

Digital Disclosure, Decision-making, and Democracy

Unit Rationale

The goals of this unit are to help students 1) assess the extent and effect of online data disclosure, 2) critically interrogate the practices of corporations whose business models rely heavily on mediated surveillance, and 3) evaluate the way these practices can shape the way consumer-citizens make decisions.

In recent years, consumers have witnessed an explosion of new media technologies available free of charge. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr, Pinterest, Hulu, and the array of Google products have become ubiquitous elements of contemporary life. Because users do not directly pay for these services, they may consider them to be akin to *gifts* provided by benevolent corporations. They thereby often fail to critically interrogate their own role as commodities in newly emergent forms of exchange.

When challenged to consider the role of data mining in the business models of big-tech companies, many students acknowledge the “targeted ads” that accompany otherwise free content. Drawing on Jhally and Livant (1986), we can characterize this model of exchange as part of the *work of watching*: consumers “work” by watching advertisements and are compensated for this work with content and services. This level of analysis challenges the common perception of new media technologies as gifts.

However, unlike older media forms (e.g. television and radio), the exchange relationship created by new media technologies is not wholly based on the “work of watching.” In class discussion, students admit that they often ignore sponsored links, mute and minimize pop-up ads, and perform an array of other techniques to avoid doing their “work.” From Jhally and Livant’s perspective, consumers seem to be getting a good deal more from new media technologies than they are paying.

Andrejevic (2002) complicates this analysis, however, arguing that media technologies profit by encouraging consumers to perform *the work of being watched*. Users “pay” for services with their data, which has become an enormously profitable commodity. The continuous disclosure of user data allows corporations to “rationalize” consumption, shape experiences, and simulate consumer desires. User data can also be aggregated, packaged, and sold to a wide array of interested buyers.

After exploring the role of data disclosure as a form of exchange, the class turns to consider some of the overtly *political* implications of these new media forms. Drawing on J.S. Mill and other theorists of free speech, we argue that democratic deliberation depends upon citizens’ ability to encounter people and ideas with which they initially disagree. If democracy requires encounters with difference, have new media technologies made such encounters more or less likely? Pariser (2011), for one, argues that media sites produce “filter bubbles” by using data disclosure to tailor content to the desires of individual consumers. Over time, users become less likely to encounter content that challenges their already expressed beliefs and desires, thereby isolating them in cultural and ideological enclaves. The class works to reveal this filter bubble

and then to “pierce” it, seeking online experiences that increase opportunities for critical encounters.

Readings

Abelson, H. et. al. (2008). *Blown to bits: Your life, liberty, and happiness after the digital explosion*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Addison-Wesley.

Andrejevic, M. (2002). The work of being watched: interactive media and the exploitation of self-disclosure. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19.2, 230-248.

Deetz, S. (1990). Reclaiming the subject matter as a guide to mutual understanding: Effectiveness and ethics in interpersonal interaction. *Communication quarterly*, 38.3, 226-43.

Jhally, S., & Livant, B. (1986). Watching as working: The valorization of audience consciousness. *Journal of Communication*, 36, 124 –143.

Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the internet is hiding from you*. New York: Penguin Press.

Sunstein, C. (2001). *Republic.com*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Other Media texts

Facebook and Facial Recognition

http://predictiontracking.com/home/printblog?index_php?view=article&id=5498&tmpl=component&print=1

Carnegie Mellon professor invents an app that allows a drone to guess your social security number

<http://www.marketplace.org/topics/tech/911-legacy/911s-effect-tech>

Eli Pariser’s Ted.com Talk on “Filter Bubbles”:

http://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles.html

Assignments

Below are three assignments designed to deepen students’ awareness of the consequences of data disclosure and mediated surveillance. The assignments can each stand-alone. Or, instructors may use the three assignments together to comprise one unit in a semester-long course.

Assignment One: Data disclosure Journal

The goal of this assignment is to develop an awareness of the extent and significance of our daily forms of data disclosure.

Read: Andrejevic’s “The Work of Being Watched” (2002) and Chapter Two of Abelson, *Blown to Bits* (2008).

Write: For one day, record your credit/debit card purchases, your social network messages, search engine searches, email/text messages sent, reward card swipes, GPS information, and any other digital data you provide to corporations you interact with.

Then: Review your journal and answer the following questions (and come to class ready to discuss your answers):

- What might we infer about the person who produced this data?
- How might corporations profit from the data you provide?
- Is there anything you would feel reluctant to share with the people in our class?
- If, following Andrejevic, we see this disclosure as “work” you do for the corporation in exchange for their services—are you getting a good deal?
- If someone wished to buy your data outright, a life-long look at your most intimate details, including where you are at every minute, your momentary desires, the rhythms of your physiology, what room of the house you are in, whether you have been drinking— how much would you expect in return?

For instructors: This assignment can generate spirited discussion that raises students’ awareness about the economic and political consequences of mediated surveillance and data disclosure. When moderating the discussion, instructors should anticipate several typical responses and be prepared to use these occasions to advance the conversation. For instance:

- Students often report feeling anxiety about revealing personal information to *other individual users* of social media sites (parents, teachers, prospective employers, etc.). Instructors should anticipate this response and work to draw special attention to the ways that *corporations* and *governments* (rather than other specific users) access and profit from user data.
- Students often acknowledge and accept “targeted advertisements” as a fair exchange for the services that corporations provide. Instructors should be prepared to lead a discussion (following Andrejevic and Abelson) about other uses, beyond direct advertising, of aggregated consumer data.
- Students often report that, prior to this exercise, they did not closely consider the role of user-generated data in the business models of internet-based companies and social media platforms. Instructors should be prepared for some students to genuinely struggle with the idea that media services are not simply the gifts of benevolent corporations. Ask, how have such corporations been able to cultivate this image of benevolence and to what end?

Assignment Two: Revealing the Filter Bubble

The goal of this assignment is to explore Pariser’s (2011) thesis that websites create “filter bubbles” as they eliminate content that challenges or contradicts users’ beliefs and preferences.

Read: Eli Pariser’s *The Filter Bubble: What the internet is hiding from you*.

Or

Watch: Pariser’s (2011) Ted Talk

Then: Choose three partners: one should be a classmate; one a friend or family member who is very different from you (in age, political affiliation, and/or lifestyle) and; if possible, one who is geographically distant (ideally in another country). Do a comparative analysis of results from 1) Google searches of the same search terms, 2) Google image searches of the same search terms, 3) recommendations from Amazon, Netflix, Hulu, or another similar site of your choosing. Consider using “private” modes offered by most web browsers and comparing them to standard searchers. Take and compare screenshots, which can serve as evidence for the claims you will make.

Review your comparisons and answer the following questions (and come prepared to discuss your findings):

- Does Pariser’s thesis seem accurate? How much does content vary among the various users?
- Which kinds of searches seem to give more universal results and which give more individual-specific results?
- Do supposed “private” modes have much effect on search results?

For instructors: This assignment helps students become more aware of the consequences of life in virtual worlds increasingly shaped by non-human, algorithmic decision-making. Instructors should be prepared to lead a discussion about the costs and benefits of these increasingly personalized online experiences. Some discussion questions might include:

- What is the value of serendipity and encounters with the unexpected? Are such encounters potentially threatened by the filter-bubble phenomenon?
- What can individual users do to counteract the filter-bubble phenomenon?
- What could internet-based corporations do to give users more access to and control over their filters? Might such increased transparency and shared control benefit the corporations as well as users?

Assignment Three: Piercing the Bubble

The goal of this assignment is to explore the way “filter bubbling” and the “work of being watched” can shape *political* decision-making.

Read: Deetz (1990) and Sunstein (2001) and consider the role of dissensus and disagreement for democratic deliberation.

Then: Keep a journal of news stories and political commentary you encounter (through social media sites, and/or your typical news sources) in the course of one or several days. Take note on the kinds of news and views you encounter. Try creating one of several personalized news pages (e.g. Google News has a “personalize” feature) and see what results this yields. Lastly, consciously try to seek out ideas with which you disagree (e.g. “right” leaning ideas if you identify as “left” leaning; immigrant-oriented news if you identify as a U.S. citizen, etc.) and record the kinds of stories you encounter.

Write: Responses to the following questions (and come prepared to discuss your responses in

class):

- In your first set of searches, how often did you encounter a story or opinion you disagreed with? How often did you find a story or opinion that shocked or surprised you?
- When you encountered political views/news, how quickly could you assess whether it represents a “right” or “left” leaning view? How “polarized” did opinions seem?
- What was the experience like when you sought views not in line with your own? Was it difficult to find such views? Did the news/commentary seem thoughtful and legitimate (or absurd/unbelievable)? Did you find anything that changed your mind or broadened your own views?

For instructors: This assignment can help students become more aware of the way online information economies shape political decision-making. The assignment addresses the complex relationship between mediated experience, interpersonal interaction, and democratic practice. Instructors should allow ample time for students to engage with the readings, which are complex. Discussion often focus on some of the following questions:

- To what extent do encounters with “difference” enrich perspectives and shape experience?
- Do online environments offer any opportunities for such encounters?
- What specific groups or individuals benefit from “polarized” political speech and who is disadvantaged by such speech?
- What changes in online behavior might we make (personally or collectively) that would facilitate better democratic decision-making?

Biography

Michael Vicaro is Assistant Professor of Communication at Penn State-Greater Allegheny. His research interests include classical and contemporary rhetorical theory, phenomenology, human rights rhetoric, and the influence of new media technologies on political judgment. He teaches classes on media ethics, conflict negotiation, and communication theory.