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Segment-Making and Society-Making Media: What Is a Good Balance?

Abstract

From the introduction:

In an increasingly number of societies, it is commonplace to talk about the movement away from a broadly shared media system to a much more fragmented media system. All agree that media organizations still have—and are expanding—the capability to lead a substantial percentage of earth’s humans to focus on particular events or ideas. The Beijing Olympics comes to mind. At the same time, though, most observers note that public electronic media also have the capacity to reach out to smaller and smaller segments of populations. Part of the reason relates to the large number cable and satellite channels available in many nations. They are often intended for one or another group, so that different parts of society gravitate to different channels. Recently, too, media companies have figured out how to target particular customized messages to individuals or small groups. So rather than reaching billions instantly with the same event, an organization can potentially reach billions instantly with message tailored distinctively to the segments (or niches) in which organization has placed them.

Disciplines

Broadcast and Video Studies | Communication | Communication Technology and New Media | Interpersonal and Small Group Communication | Marketing | Mass Communication | Public Relations and Advertising

Comments

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Selected Papers of Beijing Forum 2007

Segment-Making and Society-Making Media:

What Is a Good Balance?

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In an increasingly number of societies, it is commonplace to talk about the movement away from a broadly shared media system to a much more fragmented media system. All agree that media organizations still have—and are expanding—the capability to lead a substantial percentage of earth’s humans to focus on particular events or ideas. The Beijing Olympics comes to mind. At the same time, though, most observers note that public electronic media also have the capacity to reach out to smaller and smaller segments of populations. Part of the reason relates to the large number cable and satellite channels available in many nations. They are often intended for one or another group, so that different parts of society gravitate to different channels. Recently, too, media companies have figured out how to target particular customized messages to individuals or small groups. So rather than reaching billions instantly with the same event, an organization can potentially reach billions instantly with message tailored distinctively to the segments (or niches) in which organization has placed them.

Some academics as well as media executives revel in the changes. They suggest that emphasis on segments can get us out of the mass culture morass that so many intellectuals worried about in the age when “everybody” allegedly paid attention to the same TV shows and movies that program producers pitched to the lowest common denominator of society. In the new media world, the idea goes, the audience is king. People can choose what media materials they want and programmers have to pay more attention than in the past to what people really want. For those who worry that social segments would not talk to one another, observers admit the importance of having media channels where all those segments to talk to each other. One might suggest that in the ideal world, there would be a balance between both types of media. Segment-making media organizations would thrive by encouraging the inherent interests of self-forming associations—religious, gendered, political, leisure, academic and professional. Society-making media would draw huge audiences by encouraging those groups to move out of their parochial scenes to talk with, argue against, and entertain one another. The result would be a rich and diverse sense of overarching connectedness: what a vibrant civically-engaged society is all about.

The intellectual goal is admirable: a multipart public sphere that encourages people to know about the joys and problems of all parts of society. It sounds great, but is such a balance between segment-making and society-making media in the interest of civic-oriented understanding realistic? To what extent is it happening, and is it really bringing about the civically engaged society implied by the terminology? If yes, how can we package that and transport it throughout the world? If not, why not, and is there anything individuals and governments can do about it?

The following pages present no easy answers to these questions but instead note a key problem: that an advertiser-supported system increasingly dominates both society-making and segment-making media across the globe and helps set agendas that audiences recognize regarding their roles as citizens. I draw from the experience of the US media, an advertiser-driven system that is influencing media structures around the world. I argue that the emerging market-driven media system is setting up a balance of segment-making and society-making that celebrates consumption in ways that derive great rewards for advertisers and strongly benefit certain types of consumers. Yet

this balance also is likely to heighten social tensions because it contains at its core a new form of information discrimination: consumers' unequal access to media content that impact citizenship because of what market-driven databases say about them. Unfortunately, the society-and segment-making processes may discourage the kind of collective civic engagement through which publics can grapple over ways to improve the health of their society and the planet.

Connecting the Consumer and the Citizen

Underpinning this discussion of the relationship between media and civic engagement are three terms which increasingly need to be interconnected: the consumer, the citizen, and the audience. In many writings on the political implications of media or markets, consumer and citizen are positioned as antagonistic, even binary, roles; Couldry (2004, p.21) notes that they are "normally assumed to exist in separate spaces." Livingstone and Lunt's (2004) investigation of the way the terms are used in British media and communication regulation provides a case in point. They found that the term consumer was understood "in relation to economic goals" while the word citizen tended to be used when regulators and academics meant to underscore the importance of formulating and advancing cultural and political goals. They note, for example, (p.255) that many academics "worry that neoliberal economics and neoconservative politics have altered the balance of power in media and communication to the detriment of citizens." By contrast (p.255), they quote a communication-policy advisor at a U.K. consumers group as noting that in today's world understanding people through the lens of consumers is pragmatically useful than using a citizens lens: "The risk is if you have just the language of citizens then you end up with a load of nebulous and quite high level of public interest-type objectives rather than actually seeing if people are getting the best deal in this market."

In recent years, however, writers have begun to question the longstanding notion that citizens and consumers reflect fully separate social roles. Schudson (2004, p.274) states bluntly that "[t] here is reason to be wary of the tradition of moralizing about consumption—it offers a narrow and misleading view of consumer behavior as well as an absurdly romanticized view of civic behavior." In supporting this position, Schudson offers a number of arguments that question the standard conceptual view of consumer behavior as selfish and nonpolitically engaged while the behavior of citizens is morally elevated and tied to the democratic values. He notes, for example, that much consumer behavior is related to gift-giving, which is not selfish but altruistic. He points out that political activities are sometimes quite selfish, as when they are "intended to maximize individual or group utility rather than to consider the public good" (p.274). He adds that the roles of consumer and citizen sometimes come together, as when individuals decide to drive a hybrid car to help conserve the earth's resources.

Cohen (2004), in fact, sees the rise of the consumer as citizen to be a major development in twentieth century American society. She traces the rise of what she calls "a consumers' republic," driven by an ideology of citizenship through consumption.

The new postwar order deemed, then, that the good customer devoted to "more, newer, and better" was in fact the good citizen, responsible for making the United States a more desirable place for all its people. Wherever one looked in the aftermath of war, one found a vision of postwar America where the general good was best served not by frugality or even moderation, but by individuals pursuing personal wants in a flourishing mass consumption marketplace. Private consumption and public benefit, it was widely argued, went hand in hand. And what made this strategy all the more attractive was the way it promised a socially progressive end of social equality without requiring politically progressive means of redistributing existing wealth. Rather, it was argued, an ever-growing economy built around the twin dynamics of increased productivity and mass purchasing power would expand the overall pie without reducing the size of any of the portions.

Scammell (2004) pushes this identification of consumption and citizenship forward into the twentieth-first century, with a vision of the mass media as helping people use their leverage as consumers to actualize important public goals. "The act of consumption," she states (p.352)

is becoming increasingly suffused with citizenship characteristics and considerations. Citizenship is not dead, or dying, but found in new places, in life-politics, as Anthony Giddens (1991) calls it, and in consumption. The site of citizens' political involvement is moving from the production side of the economy to the consumption side. As workers, most of us have less power now for all the familiar reasons: technological revolution and economic globalization, abetted by the deregulating governments of

the 1980s and 1990s that systematically dismantled many of the legal rights of labor unions. As consumers, though, we, at least in the developed North, have more power than ever. We have more money and more choice among a wider variety of options.... Consumer rights and interest groups and their advice are now daily in our mainstream mass media. Environmental lobbyists and activists are no longer left-field, but have a clear and central place in the public debate and have demonstrated their ability to score direct hits against the multinationals....

This is an optimistic perspective on the ways the new media (in her “developed North,” at least) allow for prosocial activities that work and traditional politics often do not allow. Couldry (2004) is more provisional in his optimism about the citizenship possibilities of the consumer role. He nevertheless stresses the importance of examining the workings of these roles in the digital-media era. It’s a time, he says (p.26), when “people are generating new contexts of public communication and trust, whether as frameworks primarily for consumption or for citizenship participation (or both).” He argues (2004, p.21) for research into how people act through both roles “and the common issues of trust” that affect people as consumers and citizens.

This growing literature on the interrelationship of the consumer and citizen roles is an important corrective to an earlier perspective that placed the two activities in different worlds. So far, however, writings on this subject have not suggested the need for exploring the forces that set the underlying agendas about what is important for consumption and citizenship in “the new contexts of public communication and trust”—and why. Although, as Couldry notes, aspects of these agendas are undoubtedly often created interpersonally, crucial parts of the agendas that people use as grist for their conversations and actions are also continually created and circulated by industries in the forms of stories that we call news, entertainment, and advertising.

In the expanding digital interactive media environment, what forces are influencing the ways companies tell stories to people that act out, and call out, their roles as citizens, as consumers, and as combinations of the two? How are changes in the balance between society-and segment-making media affecting that? To answer this basic question, it is important to understand how creators of news, education, entertainment, and advertising use a key concept that describes the people they target in various citizen/consumer roles. That term is audience.

Constructing the Digital Audience

Media practitioners make understanding, attracting and pleasing their audience’s fundamental criteria for success. That becomes quite clear from reading the trade press, going to industry meetings, and speaking to executives and staff in media firms. The meaning of the term “audience” is, however, more complex than it first appears. Unpacking what “understanding, attracting and pleasing their audiences” denotes can help us to understand how the concept of audience relates to the social roles of consumer and citizen. That, in turn, can point us toward the ways practitioners are changing their understandings of audiences in response to the digital media environment, and the ways those changes are influencing the agendas about consumption and citizenship that audience members receive in news, entertainment, education and advertising.

The most important point about an audience is that it is a concept, a construction of reality. Although individuals are materially real, audiences are not. Audiences are ideas about groups of people. As an example, consider one hundred thousand individuals who are watching a cable television program. Say a media production firm tries to understand who these people are. Even if staffers could interview each of the one hundred thousand people at length, it could not possibly learn everything there is to know about them. Rather, the staffers would have to choose particular questions about particular aspects of their lives. The compiled answers to these questions (for example, that 50% are between age 40 and age 50, 40% are between age 30 and 40, and 10% are over age 50), and the interpretations of those questions (“most of the viewers are middle aged”), would comprise the conceptions of that audience.

A corollary to the proposition that practitioners in media industries construct audiences is the idea that audiences are industrial constructions. That is, audiences are not the idiosyncratic product of one or another person. They are, instead, ideas about the people “out there” that develop as a result of consultation among people within and across media firms. Media executives’ decisions about how to think about and act toward audiences result from sorting out claims by various stakeholders in the process about which people in society count, as well as why, when, where, and how? Examples of these stakeholders are advertisers, production firms, individual audience members, audience research firms, government agencies, distribution organizations such as networks, and exhibition organizations such

as local stations and retail stores. In the U.S. television industry, the Nielsen company provides the standard data that network executives use to decide who is viewing which programs from the standpoint of age, gender, geographic location as expressed by market region, Hispanic ethnicity, race and income. The categories Nielsen uses at base reflect the interests of advertisers, who pay for TV time based on reaching the types of people they need as customers. But that view of the audience for particular shows as well as for “television” as a whole is expanded, challenged, and otherwise altered by a variety of other forces. Depending on the particular historical context, these forces may vary. They may be government officials who contend that “the public” (read citizens) are angry about violence or sex on certain types of programs. They may be specialized marketing firms who help the networks test programs and develop qualitative profiles of target audience members. They may be well-known producers who network officials believe are in harmony with the social concerns and psychological predispositions of desired viewers. They may be thousands of individuals who send letters to TV networks explaining why their favorite show should stay on the air. They may be advertisers, who share with the networks their views about the kinds of people in the audience who are buyers of their products.

The examples above represent just a small set of the influences that come to bear on media practitioners when they think of audiences. The practitioners must assimilate and prioritize these considerations based on their perspectives of the leverage held by the different constituencies. The constituencies and their influences may be different in different media organizations, on different creative practitioners within media organizations, and in different industries. As a result, different audience constructions may well develop? However, in societies where the advertising system plays a decisive patronage role in a number of media industries, executives typically share converging depictions of audiences and audience metrics across those industries? The views are reified quantitatively in industry research and qualitatively in speeches by industry leaders. The characterizations are shared through the trade press, industry meetings, and business reports.

Consider “women in wealthy homes” as an example. The Luxury Institute of New York helps marketers understand and reach high-net-worth individuals and, as such, has an interest in being seen as a “go to” definer of this population. Gaining attention to its expertise was clearly a motivation behind this audience stakeholder’s 2008 release of a survey of “married women in households earning \$150,000 or more per year.” The survey report and the press release about it presented a cavalcade of data about the spending power of this social segment. A trade magazine article about the survey encapsulated The Luxury Institute’s basic story quite well: Married women in households earning \$150,000 or more per year make nearly two-thirds (64%) of the buying decisions, and they most certainly recognize and reward marketers that show them respect (and punish those who don’t). The article let the Institute’s CEO emphasize even more strongly the meaning his firm wanted marketers to take away about these people: “Winning over wealthy women is a do-or-die proposition for companies in industries as varied as travel, health care, financial services and home improvement. It’s positively confounding that, with the buying clout of women in general and wealthy women in particular, so many companies have not learned to have a productive dialogue with these consumers.”

Mixing views of the consumer’s and citizen’s worlds

As this quote suggests, the essential aspect of advertiser-driven constructions of audience is that they center on the audience as consumers. Advertisers understand that even when people read magazines or watch news programs with eyes toward their social roles as citizens, marketers must try to find ways to intrude into the environment of political and social issues with messages that encourage a focus on buying things. It would seem that news programs and news magazines would be the most obvious media to shift between ads about living the good life and stories that imply the responsibility that we have to learn what is going on in the world. Yet these nonfiction stories are by no means the only locations where at least a nod to citizenship mixes with exhortations toward consumption of goods. Courtroom reality shows and police dramas, for example, regularly let people inside the judicial process and present basic primers about the laws relating to crime fighting. People in the audience may well accept what they learn as plausible additions to their understanding about how society works and what they should care about as citizens. Just as importantly, dramatic and comedy programs might well raise social issues with the kind of emotional load that lead viewers to discuss the problems more than if they had seen them in a news program or read about them in a newspaper.

Advertisers patronize media vehicles that they believe connect with audiences they want, and they are likely to buy space or time only on vehicles that deliver those people in an acceptable manner. “Efficiency” and “engagement” are the contemporary terms that reflect the way marketers believe these connections ought to be carried out. Efficiency involves reaching a large number of the desired individuals with as little cost as possible. Engagement means leading potential customers to feel an emotional connection with the product both through commercial messages and through the news and/or entertainment that surround the commercials and which the potential customers are known to find credible and likeable.

Over the decades of the twentieth century, advertising at the national and even the global level created a kind of balance in attention for products and services at the level of social segments as well as at the level of society as a whole. While there are certainly media firms (magazines such as *Southern Comfort* and *Architectural Digest*) that aim at women in wealthy homes and firms interested in marketing to them, there are also media that go after much larger swatches of the U.S. female population. The CBS television network, for example, targets female viewers in general. “Women [viewers] drive network TV,” said Nina Tassler, president of CBS Entertainment, in 2008. “We wanted to add more female faces” to the lineup.

This balance can take place in two ways. One involves companies that talk to both to segments of consumers and to consumers as a whole. Advertisers of certain products—paper diapers and mobile phones, for example—may cultivate different versions of those personalities to different groups in the society to whom they would like to make special appeals because they are the most likely buyers of their products, because they have different cultural interests than the mainstream that would affect their purchase behaviors, or because their age or background suggests that in the future they will be major customers. They reach out to those people via mail, the web, and niche cable TV stations. At the same time, those same advertisers may carefully nurture brand images with which everyone can identify that can appear on signs where “everyone” converges—in the central city, for example. While this dual approach for the same product is becoming increasingly common, more common is people’s general sharing of certain advertising across social groups even while they experience different types of ads as targeted, or receive no targeted ads at all. So, for example, people may collectively see advertising for milk—with images and slogans that everyone shares—but only some may get mail that advertises insurance, or magazines that carry ads for particular cars.

Despite the differences, the overall message—the meta-message—is that advertising is a powerful and socially approved force that may target them at the individual level but certainly involves them in the collective social space. People see and hear ads as they move through the most public of surroundings. Note, too, that this repetitive celebration of the commercial often comes together with messages about citizenship. Moreover, the process increasingly relates to advertisers’ growing interest in targeting desirable niche audiences. Marketers may surround themselves with certain types of news and entertainment when they want to efficiently and engagingly reach one segment of society and other types of news and entertainment when they want to efficiently and engagingly reach another.

Segment-making media and social tensions

Some may argue that while advertisers’ blanketing of many media channels with commercial messages certainly deepens consumer society, it also comes with a benefit—the ability of people to engage with so many more sources than in the past. But the multiplication of media sources is bringing a new kind of commercialism that has potential not only to deepen the society-making media’s celebration of consumption but to make different groups in society worry that marketers and media firms are practicing out a new kind of inequality that targets the middle and upper-middle classes. The anger of the rich by the poor over disparities is always an issue, of course. But in societies such as the US a new type of inequality promises to divide the already struggling middle and upper middle classes into niches that suspect one another and share smaller agendas than ever about the concerns facing the larger society.

In economies with advanced society-wide celebrations of consumptions, we are witnessing the birth of a world in which marketers use sophisticated databases about consumers to create customized appeals, offers, and programs that appear specifically to them across a wide range of media. The change is profound. Media and marketing practitioners realize that they are at the beginning of a long journey to build their businesses around data-driven relationships with customers whom they care about and who care about them. In the twentieth century, Americans came to expect that everyone in the society has fairly equal access to certain types of knowledge about products—

their existence, their ingredients, their range of prices, how they might be used, and the public images that their sellers want to associate with them. The move in the coming century is to make that relative equality of access disappear. Marketers' new goal is to customize commercial announcements so that different people learn different things about products depending on what the marketers conclude about the individuals' specific personalities, lifestyles, and spending histories. To help marketers carry that out, media firms will increasingly deliver different ads and different programs (and even parts of programs) to people based on what they think will ignite purchases.

At first glance, the idea of customizing offers based on particular audience constructions may not seem at all objectionable. It might, in fact, benefit individual consumers. Some advertisers will give them great discounts. Some media firms will vary news and entertainment programs to match what the consumers like so they will tune in to the ads, which themselves will be appropriately personalized. Optimistic executives contend that these sorts of customization will “satisfy [the] difference and diversity” that is so much a feature of the U.S. population (see Smith and Walker, 2003).

Yet examination of the industrial logic behind the activities makes clear that the emerging marketplace will be far more an inciter of angst over social difference than a celebration of the American salad bowl. Advertisers want consumers to worry that they will not get desirable discounts and media materials unless they pony up information that will help customize persuasive messages aimed at them. Advertisers also want customers to know that to be favored with the best deals they must reveal attributes and activities that make them especially valuable to particular advertisers.

At times, individuals might very well be happy to get what they want when they want it. Over the long haul, though, this meeting of large selling organizations and twenty-first century surveillance technologies seems sure to encourage a particularly corrosive form of personal and social tension. Moreover, because the industrialized construction of audience influences messages of consumption and citizenship, the tension audiences feel may well relate to both. Audiences will quite logically assume—in fact, they might even be told—that the customized ads, entertainment and news they receive reflect their standing in society. They might be alarmed if they feel that certain marketers have mistaken their income bracket, race, gender or political views. They may ask themselves if the media content that surrounds friends or family members is better or more interesting or lucrative than theirs, and whether the others have lied about themselves to get better material. They may try to improve their profiles with advertisers and media firms by establishing buying patterns and lifestyle tracks that make them look good—or by taking actions to make others look bad.

These sorts of responses to the new importance of niches should not be considered social paranoia. They will flow directly out of the structure of database marketing as it is developing in the digital media age. It typically includes six activities:

- *Screening for appropriateness* Based on information collected or bought, marketing or media firms make judgments whether they want particular individuals as customers;
- *Targeted tracking* Marketing or media firms follow actual or potential customers' marketing and/or marketing activities to learn the consumers' interests and decide what materials to offer them;
- *Data mining* To learn the characteristics that will draw and keep the interests of actual or potential customers, marketing and media firms explore the data they have collected by tracking them, registering them, or purchasing information about them;
- *Interactivity* To draw individuals toward their products, marketing and media firms encourage actual or potential customers to interrogate the firm's virtual or actual representatives in the process of evaluating and choosing the products they want;
- *Mass customization* To draw individuals toward their products, marketing and media firms use what they have learned from targeted tracking and interactivity to offer tailored choices to customers based on specific audience niches in which they have placed those customers;
- *Cultivation of relationships* When the information gathered shows that customers fit into niches that marketing and media firms desire, the firms initiate actions activities (including mass customization and interactivity) aimed at establishing bonds with these customers so that they will keep coming back.

The sequence of these activities may be different from the order noted. The activities inform each other, continually building on the data presented. For example, companies may be continually adjusting the niches in which they place customers based on what they learn from regularly tracking them, mining their data, and

evaluating their responses to particular mass customizations. In addition, the specific nature of these six activities may differ among particular retailers, media firms, and media forms. The internet has become a test bed for these activities. Television, physical stores, and other marketing venues such as video games are only now beginning to have the technologies for the kinds of targeted tracking, interactivity, and mass customization that are available via broadband.

Yet even the web is in an immature state compared to where marketing and media executives would like to be. The industrial logic leads them to work toward a century in which databases rule. It is a world where biometric data recognition provides executives with a secure sense of who the entering consumer is; where customizations in programming, product offerings and price discounts take place instantly based on customer history and niche identification; and where the entire process reinforces the consumer in the relationship while adding the information about the encounter to the dataset so that the next encounter will be more profitable.

Note that this is subtly different from the 20th-century model, in which storekeepers stocked certain brands of soap or pasta or disposable diapers because they sold well, thus pleasing customers and making money at the same time. While that certainly continues, the new goal is to make money by identifying individuals who fit “best customer” profiles and then reinforce their purchases for reasons and in ways that are hidden from them. An emerging awareness that these surreptitious activities are taking place is beginning to drive what might be called a new culture of suspicion and envy. Americans have learned to take the twentieth century approach to collectively displayed products with posted prices for granted. As car marketers know well, when consumers have to negotiate over price—most notably in automobile dealerships—they tend to see that as an unusual, nerve-wracking experience. A belief in marketplace openness applies to the web, as well. A 2005 Annenberg Public Policy national survey (Turow, Feldman and Meltzer, 2005) found that most people believe it is unfair if retail websites do not show them the same products that other visitors to the sites see.

It should not be surprising, then, that the scaffolding of this system is shaken if a retailer changes its offerings to individual consumers (or communicates with them differently) based on niche-based information about the consumers that they don’t know, or that they suspect but can’t verify. Similarly, although the idea that people can get programs that they might find particularly interesting is an attractive one, what is missing from this scenario is a way for people to find out that they are receiving tailored programming, how it is different from programming others are getting, what types of information about them and their family are driving these activities, and what implications all these perceptions hold for their sense of responsibility as citizens.

Moreover, potentially corrosive social consequences may ensue even when audiences don’t voice concerns about their profiles. That is because the industrial construction of niche audiences encourages the shaping of niche and even tailored news and entertainment materials in the name of audience engagement. They may well present different perspectives on citizenship and citizenship-related issues based upon their understanding of their targets.

It is not at all out the question, for example, that the television programs and commercials people will receive at home and out of home will be customized to what the programmers and advertisers know about them. The menu of suggested fare will likely be different based on education, profession, gender, race and other characteristics. Some groups may be encouraged to view fictional series that emphasizes social issues and political realities, while other groups receive suggestions that privilege programs—certain forms of sitcoms and game shows, for example—that intentionally or not play down the implicit challenges facing citizens. News programs may present different agendas depending on the audience segments programmers want to attract. It is not inconceivable that CBS would consider using technologies that allowed it to create different versions of its popular newsmagazine *60 Minutes*—either with different stories or with different versions of stories—and send them to different television sets based upon what the cable or satellite delivery firm knows about the persons watching. Parents with young families might get different stories than single women or parents whose children are adults. One upshot is the question “Did you watch *60 Minutes* last night?” might have a multipart answer—“Which parts do you mean? Did you get this story or that? What was left out of your version?”—before answering yes or no.

These sorts of targeted and tailored materials are not fantasies. They already are being created and distributed on the internet in increasingly sophisticated forms. A central problem with the activity is the lack of transparency: Neither program producers, nor distributors, nor marketers tell the people receiving the programming and commercial fare about the factors that have led them to target them with certain material over others. At this point, there is no way that members of an internet audience can learn about the categories through which websites view

them and tailor materials for them. There is little reason to believe that this situation will change as the process gets more sophisticated and expands beyond the web.

In the United States, advocacy organizations such as the Electronic Privacy Information Center, the Center for Digital Democracy, and the Public Interest Research Group regularly remind Congress and the Federal Trade Commission of the importance of marketers being open when it comes to their collection and uses of audience data. They justifiably worry about personal information taken secretly from individuals that might be used in ways that the individuals would not want. Marketers are learning, however, that they can get around the privacy bugaboo. They simply ask desired customers for personal information in return for promising to engage with them in a beneficial, trust-building relationship. The companies follow Federal Trade Commission guidelines of giving their customers data security, choice about whether or not to give the information, notice of basic ways they will use the information, and access to the information the customers have given them.

One problem with this alleged openness regarding private information is that consumers really don't fully understand what firms do with their data (see Turow, Feldman, and Meltzer, 2005). They aren't aware of the sophisticated data mining and analytical techniques that firms are using to bring scattered bits of information about them (including their activities) together in order to create profiles that are useful for marketing. This widespread lack of awareness is reinforced by websites' refusal to provide details about those profiles or give people access to them. The implications may be disturbing. Oscar Gandy (2002) is among writers who have pointed to the unfairness of using databases to slot people into categories with which they might not agree for purposes which they might not agree. For decades, marketing and media firms have learned as much as they could about social groups (women, baby boomers, rich people, African Americans) and then tried to target people whom they think are part of those groups. In the twenty-first century, the process is almost reversed: they are learning enormous amounts about individuals, consigning them to different niches, and then deciding whether and how they want to deal with them based on the slotting decisions.

Only a few marketing practitioners seem to have worried about the ethical problems associated with such activities. One example is a book-length guide to customer relationship marketing by British business professors and consultants (Gamble, Stone and Woodcock, 1999). They use the term "moral maze" to describe CRM's need to "make regular decisions about the worth of other people." Nevertheless, they conclude that this differentiating must be carried out for the good of the companies. "Organizations," they write, are "... increasingly keen to use their customer databases to develop profiles of good and bad customers so that they can categorize new or potential customers before entering into a relationship" (p.296).

In this type of environment, where people know that media firms and retailers they frequent are using their data but not sure how, it is understandable, and reasonable, that consumers would be wary of their status in those relationships. Yet the development of a database-driven culture of suspicion around marketplace and media activities should ring alarm bells among those who care about democracy. Having the choice to share the same marketplace of goods and ideas has become a central proposition of equality in the U.S. What might be called the marketing-and-media system is a crucial contributor to public displays and discussions of social importance. People rely on both the market and media to learn about what the trends are and where they stand in relation to others when it comes to fashion, politics, media preferences and other aspects of social position.

Unfortunately, the competitive factors shaping database marketing and the media technologies connected to it are so strong that social criticisms will not fundamentally derail them. Instead the public rhetoric about the new world will likely be ever-more rosy. Marketing and media executives are already heralding that the new era will increase attention to particular customers and therefore reduce their chances of experiencing bad service and identity theft. But by emphasizing the individual to an extreme, the new niche-making forces are encouraging values that diminish the sense of belonging so necessary to propel healthy civic life. People will get different ads, discounts, entertainment and news. They will get different views on society, and different agendas on citizenship.

With more pressure on society, targeting will be the way that people hide their information riches from one another. Society making consumption will keep that as a primary virtue, while a knowledge that targeting exists will keep people on edge. And the civic will still be marginalized. Living in a niche media world punctuated by celebrations and traumas, we will not be able to have social conversations about the hard issues that need to be discussed across segments.

Since the Roman emperor Nero ordered bread and circuses to control his people, shrewd politicians have learned that material consumption is the opiate of the masses. But the world in which we live will accommodate such

thinking only to a point. National surveys conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (Turow, 2006, pp.158-163) show that just as most Americans do not trust commercial organizations to protect their privacy, so most also do not believe that the government will act in their behalf. Lack of trust, and the cynicism that accompanies it, can become a powderkeg when people's environments and lifestyles are declining and even many in the middle class believe they may be targets of information discrimination. We are in an age where a new balance between segment-making and society-making media is taking place. But it is not a healthy balance. And we must try to figure out how to address that.

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