

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 163 (2014) 44 – 49

---

---

**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

---

---

CESC 2013

## Advertising, Microtargeting and Social Media

Oana Barbu<sup>1</sup>*Western University of Timisoara, Politics, Philosophy and Communicational Sciences Department, Timisoara, Romania*

---

### Abstract

This paper is aimed at microtargeting and its implications in promoting strategies in the present consumerist society. We look at it firstly through definitions, then through specific, personalized implementing in regards to client need and finally in the context of the ethic issues implicated in utilizing personal information in specific segmenting of the public.

© 2014 Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license

(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).

Peer review under the responsibility of the West University of Timisoara.

*Keywords:* microtargeting, definitions, ethics, promoting, consumerist society.

---

### 1. Definitions and internal workings

Microtargeting is a recent term used in more and more situations: it is brought up anytime a sampling process in based on detailed segmentation of the target audience, mostly in online commercials, but the term was firstly used during American election campaign lobbying.

One compelling definition comes from Tom Agan<sup>2</sup>, who defines microtargeting as a way to successfully create personalized messages or offers, correctly estimate of their impact (in regards to sub-grouping) and delivery directly to individuals.

A summary of the evolution of this process in marketing during the last 20 years also comes from Agan: initially this kind of targeting was done using postal codes (Zip codes) and a geographical segmentation of the target audience was achieved. Such personalized offers were exclusively destined to a certain region, the audience receiving a particular offer based on the characteristics of the socio-geographical region it belonged to. In the past 10 years though, the phenomenon and techniques related to microtargeting have evolved, from targeting families,

---

<sup>1</sup> Western University of Timisoara, Politics, Philosophy and Communicational Sciences Department, [oana@oanabarbu.com](mailto:oana@oanabarbu.com)

<sup>2</sup>Agan, Tom, Silent Marketing: Micro-targeting, Penn, Schoen & Berland White Paper, p. 2,

[http://www.wpp.com/~media/sharedwpp/marketing%20insights/reports%20and%20studies/psb\\_silent%20marketing\\_mar07.pdf](http://www.wpp.com/~media/sharedwpp/marketing%20insights/reports%20and%20studies/psb_silent%20marketing_mar07.pdf)

when the information known was little (understood strictly as the lifestyle of a community), to targeting individuals, given the massive contribution of social media and personal profiles set up by their users. Recent studies emphasize that these types of micro-segmenting can be done to an unparalleled before level, inclusive of the precise prediction of the target audience's reaction.

On a more detailed look, microtargeting can be defined as advanced psycho-geographic segmenting which is based on an algorithm determining a series of demographic and attitudinal traits to distinguish individuals for each targeted segment.

Microtargeting is well known in the US, especially because it is used during election campaigns, where with the help of companies that have huge databases containing information about the voters, and efficiently utilized, can become a most potent weapon for winning elections.

## 2. Microtargeting, Advertising and Social Media

The huge marketing potential social networks<sup>3</sup> possess is old news, as they are – through their users – solid and credible databases for brand promoting.

When users sign up on Facebook, they are required to provide their first and last name, their email, gender, and date of birth.<sup>4</sup> A minimal identity is immediately associated with a picture and common basic information, consisting of current city, hometown, political and religious views; Relationships status, education, Work information; Contact Information, including address, mobile phone, IM screen name(s), and emails; as well as Likes and Interests. The Likes and Interests profile section can include things such as favorite activities, music, books, movies, TV, as well as Pages corresponding to brands. These are all parts of structuring a huge targeting data base with our consent.

When an individual sets up a user profile on a social network the information supplied is collected, stored and then used by promoters for easier reach to more and more specialized segments of the target audience. Although access to the data in question is not direct, an online profile will supply indirect info about the user's location, his preferences and interests. For example, when a Facebook add is activated it will be visible to those people who have some shared interest to the ad in question, or are situated in a geographical area that allows them to benefit from the product or services offered.

Targeting the audience in Social Media allows the placement of ads that speak to the interests and preferences of the target. In short, you can say that the multitude of personal information concerning age, gender, preferences, habits, friends and friends of fiends, allow social media users to see adds regarding services and products that might interest them (according to their stated preferences) and thus eliminates a dissatisfaction element that may be the outcome of bombarding clients with general adds.

The targeting criteria can be flexibly combined, e.g. targeting men who live within 50 miles of Timisoara, 24-30 years old, single, interested in women, Like Rugby, have graduated from UVT Timisoara and work at Continental. If one chooses multiple options for a single criteria, e.g. both "Single" and "In a Relationship" in Relationship status, then the campaign will target people who are "single or in a relationship". Likewise, specifying multiple interests, such as "Rugby", "Snowboarding", targets people who like "rugby or snowboarding". Otherwise, unrelated targeting criteria such as age and education are combined using a conjunction, e.g. "exactly between the ages of 24 and 30 inclusive, who graduated from UVT Timisoara". During the process of ad creation, Facebook provides a real-time "Estimated Reach" box, that estimates the number of users who fit the currently entered criteria. The diversity of targeting criteria that enable audience microtargeting down to the slightest detail is an advertisers' (and, as we will see, a malicious attacker's) dream came true as it simplifies greatly the way a promotional message is sent and received.

---

<sup>3</sup> we define the social networks (social media) as those online environments that we use for social interaction by using the Internet platforms and mobile networks. (cited Ulmanu, Alexander (2011), *Cartea Fețelor*, Humanitas, Bucharest p.29)

<sup>4</sup> via <http://www.facebook.com/terms.php>

The advantages of such an approach are obvious for marketers and advertisers, which reach their clients easier through the structured groups logged on social media. Through the online environment they also have access to detailed data that can be analyzed and used in progress reports, having access to a direct source of real data, not estimative numbers as in the case of market research statistics.

In his book, “Likeable Social Media”<sup>5</sup>, Dave Kerpen uses the term “hyper-targeting” and defines it as

directing marketing and publicity efforts to a specific group, depending on their profiles, networks and activities on social media platforms. At the time, and even more so now, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn held an unbelievable amount of data on hundreds of millions of people. From users’ profiles and comments, you could advertise and market toward groups more efficiently than ever.<sup>6</sup>

If specific targeting is done as soon as the target audience is selected according to a set of shared, well defined, multiple characteristics, microtargeting, as Kerpen sees it, is defined when the target audience is very much restricted to only a few individuals, that have a very specific element in common (let’s say the Black English Cocker Spaniel owners from Timisoara). Kerpen takes the concept even further and tells a story about extreme microtargeting that can reach a sole individual<sup>7</sup>. While complaining about the accommodation at one Las Vegas hotel he received a simple Twitter message from Hotel Rio “We are sorry for the bad experience, we hope that next time you will have a much better one”. The approach was simple and empathic, no aggressive adds, no discrediting the competition. A short message that had the right outcome given the question asked directly to the microtargeted client, the author, himself, confessing that the next time he was in Las Vegas he stayed at Hotel Rio. This is a very compelling example regarding tapping into the emotions of the target audience, where a personal touch and adapting the message will give the impression of an emotional link between the marketer and individual, based on adapting to the specific need of the individual rather than the general ones of a larger group. Restricting the group and adapting the message is a sure way to get closer to potential clients and allows for better feedback.

In the past, newspapers, magazines, television, and radio allowed marketers to tap into wide audiences of people, based around broad demographic criteria: 18- to 34-year-olds, 25- to 54-year-old females, or males 55 and older in Timisoara, Romania, for example. But in hindsight, in almost every case, these categories were too sweeping. Specifics will help you hone in on your target audience, connecting you directly with the consumer. For instance, are you targeting parents or singles? Sports fans? Hockey fans only? Are you in every major market or only certain markets? Traditional marketers may be naysayers here in regards to the advent of social media and its relation to finding the right customers. Using the impressive database created by social media platforms you can now engage them in a way that was virtually impossible only a few years ago.

### 3. Micro and nanotargeting

One extreme example, regarding the extreme level of social media targeting comes from the same author. Pushing the concept of hyper-targeting to its limits leads to what Leslie Bradshaw, the author’s friend, called nanotargeting<sup>8</sup>: criteria for targeting can become so precise that they can refer to a single individual. Kerpen took the concept and applied it on the Facebook Add platform, succeeding in targeting his own wife, a 31 years old married female, employee of Likeable Media, resident of New York City, the sole person who was able to see the author’s add.

Of course it seems rather unproductive to try to target just one person, but the fact that the commercial message can be scaled down from addressing a large group to fewer, more specific people, is a major change in business to consumer communication. Nanotargeting can have a practical purpose: in a B2B system you could target people

---

<sup>5</sup> Dave Kerpen (2011), *Likeable Social Media: How to Delight Your Customers, Create an Irresistible Brand, and Be Generally Amazing on Facebook*, McGraw-Hill. Kindle Edition,

<sup>6</sup> *ibidem* p. 25

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p.1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p.25.

from the management of a company you would like to collaborate with, the CEO of a specific company or potential investors.

As Kerpen shows, efficient microtargeting is based on a few important steps. Firstly, *the needs* of the target audience have to be accurately determined. This is done by studying the intended segment of the market, including user behavior as results from social media networking usage and consumer behaviorism in relation to similar products. The second step is designing a *product* to cover these needs as best as possible, one with the appropriate discourse, approach and response to the said needs. The third step is made out of *presenting the product to the target* audience and directing a microtargeted dialogue as well as evaluating the results. The intense study of the targeted market segment can mean turning to databases of consumer data, but the world of social media is a much approachable alternative.

The simplest example comes from Facebook. The settings on the add platform are divided over location, country, county or town, age, gender, preferences and interest, Facebook connections, education, place of work, relationship status ( including “in a relationship” and “engaged”). These items can help define a very precise target audience.

After determining the target group characteristics social media apps like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter can be used to estimate the number of people falling into these criteria.

The personal details used in restricting the search by activating specific selection criteria raise issues regarding privacy.

Specifically on Facebook, over the past year, the biggest advertisers have increased their spending on Facebook advertising more than 10-fold<sup>9</sup> and the “precise enough” audience targeting is what encourages leading brand marketers to spend their advertising budget on Facebook. Furthermore, Facebook itself recommends targeting ads to smaller groups of users<sup>8</sup>, as such ads are “more likely to perform better”.

In a broader context, studies show that narrowly targeted ads are clicked as much as 670% more than ordinary ones<sup>10</sup> and that very targeted audience buying ads, e.g. directed at “women between 18 and 35 who like rugby” are valuable in a search engine setting as well. The user attitude to microtargeted personalized ads is much more mixed. A user survey on “Facebook User Attitudes”<sup>11</sup> done by Susan Su shows that 54% of users don’t mind the Facebook ads, while 40% dislike them, with ads linking to other websites and dating sites gathering the least favorable response.

Often, users seem perplexed about the reason behind a particular ad being displayed to them, e.g. a woman seeing an ad for Plan B contraceptive may wonder what in her Facebook profile led to Facebook matching her with such an ad and feel that the social network calls her sexual behavior into question.<sup>12</sup>

The most worrying fact is the abrupt way in which Facebook ads (Google ads and other browsers use the same algorithm, but are based merely on the user’s IP address) enter the private life of a user, transforming his entire

#### 4. Microtargeting –is there an ethical issue?

Microtargeting can seem, at first, a very useful marketing tool, one that, with the help of new technologies, seems very handy to every company in search of a targeted public. Segmenting the market means that the intended public is not assaulted with dozens of commercials, but is offered tailored promotions and campaigns in accordance to preferences. However, the ethical issues could come into play, especially in regards to personal data privacy and users’ intent.

---

<sup>9</sup> Susan Su, “User survey results: Which ads do Facebook users like most (and least)?” <http://www.insidefacebook.com/2010/06/15/facebook-users-survey-results-ads>, June 15, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> J. Mullock, S. Groom, and P. Lee, “International online behavioural advertising survey 2010,” Osborne Clarke, May 20, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Su, op. cit. 2010

<sup>12</sup> Aleksandra Korlova, Privacy Violations Using Microtargeted Ads: A Case Study, [http://theory.stanford.edu/~korolova/Privacy\\_violations\\_using\\_microtargeted\\_ads.pdf](http://theory.stanford.edu/~korolova/Privacy_violations_using_microtargeted_ads.pdf) p.7

A big warning comes from Aleksandra Korlova, from Stanford University, who indicated, in a recent study<sup>13</sup>, a set of serious risks concerning ill use of audience microtargeting through the Facebook Add Platform. The authors not only brought these issues to light but also got Facebook to make some changes to the system, to ensure that exploiting it in unethical purposes is more difficult. Unfortunately, this is still a possibility, and agencies pay huge amounts of money for applications that generate databases of the habits and consumer behavior.

Aleksandra Korlova demonstrates that interfacing the relationship between promoters and the audience is not enough to protect privacy. Indeed, the personal information is not sold directly to marketers, but the app allows information extrapolation through the careful triage of targeting options in the add creation process, information which is expected to remain private by the owner, or visible to just themselves or friends.

Her analysis<sup>14</sup> has shown that Facebook uses personal information that was marked “private”, or “Friends only”, to determine that the user is suitable to the publicity campaign. Microtargeting options allow focus on individual and a large amount of precise and confidential information can be extrapolated by using the Add Platform, or can be inferred by clicks on specific adds. Besides the obvious issue of personal information there is the second one of not indicating to the targeted user that he is one of the few ones that can see the ads and that clicking on them can reveal delicate personal information.

Warnings also come from a study on Facebook adds<sup>15</sup>, which revealed that 40% of the users dislike the ones they see in their newsfeed, some of them being even baffled as to why were they targeted for some products, especially in the cases of those focused on delicate niches (e.g. sexual behavior).

As a response to Aleksandra Korlova’s study and as a precaution measure, Facebook introduced a meter for “estimated reach” and it will suggest widening the target audience of a paid campaign if it numbers less than 20 individuals. This is legal and was explained as a natural consequence of the accord signed between the user and Mark Zuckerberg’s company when setting up an account. Social media lead to an excessive liberalization of the public sphere and its access in the private space and the other way round. Sharing online experiences, emotions, important life events are free decisions that people make. Celebrating Christmas with a Coca-Cola bottle on the table seems natural, but at the same time is a quantifiable resource that not marketing agency should miss. Because of this hundreds of thousands of profiles are watched by marketers before launching a campaign in order to achieve the effect of connectivity and contagion so indigenous to social networks.

Microtargeting is not by any means a new concept, evidence of “surveillance” in voting campaigns existing from as early as Abraham Lincoln’s times in America. Concerns<sup>16</sup>, especially in the political sphere come from the fact that the audience can be coached and influenced into choices that can be in contradiction to their actual beliefs. It can be said that persuasion was always part of the political and marketing discourses and is not less ethic than other methods. It can be also said that better knowledge of the voters allows politicians and marketers to better address their needs, but such a perspective does not eliminate the ethics, or lack of, in observing private behavior.

The main concern is that microtargeting models can lead to manipulation and the access to personal and confidential information is a critical step that needs not to be taken. The threshold is harder and harder to distinguish because the public is used to offering, mostly voluntarily, a lot of information that they would like to actually keep confidential.

Such an extreme example is Aristotle Inc., a specialized company dealing with information gathering for election campaign, whose implications are detailed in a Vanity Fair article from the 12<sup>th</sup> of Sept 2007<sup>17</sup>. Such an app can be easily transformed into a sort of “global FBI” which contains information about online users that include personal data such as age, address, name and number of close relatives, political standing, preferences and estimated income. Obtaining and possession of such data seems illegal and certainly upsets but using such a database is for not tolerated, risks and negative aspects being considered less than well defined.

---

13 ibidem

14 Ibidem, p. 3.

15 <http://www.insidefacebook.com/2010/06/15/facebook-users-survey-results-ads/>

16 Michael LaBossiere, The Ethics of Micro targeting, <http://aphilosopher.wordpress.com/2008/05/01/the-ethics-of-microtargeting/>

17 <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2007/12/aristotle200712>

The founder and CEO of the company in question, John Aristotle Phillips, admitted in the 2007 article that citizens should have more control and express explicit approval to the use of the data they make public, sometimes unknowingly. There is a long list of complaints and accusations for the company but on the other hand the company had in unveiling the election fraud from Ukraine in 2004, with the use of the same app, has its supporters. Phillips has now contracts outside of the US, and in his vision of the future we will be able to vote using an ATM machine or a smart-phone. The market for such an app is widening and online apps that allow geo-targeting of target audiences seem to be more and more appreciated by a tech savvy consumer but ignorant to his personal exposure.

Irrelative to the way in which this information is gathered, either direct by offering by the user on a social network, inferred through the methods described by Aleksandra Korlova, or extracted from the sea of online information and voter databases, the ethics involved in their usage needs to be a topic for communication specialists. Who and to what extent has the right to use personal information for profit? Which are the limits that need to be set up in monitoring social media and how can we ensure safety for the personal information of users? Discussions toward a clear legislation for the internet that can protect the individual from unethical use of confidential data are in place for over a decade, but still we are in the midst of such advanced technology that one individual's privacy can be invaded for the sole purpose of promoting a certain product. Ironically or not Korlova's study was published in June 2010, yet in 2014 modern technologies to defend against these invading means do not hesitate to come out on the market.

## References

- Agan, T. (2007), *Silent Marketing: Micro-targeting*, Penn, Schoen & Berland White Paper; [http://www.wpp.com/~media/sharedwpp/marketing%20insights/reports%20and%20studies/psb\\_silent%20marketing\\_mar07.pdf](http://www.wpp.com/~media/sharedwpp/marketing%20insights/reports%20and%20studies/psb_silent%20marketing_mar07.pdf)
- Dave Kerpen (2011), *Likeable Social Media: How to Delight Your Customers, Create an Irresistible Brand, and Be Generally Amazing on Facebook*, McGraw-Hill. Kindle Edition;
- Su, S. (2010) "User survey results: Which ads do Facebook users like most (and least)?" <http://www.insidefacebook.com/2010/06/15/facebook-users-survey-results-ads/>;
- J. Mullock, S. Groom, & P. Lee, (2010), "International online behavioral advertising survey 2010," Osborne Clarke;
- Korlova, Aleksandra (2010) *Privacy Violations Using Microtargeted Ads: A Case Study*, [http://theory.stanford.edu/~korlova/Privacy\\_violations\\_using\\_microtargeted\\_ads.pdf](http://theory.stanford.edu/~korlova/Privacy_violations_using_microtargeted_ads.pdf)
- Su, Susan (2010), online survey Results: "Which Ads Do Facebook Users Like Most (and Least)?" <http://www.insidefacebook.com/2010/06/15/facebook-users-survey-results-ads/>
- Michael LaBossiere (2008), "The Ethics of Microtargeting", online article <http://aphilosopher.wordpress.com/2008/05/01/the-ethics-of-microtargeting/>