, people's decision to vote for candidates they initially support relates to various factors. We do not see these responses as necessarily predictive of ballot behavior. Rather, we see them as part of a pattern of answers in this survey that reflects the Americans' displeasure regarding the process of political targeting and tailored communication based on the targeting. In addition to the scenarios, we have already seen the pattern in the ways people responded to the questions about political ads tailored to their interests. This displeasure is further reflected in responses to three statements we read to our respondents later in the survey. As Table 5 shows, large majorities indicate annoyance and even anger when confronted with examples of data sharing and targeting for political purposes. Fully 85%, for example, agree or agree strongly that they would be angry if they found out Facebook was sending them ads for political candidate based on profile information they had set to private.

We asked about the particular situations in Tables 4 and 5 because political marketers actually carry them out. Americans, for their part, seem to realize the activities are not hypothetical. Answers to a number of questions we posed suggest many Americans know these activities are taking place. We asked the people in our sample, for example, if they think any candidates have used information in the ways described in the three scenarios. A large majority of our respondents said yes--75% regarding the first scenario (9% said no, 15% unsure), 77% for the second one (8% said no, 15% unsure), and 70% with respect to the third (10% said no, and 20% said they were unsure). Later in the interview we asked "Do you think political marketers have the technical ability to combine facts about what you do online and offline in order to tailor political ads for you?" Similar to the previous answers, 70% believe this rather high level of sophistication is possible; 24% say no, and 6% don't know.



**Table 4: The Three Scenarios (N=1,503)\***

If you knew a candidate that you supported was using online information in this way, how would it affect your likelihood of voting for the candidate? Would your likelihood of voting for that candidate---	<b>Decrease a lot</b>	<b>Decrease Somewhat</b>	<b>Neither increase decrease</b>	<b>Increase Somewhat</b>	<b>Increase a lot</b>	DK/ Ref
Let's say that a political campaign buys information about where you go online and what you buy on the web. The campaign uses this information to draw conclusions about your political beliefs and voting preferences.	33	24	34	3	3	4
Now let's say a candidate's campaign organization uses information it has bought about you to send you online political ads with messages it thinks will appeal to you. It sends your neighbors different online ads, based on the information that the campaign bought about <i>THEM</i> .	37	27	29	2	2	3
Imagine Sally visits the Facebook page of a political candidate and clicks that she "likes" the page. The campaign organization then pays Facebook to send ads to the Facebook pages of Sally's friends. The ads contain Sally's name and photo and proclaim that Sally supports the candidate.	50	20	25	1	2	2

\*When the numbers don't add to 100%, it is because of rounding error.  
DK=Don't Know; Ref=refused to answer

**Table 5: Responses to Statements about Political Targeting (N=1,503)\***

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>DK/Ref</b>
I am going to read some statements about political advertising. After I read each one, please tell me if you agree or disagree.						
I do NOT mind if an organization tries to figure out my political opinions based on what I read online.	3	24	11	33	28	1
If I knew a website I visit was sharing information about me with political advertisers, I would not return to the site.	35	42	8	11	3	1
If I found out that Facebook was sending me ads for political candidates based on my profile information that I had set to private, I would be angry.	47	38	4	6	3	2
If I give a political campaign my cell phone number, it is OK if that candidate's organization sends me text messages.	7	44	5	21	21	2
If I register my name on a candidate's site but have not given the candidate my cell phone number, it is OK if that candidate's organization finds out what my cell phone number is and sends me text messages.	1	4	3	33	58	1

\*When the numbers don't add to 100%, it is because of rounding error.

DK=Don't Know; Ref=refused to answer

## **Americans Hold Various Objections to Political Targeting and Tailoring**

We note in Tables 4 and 5 that more people objected to certain types of data extraction than to others. Taking data from Facebook that respondents consider private yielded the highest resistance at 85%. The somewhat more general notion of a site “sharing information” about the respondent with political advertisers (Table 5) bothers the second-highest percentage of respondents (77%). The notion (in Table 5) that an organization would learn about the respondent based on what the person reads online or (in Table 4) about where people go and what they buy online yields relatively lower levels of objections—61% and 57%, respectively.

Note, too, that substantially more people accept being contacted through phone text message by a political organization if they gave the organization their phone number (51%) than if the organization acquired it elsewhere (5%)—even if they had registered on the organization’s site. We take this variability in answers to mean respondents were judging each situation presented to them separately and not just dismissing the notion of political behavioral targeting out of hand. Still, even the lowest proportion of objections to such targeting is quite large—about one of every two Americans.

## **Large Percentages of Americans’ Reject Tailored Political Ads No Matter Their Party Affiliation or Political Orientation**

As Table 6 indicates, there are no statistically significant differences in the percentages associating lack of desire to receive politically tailored ads with a person’s political-party affiliation. And although the association of tailored ads with political orientation is statistically significant, even the lowest percentage—of those who call themselves very liberal—still rejects it in huge proportions (76%). Moreover, the percentages do not seem to reflect a meaningful pattern.

We find this lack of meaningful connection to party or affiliation across the three scenarios, as well. Sometimes the differences in party identification are statistically significant at the .05 level, using the Chi<sup>2</sup> statistic, and sometimes political orientation is significant. Nevertheless, the differences are small, and they don’t come together to suggest meaningful association of party affiliation or political orientation with attitudes toward political behavior targeting or tailoring.

## **Large Percentages of Americans Reject Tailored Political Ads No Matter Their Gender, Age, Education, Race, or Ethnicity.**

We also see the rejection of political ads in large percentages irrespective of social segments when we look at key demographic categories. Unlike with party affiliation and political orientation, we note pattered differences as well. Table 7 presents the association of respondents’ gender, age, education, and race/ethnicity with their answer to the direct question about tailored political ads. Tables 8-10 then present the association of the demographics with answers to the three scenarios, which depict different aspects of tailored political advertising.

**Table 6: Do Party Affiliation and Political Orientation Predict Americans' Attitudes Toward Tailored Political Ads?\***

	No, Would Not Want Tailored Political Ads (%)	Maybe/ Depends (%)	Yes, Would Want Tailored Political Ads (%)
<b>◆ Thinking about your general approach to politics, do you consider yourself a</b>			
Republican (N=335)	84	1	15
Independent (N=562)	86	0	14
Democrat (N=423)	85	1	15
<b>◆◆ In general, would you describe your political views as</b>			
Very conservative (N=98)	81	0	19
Conservative (N=390)	85	1	14
Moderate (N=559)	89	◆	11
Liberal (N=243)	86	1	13
Very liberal (N=82)	76	0	24

\* Because the table excludes the small percentages that said *Don't Know* or *Maybe*, the N for party affiliation is 1,320 and the N for political orientation is N=1,372. See text for explanation. When the numbers don't add to 100%, it is because of rounding error. ◆ = *Less than 1%*. ◆ = Using the Chi<sup>2</sup> statistic, differences are not significant at the .05 level. ◆◆ = Using the Chi<sup>2</sup> statistic, differences are significant at the .05 level.

The tables indicate that differences in age and gender are sometimes significant, sometimes not. When age is significant (Table 7), younger people are somewhat more likely than older people to be OK with tailored political ads. When gender is significant (Table 9 and 10), men are somewhat more likely than women to be OK with tailoring political ads based on purchased information and identifying Facebook friends. While gender and age show only occasional relationships with attitudes towards different aspects of tailored and targeted political advertising, somewhat more consistent patterns show up with education and race/ethnicity. People with the lowest and highest amounts of education tend to reveal a bit less concern about tailored advertising than do people with a high school degree and some college. And larger percentages of *Black Non-Hispanics* reflect less concern with various aspects of politically tailored ads than do other groups, while *Other Non-Hispanics* are typically most likely to express concern.

The reasons for the differences are not obvious, and they ought to be a topic for future research. Here we emphasize that concern with an aspect of tailored or targeted political advertising never falls below 50% for any of the social groupings and is frequently far above that proportion. In fact, the proportions of demographic segments saying no are typically in the 80-90% range with respect to the central question about the desire for tailored political advertising (Table 7).

**Table 7: Do Gender, Age, Education, and Race/Ethnicity Predict Americans' Attitudes Toward Tailored Political Ads?\***

	No, Would Not Want Tailored Political Ads (%)	Maybe/ Depends (%)	Yes, Would Want Tailored Political Ads (%)
<b>◆ Gender</b>			
Male (N=733)	84	◆◆	16
Female (N=764)	88	1	12
<b>◆◆ Age</b>			
18-29 (N=394)	81	1	19
30-45 (N=433)	86	1	13
46-64 (N=484)	88	1	11
65 and older (N=148)	92	1	7
<b>◆◆ Education</b>			
Less than high school degree (N=76)	67	0	33
High school degree (N=425)	84	1	16
Some college (N=438)	87	1	13
College degree or more (N=549)	90	◆◆	10
<b>◆◆ Race/Ethnicity</b>			
White Non-Hispanic (N=1050)	87	1	12
Black Non-Hispanic (N=143)	78	0	22
Hispanic (N=162)	81	0	19
Other Non-Hispanic (N=95)	90	0	11

\* Because the table excludes the small percentages that said *Don't Know* or *Maybe*, the N for gender is 1,497, the N for age is 1,459, the N for education is 1,488, and the N for race/ethnicity is 1,450. See text for explanation. When the numbers don't add to 100%, it is because of rounding error. ◆◆ = Less than 1%.

◆ = Using the Chi<sup>2</sup> statistic, differences are not significant at the .05 level. ◆◆ = Using the Chi<sup>2</sup> statistic, differences are significant at the .05 level or lower.

**Table 8: Do Gender, Age, Education, and Race/Ethnicity Predict Americans' Attitudes Toward Online Tracking For Political Reasons?\***

	Decrease Some / a Lot (%)	Neither Decrease Nor Decrease (%)	Increase Some / A Lot (%)
Now let's say a candidate's campaign organization uses information it has bought about you to send you online political ads with messages it thinks will appeal to you. It sends your neighbors different online ads, based on the information that the campaign bought about THEM.			
If you knew a candidate that you supported was carrying out these activities, how would it affect your likelihood of voting for the candidate? Would your likelihood of voting for that candidate...			
<b>◆ Gender</b>			
Male (N=718)	64	32	5
Female (N=742)	69	27	4
<b>◆ Age</b>			
18-29 (N=383)	64	31	6
30-45 (N=424)	67	30	3
46-64 (N=474)	67	28	5
65 and older (N=144)	69	30	1
<b>◆◆ Education</b>			
Less than high school degree (N=69)	68	17	15
High school degree (N=412)	69	24	7
Some college (N=431)	71	27	2
College degree or more (N=539)	61	37	2
<b>◆◆ Race/Ethnicity</b>			
White Non-Hispanic (N=1026)	69	29	3
Black Non-Hispanic (N=142)	54	32	14
Hispanic (N=160)	65	28	7
Other Non-Hispanic (N=93)	65	31	4

\* Because the table excludes the small percentages that said *Don't Know* or *Maybe*, the N for gender is 1,460, the N for age is 1,425, the N for education is 1,451, and the N for race/ethnicity is 1,421. See text for explanation. When the numbers don't add to 100%, it is because of rounding error. ◆ = *Less than 1%*.

◆=Using the Chi<sup>2</sup> statistic, differences are not significant at the .05 level. ◆◆= Using the Chi<sup>2</sup> statistic, differences are significant at the .05 level or lower.

**Table 9: Do Gender, Age, Education, and Race/Ethnicity Predict Americans' Attitudes Toward Tailoring Different Political Ads Based on the Purchase of Personal Data? (N=1,503)\***

	Decrease Some / a Lot (%)	Neither Decrease Nor Decrease (%)	Increase Some / A Lot (%)
Let's say that a political campaign buys information about where you go online and what you buy on the web. The campaign uses this information to draw conclusions about your political beliefs and voting preferences.			
If you knew a candidate that you supported was using online information in this way, how would it affect your likelihood of voting for the candidate? Would your likelihood of voting for that candidate...			
<b>◆◆ Gender</b>			
Male (N=715)	56	36	8
Female (N=733)	62	34	4
<b>◆ Age</b>			
18-29 (N=381)	56	38	6
30-45 (N=419)	57	35	8
46-64 (N=467)	61	33	6
65 and older (N=145)	62	35	3
<b>◆◆ Education</b>			
Less than high school degree (N=67)	57	25	18
High school degree (N=408)	63	28	9
Some college (N=425)	62	35	4
College degree or more (N=542)	54	42	4
<b>◆◆ Race/Ethnicity</b>			
White Non-Hispanic (N=1017)	60	37	4
Black Non-Hispanic (N=139)	52	35	14
Hispanic (N=158)	59	27	14
Other Non-Hispanic (N=92)	66	28	5

\* Because the table excludes the small percentages that said *Don't Know* or *Maybe*, the N for gender is 1,448, the N for age is 1,412, the N for education is 1,442, and the N for race/ethnicity is 1,406. See text for explanation. When the numbers don't add to 100%, it is because of rounding error. ◆ = Less than 1%.

◆ = Using the Chi<sup>2</sup> statistic, differences are not significant at the .05 level. ◆◆ = Using the Chi<sup>2</sup> statistic, differences are significant at the .05 level or lower.

**Table 10: Do Gender, Age, Education, and Race/Ethnicity Predict Americans' Attitudes Toward Tailoring Political Ads Based on Identifying Facebook Friends?\***

	Decrease Some / a Lot (%)	Neither Decrease Nor Decrease (%)	Increase Some / A Lot (%)
Imagine Sally visits the Facebook page of a political candidate and clicks that she “likes” the page. The campaign organization then pays Facebook to send ads to the Facebook pages of Sally’s friends. The ads contain Sally’s name and photo and proclaim that Sally supports the candidate.			
If you knew a political campaign that you supported was using Facebook information in this way, how would it affect your likelihood of voting for the candidate? Would your likelihood of voting for that candidate...			
<b>◆◆ Gender</b>			
Male (N=720)	68	27	5
Female (N=749)	75	23	2
<b>◆◆ Age</b>			
18-29 (N=391)	62	32	6
30-45 (N=429)	70	26	4
46-64 (N=469)	77	21	3
65 and older (N=147)	82	18	7
<b>◆◆ Education</b>			
Less than high school degree (N=77)	66	23	9
High school degree (N=414)	71	22	7
Some college (N=431)	74	24	2
College degree or more (N=543)	70	29	1
<b>◆◆ Race/Ethnicity</b>			
White Non-Hispanic (N=1034)	75	24	2
Black Non-Hispanic (N=140)	53	36	11
Hispanic (N=161)	62	26	12
Other Non-Hispanic (N=94)	76	25	0

\* Because the table excludes the small percentages that said *Don't Know* or *Maybe*, the N for gender is 1,469, the N for age is 1,436, the N for education is 1,465, and the N for race/ethnicity is 1,429. See text for explanation. When the numbers don't add to 100%, it is because of rounding error. DK=Don't know; RF=Refused; ~~◆~~= Less than 1%. ◆=Using the Chi<sup>2</sup> statistic, differences are not significant at the .05 level. ◆◆= Using the Chi<sup>2</sup> statistic, differences are significant at the .05 level or lower.



## Americans’ Rejection of Tailored Political Ads Is Not Simply Based on a General Dislike of Online Ads

The high proportions of Americans inclined to reject political ads tailored to their interests no matter what their backgrounds raises a basic question about their reasoning. Is it possible that people who reject political advertising are against it because they dislike online advertising generally? To explore this topic, we presented our respondents with a positive statement about regular online ads toward the beginning of the interview, before they received questions about tailored advertising. We asked people to agree or disagree that “I don’t mind receiving ads on my computer in exchange for free content.” 33% said such regular online ads are OK (including 2% who strongly agreed) and 65% said they are not OK. 1% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 3% don’t have a computer.

Does the wide dislike of regular ads on computers explain the rejection of tailored political advertising? The answer is no. We did find a statistically significant correlation (Pearson=.19) between respondents’ general views about receiving online ads and their views about receiving tailored political ads more specifically. However, as can be seen in Table 11, this relationship is a weak one: those who are OK with online ads are only 12% more likely than those who are not OK with them to oppose tailored political ads, and over three-in-four respondents who were OK with receiving online ads in general still did *not* want to receive tailored political ads. This finding strongly suggests that people’s rejection of tailored political ads is based on reasons that go beyond a simple dislike of online ads in general.

**Table 11: “I Don’t Mind Receiving Ads On My Computer In Exchange for Free Content.” (N=1,473)\***

	No, Would Not Want Tailored Political Ads (%)	Yes, Would Want Tailored Political Ads (%)
Agree or agree strongly (N=490)	78	22
Neither agree nor disagree (N=20)	100	0
Disagree or disagree strongly (N=963)	90	10

\*The table excludes the small percentages that said *Don’t Know, Maybe*, or don’t have a computer (that is, they access the internet in other ways). Using the Chi<sup>2</sup> statistic, the differences are significant at the .01 level. When the numbers don’t add to 100%, it is because of rounding error. See text for further explanation.

## Most Americans Want to Know What Campaigns Know About Them and How They Know

Some of Americans' wariness of tailored political ads may come from a concern that they have no control over their information. Table 12 shows that a large majority would like to understand what information about them is used for political ads and how it came to be used. When asked "If a political campaign sends you an online ad that's relevant to you, would you want to know what the campaign knows about you that led to the ad, or do you not care?" 65% say they would want to know. Further, when asked if they "would want to know where the campaign got the information to make it relevant, or do you not care?" 76% say they would want to know.

**Table 12: Americans' Desire to Know the Sources of Tailoring (N=1,503)\***

	Wants to Know (%)	Does Not Care (%)	DK/RF (%)
If a political campaign sends you an online ad that's relevant to you, would you want to know what the campaign knows about you that led to the ad, or do you not care?	65	33	2
If a political campaign sends you an online ad that's relevant to you, would you want to know where the campaign got the information to make it relevant, or do you not care?	76	23	1

\*See text for explanation. When the numbers don't add to 100%, it is because of rounding error. DK=Don't know; RF=Refused.

## Most Americans Want Political Candidates' Websites to Ask Permission When Using Their Information

An even higher percentage of Americans agree that political websites ought to ask permission for their information. Table 13 indicates 91% of Americans say no when asked if it's OK for a political candidate's website to sell information they provide to the site. 69% of them continue to say no when told that the site's privacy policy would inform them it was selling the information. (The 69% continuing to say no represents 63% of the entire sample.) But when Americans are given the opportunity to "opt in" every time a candidate's political website wants to sell information they provided to the site, the percentage who then say no drops to 41%, which equals 38% of the entire sample. The big drop indicates that more than half of the population accepts that political campaigns should be able to use information about people if the people give affirmative permission every time.

**Table 13: Americans’ Desire to Have Political Candidates’ Websites Ask Permission for Their Information\***

	Yes, OK (%)	No, Not OK (%)	DK (%)	RF (%)	% of Entire Sample Saying No (N=1,503)
Do you think it is OK for a political candidate’s website to sell information you provide to the site? (N=1,503)	8	91	1	■	91
Do you think it is OK for a political candidate’s website to sell information you provide to the site – including your name, address, and email address – if it uses the privacy policy to tell you what it was doing? (N=1,384)**	29	69	2	1	63
Do you think it is OK for a political candidate’s website to sell information you provide to the site – including your name, address, and email address –as long as the campaign tells you every time it wants to do it? (N=1,384)**	58	41	1	■	38

\*See text for explanation. When the numbers don’t add to 100%, it is because of rounding error.

DK=Don’t Know; RF=refused. ■ = Less than 1%

\*\* Based on internet users who initially say it is not OK for a political candidate’s website to sell information that they provide to the site, don’t know or refused [N=1,384]

### ***Concluding Remarks***

Why wouldn’t the other 38% who still say no allow the website to sell their data if they had the right to opt in? We suggest a large number of internet-using American adults—almost two out of five—are so wary of political advertisers’ use of people’s data that they simply don’t want that use to take place under any conditions.

It’s a startling perspective, perhaps, but the findings of our study indicate Americans share a special discomfort regarding behavioral targeting and tailored advertising when it comes to politics. Recall that the large 61% of our respondents who say they don’t want regular commercial ads tailored to their interests transforms into a huge 86% who say no to tailored *political* ads. Recall, too, that consistently high proportions of the population reject particular aspects of tailored political advertising, including the three scenarios that describe activities taking place today.

These collective responses are a national statement of concern. The concern is unrelated to political-party affiliation or political orientation. It cuts across gender and age, and while it varies some with education, race and ethnicity the numbers opposing tailored political advertising are high across the board.

The fundamental issue growing out of these findings is enormous: The public’s emphatic and broad rejection of tailored political advertising bumps directly up against the huge growth of this

very activity in the 2012 presidential election. What we have is a major attitudinal tug of war—a political class pulling for new ways to divide and address the populace versus a public that appears deeply uncomfortable, even angry, about activities pointing in that direction. This stark collision of political and public views raises two obvious questions: How should politicians respond when the public rejects the very activities their marketing advisors insist represent the future of political campaigning? And, how should the public respond to a politician-created environment suffused with behavioral targeting, data-mining, and tailored communication that it finds distasteful and that generally take place without the permission or even knowledge of the citizens?

These issues have hardly been addressed until now. In the wake of our survey, they deserve to be central to public discussions regarding the future of political campaigning in the twenty-first century. That is because the divide we found between the public's attitudes about what should take place in politics and what actually takes place may in coming decades erode citizens' beliefs in the authority of elections. To understand how this erosion can take place, it is important to understand that technology already exists to make television sets "addressable" electronically much as the internet is today. Technology also exists to create audiovisual commercials on the fly that reflect the demographic makeup and political orientation of a household.<sup>19</sup> When these developments roll out, political marketers will consider today's tailored ads primitive forerunners of their new era.

It will be possible for campaigns to virtually envelope households and individuals with candidates created *for them*. A campaign database may predict that one particular household would lean toward a candidate if it learned of three positions but not four others, while another household would vote for the candidate if it learned of those four but not the other three. Targeting and tailoring technologies will allow the candidate to suffuse likely supporters with the "right" messages online, on mobile devices, on TV, and even in print while playing down or eschewing messages that the data predict will cause dissonance. Opposition candidates and even journalists will have a hard time learning what homes get which thousands of messages, and candidates on news programs will learn to speak in ways that are compatible with broadly acceptable versions of what they believe.

Citizens will know (as this survey has found they already know) that political targeting and tailoring takes place, but they won't know how or exactly when. They may therefore see every political advertisement—and eventually every message from a politician—with wariness about how the politicians have defined their interests and resentment that they cannot easily know the messages their neighbors, relatives, co-workers, friends, and enemies are getting.

In response to such concerns, political campaign managers will likely point out that the targeting and tailoring that Americans say they dislike nevertheless succeeds in efficiently persuading voters and gaining active adherents, and so its utility trumps the public's qualms. But this thinking is short term. Long-term the effect of campaigns that surround people with messages based on tactics they intuit but don't understand or approve may well be to erode people's trust that they are receiving an honest agenda of issues from candidates. They may see data-driven tailored political communication as an anti-democratic way of practicing democracy. Such corrosive attitudes may end up wounding the credibility of politicians before and after their

campaigns. The attitudinal tug of war will grow tougher and tougher, with resulting tensions coursing throughout the political system.

So what should be done? Our survey suggests that at a minimum Americans want to know what political campaigns know about them and how they got this information. We also found that Americans want political candidates' websites to ask permission to use information about them. In addition, lifting the hood publicly on data-driven political-campaign tactics can be an important way to bring citizens into the process and encourage them to participate in the creation of an election environment that they both understand and approve. This can be achieved through a combination of active press coverage of the issue, frequent surveys of public attitudes on the topic, regular inclusion of politicians' database-marketing activities in campaign coverage and discussions of the public sphere more generally, and the rise of advocates who will insist politicians adopt norms and even limits regarding targeting, tailoring, and data mining.

We hope that this report is a first step to opening up all sorts of public discussion regarding Americans' understanding of their evolving political system and where they would like to see it go.

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<sup>19</sup> See Joseph Turow, *The Daily You: How the New Advertising Industry is Defining Your Identity and Your Worth* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 160-170. See also Terry Gross and Joseph Turow, "How Companies Are 'Defining Your Worth' Online," National Public Radio *Fresh Air* interview, February 22, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/22/147189154/how-companies-are-defining-your-worth-online> Accessed June 7, 2012.