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# Advertising, Big Data, and the Clearance of the Public Realm: Marketers' New Approaches to the Content Subsidy

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This article addresses implications for democracy of two interconnected developments involving big data and the media. One is the targeting of consumers for advertising by marketers and the new data-capture industry that supports them. The other involves the transformation of advertisers' approach to subsidizing media content production. We describe these developments and consider their consequences for democratic life, drawing on classical and recent democratic theory (Paine, Dahl, Mouffe, Rosanvallon). We conclude that big data's embedding in personalized marketing and content production threatens the ecology of connections that link citizens and groups via information, argumentation, empathy, and celebration as members of a shared social and civic space. Unless challenged, these developments risk eliminating the connective media necessary for an effective democracy.

Concerns have multiplied about exaggerated claims made for big data use in social science research (boyd & Crawford, 2011). Our article looks more broadly at the consequences of embedding big data use in advertising and marketing. Advertising practitioners conceive of big data in terms of many actionable points of information about millions of individuals. They are moving away from the traditional approach of using specific media environments (particular newspapers, magazines, or television shows) to reach target audiences that congregate there. Instead, ad practitioners home in on desirable individual consumers with technologies that reach those people at optimal times in optimal locations with advertising messages and, increasingly, publishing environments tailored to fit information about those consumers exclusively gleaned through various data-mining activities.

We are not interested here in how successfully advertisers, marketers, and the growing business sector that supports them use big data to meet their own ends. Our concern is with the unintended side

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effects for democracy of advertisers' fundamental rethinking of the subsidy their business has long provided to media firms. Democracy depends on some effective form of participation, which media have played a major role in sustaining. In Robert Dahl's (1989) classic theory of "polyarchy" (the multiple frameworks that in large societies are *preconditions* for a working democracy), a regime is democratic to the degree that political relations between the state and its citizens feature "broad, equal, protected and mutually binding consultation" (Tilly, 2007, pp. 13–14). But such consultation is not feasible without the common circulation of facts, themes, and reference points as background to the issues for consultation. Such shared public reference points go beyond news to include a wide range of materials—fictional stories, images, and songs (Dahlgren, 1995; Gerbner, 1972–1973; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011)—a point neglected by original public sphere approaches.

Our aim is not to look back nostalgically to some imaginary media-sustained era of national consensus. To the extent that this ever existed in modernity, it was on the basis of damaging exclusions reinforced by the media institution and other societal power centers. Nor do we predict an all-encompassing individuation in which people are completely disconnected from the larger culture. Our worry instead is with the progressive decline of the sources for a *common agenda of contention and mutual acknowledgement* that orients us at least to recognize each other (Honneth, 2007) as "consulting" members of a common social and political space. As Chantal Mouffe (2000) notes, democracy (if it is not to be just disguised violence) requires that social and political adversaries regard each other as *legitimate* adversaries, but that requires they share some "commitment to a system of reference . . . a way of living, or of assessing one's life" (Mouffe, 2000, pp. 74, 97). How is such a shared commitment sustainable long-term when advertisers and marketers pursue business goals that *require*, and professional content producers work by rules of thumb that *increasingly permit*, the optimal personalization of content to fit the features that *mark off* one consumer from another? Are we witnessing the birth of a new media logic—personalization—whose dynamics will erode democracy unless their hidden workings are made public and contested broadly? Our article is prophylactic; by extrapolating (only a little) business dynamics that are well established, we aim to clarify what is at stake in accepting, or not, the emerging culture of big data use that is increasingly dominant in two key cultural sectors: advertising and media publishing.

**From Segmentation to Deep Personalization**

Academic worries about the fragmentation of the civic sphere due to changes in the media system have increased in recent years. Scholars from several perspectives have suggested this increase of choice would erode civic dialogue. Elihu Katz, in a 1996 article titled "Deliver Us From Segmentation," worried about the implications for shared civic culture when Israel switched from a single public broadcaster to several channels, with a consequential sharp drop in news viewing (Katz, 1996). Markus Prior (2007) noted a similar trend in U.S. viewing with the rise of cable television. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph Cappella (2007) saw talk radio as an arena where a conservative political viewpoint was cultivating followers who would see those programs as a self-protecting sphere that dismissed the validity of nonconforming perspectives. More broadly, Cass Sunstein (2006) and Todd Gitlin (1998) argued that people's ability to choose among the virtually infinite news offerings of the Internet would lead them to dwell intellectually only in arenas where they are comfortable, creating barriers between them and those in the public sphere with whom they would not likely agree.

The segmentation thesis rose with the technological developments to which it alerts us. Beginning the 1980s, the spread of cable and satellite television in many countries led to the exponential multiplication of available news and entertainment platforms. The 1990s and 2000s witnessed the proliferation of online portals for individuals to craft a personalized stream of news and entertainment. More recently, the emergence of smart phones with app-based interfaces gives citizens the chance to preselect which of today's almost-infinite data flows they want presented to them. While some contest the segmentation thesis, a growing number of studies on the relation between audience fragmentation and news (see, e.g., Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Nir, 2012) suggests that a gradual erosion of a common arena of discourse is a plausible outcome of a splintered media world.

Our aim here is not to dispute this perspective. It is, rather, to argue that these longer-term trends toward broad production-led segmentation of content and audience-led forms of preselection are being overtaken by a new but central feature of the digital media system, which may, in the long run, be even more powerfully erosive of the civic sphere. That feature is the advertising industry's use of big data to encourage personalized advertising and set the groundwork for increasingly personalized advertisements, prices, news, and entertainment: *Personalized* refers to a form of a *deep* personalization—content whose selection has already been *decided for* citizens on the basis of criteria unknown to them and calibrated not to their proximate selection decisions, but to big data–generated *assumptions* about where those citizens would want to focus their attention or where marketers need those citizens' attention to be focused. This development is not the result of conspiracy to remove people from collective experiences. It is instead an unintended side effect—a *negative externality*—of how advertising, big data, and content production have come to coexist over the past two decades.

## The Rise of Big Data's Use in Advertising[1]

Advertising subsidies support publishers throughout the media system. Publishers are organizations that produce and distribute content through analog or digital means; think of newspapers, television production firms, and search engines. The advertising subsidy involves payment for the right to persuade the publisher's audience to purchase or otherwise support a product or service. Traditionally, that has meant purchasing space or time on or near a publisher's content—for example, a newspaper article or an Internet video. Most people likely think of advertising in terms of its most visible manifestation, the persuasive message. Yet the activity involves two sets of activities in addition to the creation of the ad. One part, traditionally called media planning and buying, revolves around the strategic consideration and provision of funds to pay for placement of the notice. The other part, evaluation research, involves determining whether and how the message worked. The amount of money used for the direct-subsidy aspect of the process—media buying—is huge. Industry consultants estimate upward of $250 billion as the global amount of money advertisers and their agents spend on placing ads on one or another medium.

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[1] For a fuller account, see Turow's *The Daily You* (2011). That book is based in part on 52 interviews with advertising industry practitioners, attendance of industry trade meetings, and long-time as well as targeted readings of industry periodicals. The interview with Rishad Tobaccowala cited later in this piece came about through *The Daily You* research.

The use of data to plan and evaluate these expenditures is by no means new. As far back as the 19th century, advertisers and their representatives in the nascent ad agency business bought, analyzed, and evaluated lists of individuals who might be influenced by particular direct-mail solicitations to determine whether and how the postal service was a good ad medium. In the early 20th century, advertisers worked with print media firms they subsidized—principally newspapers and magazines but also outdoor boards—to develop trusted total circulation figures based on audits. Somewhat later, they supported companies that used audience ratings panels to infer circulation data for radio and television broadcasters. By the 1960s, such circulation and ratings activities were yielding large streams of data that planners and buyers examined in advance of purchasing advertising space and time. To these numerical considerations were added the quantitative and qualitative results of depth interviews, surveys, and experiments by marketers, media firms, and advertising agencies to learn why certain ads in certain media succeeded and others did not.

From a colloquial standpoint, all these activities may well have been considered to involve big data. In response to a late 2012 trade article (Smith, 2012a) about an upcoming conference devoted to "Data-Driven Marketing," a reader asked,

> Whats all this latest fixation/obsession about data all about, as if we never knew it existed before, well it has, big time, and clever marketers have been using it well for years and don't need to be reintroduced to it as if experienced marketers were schoolkids.

In fact, that article's author (one of the conference organizers) had himself questioned the term's use in the advertising context and had come to the more specific conclusion that

> Data has been "big" all along. What has changed now is not just scale and cross-channel inputs, but the sheer speed and accessibility of data as it moves to the cloud and becomes present on any device anywhere. Making data actionable in real time and at the point of critical need or decision-making is where data is not just big, but enormously effective. (Smith, 2012b)

In fitting this characterization, the ad industry does not merely mirror the fascination with data crunching taking place throughout society. The perspective reflects a transformation of media planning, buying, and evaluation in the advertising industry that began in the 1980s. The alterations were fundamental—institutional as well as technological. Before the 1980s, advertising practitioners considered media buying and planning as rather straightforward, unexciting components of a standard ("full-service") agency's offerings to clients. During the 1980s and 1990s, however, agency executives began to take a different approach to their media planning and buying divisions. Several factors were involved, but many of them centered on the fragmentation of media channels due to cable television (Turow, 1997). A clutch of new agency holding companies with international footprints (WPP of the United Kingdom, Omnicom and Interpublic from the United States, and Publicis from France) established freestanding media buying operations that, along with media buying firms Aegis in the United Kingdom and Havas in France, claimed special quantitative abilities. Using different computer models, each insisted it knew the best ways to

reach increasingly dispersed audiences according to a growing number of demographic, psychographic, and geographic characteristics in the most efficient and accountable ways possible. According to a research firm that keeps track of buying firm developments, these six companies spent $224 billion advertising dollars worldwide in 2009 (RECMA, 2010). That year, the six controlled about 45% of purchasing in the U.S. advertising market; in most European countries, the share reached 80% (RECMA, 2010).

The buying firms' emphasis on computer-driven quantitative analyses to target fragmented media audiences served as a testing ground for the coming age of ubiquitous digital media. Although advertising appeared during the 1980s on computer dial-up services such as Prodigy, the business was marginal and ad agencies did not consider that it had mainstream possibilities. The growth of commercial advertising on the World Wide Web with the introduction of the Netscape browser in 1994 pointed to a venue for marketers to reach millions of audience members. The second half of the 1990s marked a transition period during which publishers and various partners refined ways to construct the audience in greater detail than earlier decades.[2] Central to their digital activities were technologies—cookies, tracking pixels, Flash cookies, and various mobile device "digital fingerprinting" methods—to trace people's actions within and across websites, applications (apps), devices, and physical locations.

The ability to tag audience members and track what they viewed allowed publishers to create and offer up segments of inferred interests to advertisers who might conclude purchasing interests from that information. Advertising networks were doing the same thing, though across websites, and they and a growing number of data collection firms such as Axiom, Experian, BlueKai, and eXelate often matched their cookie-like trackers with those of other firms to enhance advertisers' ability to target very specific types of individuals—and often even very specific (though still anonymous) individuals. By the late 2000s, audience data exchanges owned by Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, Interpublic, Facebook, and other major players facilitated the auction of individuals with particular characteristics, often in real time. It is, therefore, now possible to buy the right to deliver an ad with a message tailored to a person with a specific profile at the precise moment that that person loads a Web page. In fact, via an exchange, a publisher can sell an advertiser the ability to instantly reach and tailor a message for someone the advertiser knows from previous contacts and may even have followed around the Web.

### Rethinking the Subsidy

Accompanying the advertising industry's transformation of its activities in the digital age has been a profound rethinking of norms regarding publishing subsidies. "Marketers haven't ever wanted to underwrite the content industry," Rishad Tobaccowala, a high-ranking Publicis strategy executive, told one of us in 2010 (see Turow, 2011, pp. 111–112). "They've been forced." His contention reflects a general sentiment in the U.S. advertising industry that news and entertainment powerhouses of the 20th century—firms such as CBS, the Tribune Company, and Time Warner—had too much leverage over

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[2] Without evidence, a Wikipedia entry notes that the website Global Network Navigator sold the first clickable Web ad—later called a banner—on its home page in 1993 to a law firm with a Silicon Valley office. It claims that the Hotwired site was the first to sell clickable ads in large quantities.

advertisers because the publishers were gatekeepers to huge audiences. Certainly throughout the 20th century, even the biggest media firms helped their sponsors by delivering attractive audiences who saw the advertisements within content environments designed to encourage them to pay attention to commercial messages. Nevertheless, media firms often saw value in maintaining credibility with audiences, advocacy groups, and government regulators by adopting policies and principles that sometimes conflicted with the advertisers' direct interest in getting the most for their money.

Probably the most enduring object of conflict with advertisers was what mid-20th-century *TIME* publisher Henry Luce dubbed the "Church-State separation" (see Turow, 2006, pp. 50–52). First newspapers and magazine industries, then the broadcasting industry, endorsed an idea that had by no means been clear earlier in the century: The editorial side of a media company should be independent from the advertising part of the business. Marketers chafe at that proscription because they believe that the public often disbelieves explicit advertising and may be more likely to accept favorable comments that marketers pay to include in news and entertainment. By the 1960s, though, offering surreptitious favorable coverage or product placement in exchange for sponsorship was considered a rogue practice in the newspaper, magazine, television, and radio industries. Advertisers had to buy into those industry subsidy norms, and often pay dearly for access to the publishers' audiences.

The rise of digital media is, however, fundamentally altering media industries' ability to set the terms of the advertising subsidy in that way. At the heart of the change is the unprecedented competition for revenues that media firms are experiencing online and off. At this point in digital developments, the difficulties are especially noticeable in the newspaper, magazine, and radio businesses. Their advertising revenues in their traditional (analog) spaces are falling as audiences move toward digital media and advertisers follow them. The huge availability of content—and the movement of advertising dollars to new vehicles such as search engines and social media sites—means that media buyers can exploit unprecedented competition to reach people (gain "audience impressions") at far lower costs per thousand impressions than with analog media. To the interviewed Tobaccowala and his colleagues, the downward pressure on ad prices reflects their (to them) justified desire not to support the original creators and distributors of content but just to reach the individual target wherever that person may be.

The success of search engines and social media platforms in the exchange process underscores the lessened leverage that traditional content producing companies now have. Marketers make it clear that publishers have to offer them more and more data about their audience members if publishers want to be players in the exchanges. That often requires publishers to hire companies such as Audience Science to manage such information as well as slice and dice it so that particular sponsors can buy access to only specific types of audiences that matter to them and personalize their messages accordingly. The new leverage that the advertising industry can exercise over publishers is also leading to the blurring of the church-state separation between editorial and advertising material in many publishing operations. Sponsors see the weakened state of publishers as a way to negotiate direct insertion of their products into media content that does not look like an advertisement. Publishers, for their part, see the rabid competition threatening their existence as forcing reassessment of a purist content creation philosophy. The editor of the historically prestigious *Christian Science Monitor* newspaper asserted in 2010 that the changed financial environment required removing "the taboo about having a conversation across the

[church-state] wall and put[ting] various people—not just the editor and publisher but deputy editors and national editors . . . in conversation with the business people" (Ives, 2010, para. 10). An *Advertising Age* reporter, having covered the attrition of the church-state boundary for several years concluded at the time that "the wall was almost a privilege of simpler times, more editors and publishers seem to agree" (Ives, 2010, para. 12).

Media planners' relentless demands of publishers based on the new subsidy norms are leading to new relationships between media firms and their sponsors. In turn, those relationships are redefining the creation and distribution of content directed at the audiences advertisers want most. We are just a few years into this change, and we should not expect industry value, habits, or technologies to transform overnight. Nevertheless, discourse and actions within the media system point to three dynamics of content personalization that are causing the worlds people see in their digital travels increasingly to diverge depending on demographic, psychographic, locational, and other behavioral points of information that advertisers or publishers carry about them.

The first dynamic, the most pervasive so far, involves publishers working with advertisers to personalize the commercial messages they receive *around* the editorial matter. Using a growing number of data points—accurate or not—marketers and publishers target different types of people, and even different individuals, with different persuasive messages for the same or different products. Based on these constructions, people receive different prices for the same products, and different discounts for competitive products. The ads they receive also may present different stories and types of people—and therefore different views on the world—depending on the target and the persuasive message (see Turow, 2006, pp. 111–137). A clear example of this differentiation due to microtargeting is personalized digital political campaigning. During the 2012 U.S. presidential race, marketers for the Obama-Biden team used data-mined information about Democratic voters to determine what issues to present to them, how often, and when (see Turow, Delli Carpini, Draper, & Howard-Williams, 2012).

The second dynamic, growing strongly since 2010, is what marketers call *native advertising* (see, e.g., DVorkin, 2013). A native ad is textual, pictorial, and/or audiovisual material that supports the aims of an advertiser (and is paid for by the advertiser) while it *mimics the format and editorial style* of the publisher that carries it. A basic version is the sponsored tweet that Twitter integrates into the streams of people who use it and whom the sponsors deem useful to receiving the messages. More elaborate are entire articles written by firms specializing in "seeding" native advertising articles so that the right people will see them. One such company, Social Seed (2012, para. 3), describes its mission for Samsung to "amplify their seductive motion content" through a video that would "achieve press placements and organic, editorially-focused traffic in several global markets." It accomplished the goal with 125,000 views through "35 placements on highly targeted sites, such as Gizmodo." Moreover, the Samsung-driven editorial matter ignited "significant engaged commentary."

This sector of the publishing business is growing, with firms such as Buzzfeed, Gawker, Associated Media, and Videoseeding.com targeting audiences by interests, demographics, location, online behavior, and other characteristics. Traditional publishers such as *The Atlantic* and *Forbes*, along with major mainstream blogging sites such as *Huffington Post*, have taken up the practice. Though

accompanied by labels ("presented by," "sponsor-generated post," "ForbesBrandVoice") that note the articles are created for or by sponsors, the emphasis on matching the publisher's style already violates norms of the American Society of Magazine Editors because the casual reader might confuse the actual creation of the product for mere background sponsorship. The real benefit to advertisers, in fact, is that these articles will show up on search engine results to relevant searchers because they appear to the search spiders *not* to be ads but simply products of the respectable title. Moreover, advertisers sometimes pay the publishers to highlight those pieces specifically to site visitors that interest them.

At present, then, the two dominant forms of personalized content creation are advertiser driven in the most direct sense. Many news sites allow visitors to customize the ways the sites will look to them—what stories they want to see, for example—based on their own interests. So far, publishers have not moved much to *change the agenda* of material they show visitors, or *the content itself*, based on what they believe they know about their visitors, but there are signs this is under way (Turow 2011, chap. 5). As publishers become used to advertisers' microtargeting and as native advertising becomes a part of their everyday landscape, it is easy to see how publishers might develop this third dynamic: They will begin to vary their own material based on their visitors and what they know about the visitors. Advertisers have for over a decade been using techniques for testing whether ads with certain features will draw engagements or clicks. It is not much of a stretch to expect that, facing growing advertising competition from search engines and social networks, straightforward content publishers will use their data to change articles or videos on the fly based on what they know of visitors. In fact, as the industry newsletter *PaidContent* noted in January 2013, big Internet publishers recognize big data analysis with the goal of content personalization as a necessity:

> [As John Battelle noted,] "Twitter's gotten better and better at what's called "entity extraction"—identifying a person, place, or thing, then associating behaviors and attributes around that thing. . . . *Real time entity extraction* crossed with signals like those described above is the Holy Grail."

> This is fundamentally the same goal that both Google and Facebook are focused on as well: *how do you show users only things that are relevant to them, and hide those that aren't*—in real time? Facebook has gotten criticism for the way it tweaks the news feed based on its algorithms, but the reality is that *most users don't want to see everything that streams through their networks*. And Google started its Google+ social network, and built it into everything it does, in part because it needs more data signals about its users. (Ingram, 2013, para. 5–6, emphasis added)

The *PaidContent* writer adds that "The problem for all of these companies is that doing this is really, really hard—every user's stream consists of billions of data signals, and deciphering which are meaningful and which aren't is a complicated business" (Ingram, 2013, para. 7). Yet it is not hard to understand the advertising imperatives toward personalization that drive these efforts. For example, if a news site finds that certain people with high incomes in the market for expensive cars tend to stay on articles with optimistic headlines—and click more frequently on ads with those headlines—they will change the headlines for those people. Or perhaps there is a belief that people with certain backgrounds will stay

on the site if news favorable to a particular country shows up, so those people might see more favorable news of that country. The same scenarios can be spun out regarding entertainment programming. Technologies already exist to create different layers of programs for different audiences via addressable television.

When these three dynamics work together—not in a year or two but during the course of the century's second decade—marketers and their publisher partners will routinely show different constructions of reality to people that they categorize in different ways. Crucially, people may not necessarily realize they are being treated differently, and if they do realize it—whether they like it or not— they may not know why. Indeed, the logic (expressed by the *PaidContent* writer) of "hiding" in advance from individuals what is less "relevant" to them must automatically hide also the fact of its operation. What is present *to us* on the world's stage will have already been adjusted by the operation of side doors we know nothing about. Marketers and publishers will try to reduce tensions over the situation through the mantra of relevance and the aura of personalized attention, and, after a while, people will take personalization for granted as the lens through which to understand the world.

There are certainly rhetorical pressures that, from time to time, run counter to personalization. Large media continue to make claims that they speak to the wider population; indeed, governments rely on them to make such claims. Mega-events such as the Olympics provide occasional centripetal frameworks with their own distinctive advertising and marketing dynamics. There is too much at stake, from many institutional standpoints, for media's claims to be "central" social institutions to evaporate overnight (Couldry, 2003, 2012; Turner, 2010). But such rhetoric will increasingly be at odds with other, largely hidden, pressures that disaggregate audiences and mine their particularity.

### A New Public Realm?[3]

These trends—the growing prevalence of personalized advertising based on continuous data mining, leading to pervasive pressures to personalize content in response—represent a momentum of *cultural* change across countless institutions, enterprises, and individuals in multiple sectors that has the capacity to transform habits and values irrevocably. The three advertising dynamics are sweeping away the core 20th-century norm separating advertising from editorial matter in news and some entertainment forms while laying the groundwork for surreptitious commercial messages to be personalized across media boundaries. Both of these scenarios are changing quickly, however. Hyper-competition and a belief in modeling are leading marketers to demand from publishers' ever-increasing amounts of data to slice and dice their audiences. Not even premium content sites are immune from these pressures, which have long-term implications for journalistic agendas and modes of news writing. Meanwhile, the economic consequences of declining media audiences and readerships mean that there are simply fewer professionals now around (whether at newspapers or news agencies) with the time, resources, and standing to resist such challenges to basic journalistic values, including the bypassing of the old church-state divide (Davies, 2007). Another incipient development is the spread of personalization to the most pervasive audiovisual medium, the home television set. The technology already exists to change features

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[3] For related discussion of digital media's consequences for democratic politics, see Couldry (2012).

of commercials and even programs in real time based on the ways advertisers and cable systems construct households and individuals. When TV-set manufacturers and cable firms solve cost and logistical challenges, it is very likely that the central audiovisual medium in the home will follow the same personalization dynamics that today take place in relation to the Web, mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets, and gaming machines.

There is a potential barrier to this seemingly unstoppable momentum: audience trust. Content producers, in one form or another, rely on it. If you did not trust a content producer or platform to have some control over the accuracy of its outputs, or to make clear when its content was wholly driven by powerful *external* interests, why would you go on using it? Indeed, content producers fear that users will be unnerved if they become aware that content apparently aimed at general distribution is personally tailored. While an en masse uprising of concerned citizens is certainly possible, the individualized way in which this activity is manifested makes revolts by large groups unlikely. Marketers and publishers continually tell their visitors that personalized relevance is a great benefit, and the status implied by such rewards as personalized discounts may be difficult for individuals to interpret. Occasional scandals surrounding the new advertising norms will no doubt emerge and may force adjustment of those norms. *The Atlantic*'s recent apology for publishing a native advertisement from the Church of Scientology led to an apology and a determination to better think through the definition of native ads for *The Atlantic*'s readers (Stelter & Haughney, 2013). *The Atlantic*'s faux pas did not, however, lead its executives to foreswear native ads. They explicitly noted that resource needs and the changing nature of the advertising subsidy *required* new forms. We need, therefore, to take seriously the possibility that the pressures toward personalization of media content will continue unchallenged for a considerable time.

How should we think about the consequences of this trajectory? The even distribution of knowledge and resources for interpreting knowledge is one of democracy's key preconditions (Dahl, 1989). The representative system of modern democracy is indeed difficult to conceive on any basis *other* than the diffusion of *common* knowledge on matters relevant to monitoring what governments are doing. As Thomas Paine (1937/1791) put it in *The Rights of Man*, "the representative system diffuses such a body of knowledge throughout a nation, on the subject of government, as to explode ignorance and preclude imposition" (p. 157). Even elite democracy theory (Schattschneider, 1960) depends on the assumption that knowledge is diffused in some *sufficiently* effective way among the population, even if that means relying, more than other theories do, on the role of expert elites. But what happens when the common system for knowledge distribution starts being organized on a different principle: that of circulating what merely *passes for* common knowledge among its receivers for the ulterior motive of generating better data for advertisers on individual consumers? What, too, if that trend is driven by shifts in the advertising and marketing industries, which media companies—because they face declining returns on direct online advertising and receive a faster declining share of overall advertising spend—lack the powers in all but the most exceptional cases to resist? As already noted, we understand the term *knowledge* here to cover much more than just facts—indeed, to cover the full range of shared reference points that, through being shared, enable us to recognize one another as members of a common social and political space.

Is an appeal to democratic values enough to generate an urgent correction? Sadly it is not, for a number of reasons. First, the recent shift in the advertising industry's relations to content producers is deeply embedded in the struggles of each for *survival* in drastically changed business environments. Second, the displacement of the site of advertising value to *wherever* individual consumers are active via their computer-networked interfaces is a displacement onto territory that, for two decades now, has been strongly associated with values that are unquestionably positive: freedom, creativity, and openness (Streeter, 2011). It seems almost counterintuitive to claim, as we are doing, that the very site of such values is becoming a site of unfreedom. Third, no values are ever self-evident, and no complex society is sustainable without a *plurality* of "regimes of justification" (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). Publishers and marketers across the media system herald the audience's ability to act as producers as well as to customize the material they receive as the most advanced forms of audience power. They cheer automated, surreptitious personalization along with these developments, despite surveys that consistently reveal public opposition to material publishers and advertisers tailor for them without asking (see, e.g., Couldry, 2012).

The only way to address such conflicts is to make the values that are threatened as explicit as possible, and to use those newly explicit values as a basis to justify change. The relationship between media industries and democratic culture has never been straightforward or direct, and there is no prospect of it becoming so now. So a simple appeal to the values of democratic theorists such as John Dewey (Pariser, 2011, p. 75) is insufficient to bring the problem into focus, valuable though Dewey's writings may still be as general inspiration.

Admittedly, things look different from the perspective of the United Kingdom, where one of us works and where a tax-subsidized public service model of broadcasting remains a powerful and distinctive cultural force. That public service model remains of vital importance in many countries and might be an effective site of resistance to some of the above trends, but it would require another article to explore this. It was in the context of the BBC's history that Paddy Scannell (1989) developed his striking concept of the "communicative entitlement" to certain shared discourses that media institutions can make available to audiences. But even in the United Kingdom, long-term government support for the license fee that funds the BBC is increasingly questioned, so we cannot simply rely on the U.K. public subsidy model as a reference point when we consider what counterweights can be built against content personalization internationally. In any case, it must be acknowledged that, in two crucial respects, the ground rules have changed since Scannell developed his notion of communicative entitlement: first, a destabilization of institutional structures, reference points, and work roles that Zygmunt Bauman has captured with the term "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000; Papacharissi, 2010); and, second, the growing saturation of everyday life by media contents that have become detached from the limited channels of content circulation that prevailed in the 1980s. The viewer poised to switch on the prime-time news or pick up a newspaper is scarcely now a credible starting point for thinking about how citizens interface with the materials relevant to their citizenship. Communicative entitlement, if the concept remains useful, will need to be configured quite differently from before.

This has led some scholars to rethink the baseline for considering media's contribution to civic life. Mark Deuze's account of "media life" would seem to undercut any normative critique: If our starting

point becomes, quite simply, that "media make us real, because we create ourselves in media" (Deuze, 2012, pp. 127–130), then the only test becomes what individuals make of this media life, for good or ill, and any collective norms fall out of the mix. Zizi Papacharissi argues, more fully, that we have moved toward forms of "thin" citizenship supported by convergent technologies that are characterized by favoring the voices of the opinionated and offer personalized and "simplified civic participations options . . . not requir[ing] extensive contemplation of civic affairs" to the less engaged (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 107). Although there is much force to Papacharissi's characterization, it does not consider whether personalization is undermining not just interest in civic life, but even our basic orientation to one another as members of a shared democracy.

### Back to the Drawing-Board of Democratic Theory?

The work of two democratic theorists, Chantal Mouffe (noted earlier) and Pierre Rosanvallon, can point us beyond this dilemma. Mouffe (2000) argues that an effective democracy needs "an ensemble of practices that makes possible the creation of democratic citizens" (p. 95). Mouffe challenges formal rational deliberation as the only model for politics and is rightly concerned with democracy's broader cultural conditions; she says little, however, about the form this ensemble of practices should take. Here is where Rosanvallon's insights are useful. In language strikingly similar to Mouffe's, he asserts that the challenge for contemporary societies aiming to be democratic is to generate "an ensemble of actions and discourses for commonality and making the system of social interactions both more legible and more visible" (Rosanvallon, 2006, p. 250). Otherwise, we will not recover what Rosanvallon argues we have lost over many decades in advanced democracies: "a practical experience of the general will"—that is, a way of figuring out together solutions to vexing problems of interdependence (2008, p. 313).

Doing that requires facing up to the complexity of democracy. For Rosanvallon (2011, p. 225), democracy is a multidimensional and multi-institutional process involving all of the following: specific processes of civil society and detailed workings of a particular political "regime" as well as, more broadly, a "form of society" and an overall mode of government. Building on Rosanvallon's (2011, pp. 201–202) own recognition of media's importance in sustaining contemporary forms of political legitimacy, we would add that media can collectively help illuminate and support the interrelations between the democratic process's multiple dimensions, serving as critical engines in what Alain Touraine (1977) once called "the self-production of society." Media offer patterned entertainment and news stories about the elements that make up this complex democratic process, and citizens can evaluate the picture they gain from media in relation to various norms of acceptability. Such public and private reactions, in turn, may reinforce notions of acceptable personal and collective behavior with respect to those institutional structures. It follows that, within a complex model of democratic functioning, we must understand *media's* contribution to the democratic process (from the workings of political mechanisms to the broader production of society) as itself inherently complex. As one of us has written elsewhere, media have historically performed not just one role in social formation, but multiple roles: "society-making" and "segment-making" (Turow, 2011, p. 193) alongside, we might now add, enhancements that benefit individuals who seek to personalize their window onto the world. All feed into the sustaining of the overall democratic process. If so, critical argument will only ever be about the *balance* between these inherent aspects of media production, and the conditions under which something like media's society-making role can continue.

By *society-making,* we do not mean the production of consensus, or even the picturing of society as a coherent whole. As Rosanvallon (2011, p. 188) notes, such a picture may no longer be credible. At issue is the possibility for a common language of mutual recognition and contention, a symbolic territory, as Rosanvallon (2011) puts it, of "shared trials, similar situations and parallel histories" (p. 183). The key word here is *shared*. If democracy is to remain a substantive, not fictive, term, then it must involve *some* sharing of experience—of information, argumentation, clarification, empathy, and celebration—across a range of social locations. Otherwise, members of a democracy will barely recognize one another as part of the same space (Mouffe, 2000). Yet the logic of *deep* personalization is headed in another direction. In the face of the new media advertising system, the goal should be to mobilize stakeholders representing every dimension of the democratic process in a public debate about the implications of big data's deep embedding in a personalized public realm.

## Conclusion

Media's capacity to circulate material that builds connections between otherwise diverse groups is not helped, but rather undermined, by the pressures toward personalization that we have outlined. Yet effective routes to challenging this personalization are hard to find. One starting point may be for private individuals to find common cause against the hidden selling and packaging of their personal data and the resulting judgments and evaluations that third parties have made about them. Another starting point, short of an entirely new debate about the corporate uses of big data about private individuals getting under way, is to point to the destination where the personalization train is headed—a destination not obviously recognizable as democratic. Even if no simple correction is possible to the complex shift in the relations of interdependence between large institutional sectors that we have outlined, trade-offs become imaginable once the competing sets of values are made clear (Mansell, 2012). We may need to rethink the relations between media institutions, society, and democracy in ways that are more explicit about not just the direct effects of advertising messages on individuals but the profound, if indirect, consequences of the advertising industries' self-transformation for the whole public media environment.  For this, the big data issue raised here must come out fully into the open, not just in the United States and United Kingdom but in all emerging democracies around the world.

A final metaphor may help us focus on what is stake here if we fail to make big data's workings themselves an issue of democratic contention. We risk walking, negligently, down a path that leads to the undermining of key elements essential for democracy. What landscape can we expect to find if we continue much farther down the path charted in this article? A landscape, we suggest, that has been *cleared* of one basic ingredient of democratic life: the reliable and regular exchange of common ideas, facts, and reference points about matters of common concern. Instead, we will inhabit an information landscape of constant updates on the issues that are closest to us, regular but trivial distractions interrupted from time to time by grand news spectacle, and occasional exotic curiosities.

We take the metaphor of "clearance" from the drastic transformation of the economy of the Scottish Highlands in the 18th century (Prebble, 1969), when a whole way of agricultural life—and the people who sustained it—was cleared from the land (forcibly, often murderously by fire) to make way for sheep. Only sheep, it seemed, were sufficiently profitable for the distant landlords, long sick of the low

and fluctuating rents from tenant farmers and with large property bills to pay. Visit the Scottish Highlands now, and it is empty, although beautiful in its vastness. It takes a considerable amount of archaeological inquiry to reimagine the dense living networks that once filled those empty valleys. The point is not to romanticize media's old ways of "providing for" democracy, but simply to remember that decisive, even epochal, change can be driven by motives very distant from the aims of those of the most affected. Could today's flawed but still crowded landscape of news production be "cleared" over the next decade to suit the goal of rationalizing the advertising industries' "delivery," leaving traces only for news antiquarians to marvel at? What story, by then, will be left for the historians of democracy to tell?

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