The Advertising Network

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Facebook has been in the news a lot lately, and the type of coverage has really tested the notion that any press is good press. The social media network is taking heat because it reportedly enabled a company called Cambridge Analytica to scrape the data of 50 million users. The purpose of the data scrape was to use the information to conduct micro targeting with political ads, and the company was hired by the 2016 Trump campaign to do exactly that—Steve Bannon, Trump’s former campaign CEO, sat on the board of the data company prior to the hiring. The story went public because one of Cambridge Analytica’s data scientists, Christopher Wiley, decided to blow the whistle on his former employer. On March 19th, “Vice News Tonight” aired an interview with Wiley in which, he offered some of his insights into the situation. He said that when Bannon wanted to “build an arsenal of weapons for his culture war,” Cambridge Analytica’s experience assisting military operations made the company especially appealing. Wiley described what Cambridge Analytica did as “the transposition of military-style information operations, and propaganda, to an American political consultancy so that they could create a web of disinformation on Facebook.” A lot of people are angry with Cambridge Analytica, but people shouldn’t be surprised that their Facebook use was exploited in the way that it was.
What Cambridge Analytica did, political micro targeting, is a form of advertising and despite representing itself as a platform for social interaction, Facebook is built to meet the needs of advertisers. More specifically, Facebook provides advertisers with new and improved ways to accomplish their three main goals—gaining exposure, gaining exposure within specific groups, and creating the groups themselves. Defending this claim is the purpose of the paper. The first section will take a historical look at advertising, in order to establish that these have traditionally been the goals. An additional emphasis of this section will be that the evolution of advertising strategy has often been a response to, or been enabled by, advancements in technology. For example, advancements in printing technology in the late 1800s led to a rapid growth in print media. This gave advertisers one of their earliest opportunities to market to specific groups. The point of the emphasis is that the advent of Facebook is yet another technological advancement that has created opportunities for advertisers. The main section of the paper will be an analysis of how Facebook is structured, specifically focused on how it is conducive to the three stated goals of advertising.

Facebook use has become ubiquitous. As of February 1st of this year, there were over 2.1 billion monthly users and an average of 1.4 billion daily users, according to Zephoria Digital Marketing. And even this doesn’t capture the full scale of the ubiquity. China for example, a country with well over a billion people, censors the use of Facebook however; this doesn’t mean that Chinese people have abstained from the phenomenon. Instead, they use a Chinese version of the platform, indicating that the impulse to engage with it transcends cultural and political
boundaries. And impulse is the correct word—a critical component to my argument is that Facebook is designed to be addictive. A recent study found that Facebook use negatively influenced “the two components of subjunctive well-being: how people feel moment-to-moment and how satisfied they are with their lives” (Kross).

Perhaps an explanation is that people spend more time than they would like to on Facebook, and they have a difficult time controlling it. The fact that billions of people spend time on Facebook, and the fact that it’s designed to maximize the time they spend, means that the platform is the ideal place for any advertiser looking for general exposure.

Advertisers want more than general exposure though—they want exposure within specific groups. In the early 1990s, a study was conducted on trends in international advertising. 96 international advertising managers in the U.S. were studied, and the “results indicated that 75% of the firms followed a localized approach to international advertising and 25% a standardized one, suggesting that the standardization of advertising [was] declining.” The study also noted that some of these managers were “culturally oriented” to the markets they were advertising in, and that this made them more likely to successfully utilize a localized approach (Kanso). Advertisers prefer this “localized” approach because cultural characteristics impact the effectiveness of a given strategy. The more an advertiser knows about the target audience, the greater likelihood of success. Nothing provides more information about consumers, and nothing enables more precise targeting than does Facebook, which was especially beneficial to Cambridge Analytica.
Moving beyond exposure within specific groups, advertisers seek to create the groups themselves and nothing makes this goal more tangible than Facebook does. Facebook makes creating groups as easy as possible and in fact, over the last few years they've had an incentive to do so—group membership promotes user activity. With a click of a few buttons, users can create group names and invite people to join. Advertisers can create groups in this way as well however, this paper focuses on some unexpected and potentially dangerous examples of group making through Facebook. The Russians for example, reportedly interfered with the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and they took advantage of Facebook’s group-making capabilities as part of their strategy.

In the conclusion, I’ll shift gears and suggest a possible consequence of how Facebook is structured—the social theories of Jean Baudrillard will be useful here. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard anticipated a future where “the social turns itself into advertising” (Baudrillard, 88). In the context of a world full of Facebook users, the words seem semi-prophetic.

On December 17th, 1903 the Wright brothers took to the skies above Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, marking one of mankind’s most significant modern advancements in technology. By 1911, advertising professionals were already trying to exploit flight technology to reach more consumers. That year, Calbraith Rodgers set out in hopes of completing the first coast-to-coast airplane trip in U.S. history and Vin Fiz, a carbonated grape beverage company, saw sponsorship of the flight as an opportunity to spread brand recognition (R. Taylor). In exchange for
financial support, Vin Fiz was able to place its logo and brand name anywhere that featured news of the flight. The company also painted their name and logo on the aircraft itself to expand the reach beyond those who followed the news. The problem with these early attempts at aerial advertising though, was that a logo painted on an aircraft at an elevation of thousands of feet was completely indiscernible to people on the ground.

In 1922, an exciting solution to this visibility problem appeared in the skies of London. Using a method developed by Major Jack Savage, the words “Daily Mail” were spelled out in the smoke trail of an airplane and with that, commercial skywriting was born. The stunt had been carried out in promotion of a newspaper and a couple days later “the paper boasted that this was ‘the largest advertisement the world [had] ever known’—the two words measured three miles across, and were seen by millions” (J. Taylor, 755). Exposure is one of the earliest, and certainly one of the most enduring goals in advertising. As early as the 1870s, competition for exposure in newspapers and magazines was so stiff that “individual advertisers worried that their message was being lost among the sea of ads” (Norris, 32). In contrast to the cluttered pages of the advertisement sections, the sky provided a vast, empty canvass where an advertiser’s message was almost certain to stand-alone. Pepsi-Cola Corporation was one of the greatest beneficiaries of skywriting technology, as they went from a relatively unknown product to a household name and relied primarily on their messages in the sky to do so. According to Smithsonian, in 1940 alone the corporation “contracted for 2,225 writings over 48
states, Mexico, Canada, South America, and Cuba” (S. Sidney). The company’s rise to prosperity is a glimmering example of the power of general exposure.

Advertising has a long history of evolving alongside advancements in technology. As in the case of skywriting, newly developed technology sometimes offered advertisers new and/or improved ways to increase exposure of their products. Other times though, technological advancement forced advertisers to innovate or risk losing previously secured exposure. The decline of skywriting in fact, provides an example because it coincided with increased popularity of personal automobiles. As people began to spend more time with their eyes focused on driving, it made less sense for advertisers to try to sell their products in the sky. The result was the advent of roadside billboards, and as the average velocity of an automobile increased, the result was bigger, flashier billboards (Geary, Grossman and Blumenstein). Interestingly, the progression of billboard advertising mirrored the progression of the earliest forms in the US, newspaper and magazine advertising, at least in that both progressions moved away from small, modest ads towards the bigger and flashier. The point of the progression of course, was to make sure the ads were being seen.

Local newspaper advertisements in the mid 1800s generally resembled nothing more than brief announcements. During the period, the papers typically “grouped advertisements on the first page [...] and tended to restrict ads to rather modest size and character. Illustrations seldom accompanied the conventional column form ads” (Norris, 13). Goods that were advertised in this way still often saw increased sales, but this was partially due to the fact that the producers of the
goods relied on supplementary methods of exposure. Local storekeepers, who
certainly had a stake in selling products, would often provide additional exposure
with demonstrations for products and with aesthetically pleasing window displays.
Window decoration eventually became a formidable advertising force on its own
and in fact, by 1900 there were more than 1,500 fulltime window decorators. One
expert even estimated that “only newspaper and magazine advertising outdistanced
window displays as a means to promote department store buying” (Norris, 18). It
may have been more accurate though, to think of exposure as the means to promote
buying, and to think of newspapers, magazines, and window displays as mediums
for producing exposure.

It was also around this time that mail order catalogs appeared and they
dererve a lot of credit for pushing these types of ads to be bigger and more attention
grabbing. These mail order catalogs didn’t have physical department stores to
provide additional exposure for their products. Not surprisingly, “the publication of
catalogs quickly became an art. A mail order firm’s very existence depended on the
effectiveness of its advertising” (Norris, 15). (It’s worth noting that many of these
mail order firms eventually resorted to other methods of exposure as well. For
example, trains were employed by some of them to tour the country offering
demonstrations). Advancements in technology also deserve some credit though, for
helping advertising in these mediums reach the next level. Thanks in large part to
the fact that printing technology had greatly reduced the cost of printing, by the turn
of the twentieth century the country began to see “wider and larger distribution of
low-cost popular newspapers, magazines and journals” (Norris, 31). This led to
advertisers having more options and in turn, they enjoyed greater freedom in shaping their ads, both in terms of size and artistic value. The greater variety though, also prompted a shift in advertising strategy—one that was bit more nuanced than simply gaining exposure.

Having a larger variety of newspapers, magazines, and journals meant that advertisers were able to move beyond the goal of general exposure and instead seek out exposure within specific groups. Initially, this was the only part of the strategy that changed—manufacturers of farming equipment, for example, would feature ads in “rural journals like the Southern Planter, the Country Gentleman, and the American Farmer” but the ads followed a familiar theme. These ads, like so many that came before them, took the form of basic announcements for products, occasionally accompanied by a reassurance of the quality of the product and/or instructions for its use. These ads assumed that a demand existed and “sought not to create demand...but to capture as large a share as possible” (Norris, 25). A transformation of strategy was occurring though, and some of the earliest examples of it could be found in prestigious literary magazines.

Publications like Harper’s Magazine, Atlantic Monthly, and Scribner’s Monthly provided hundreds of thousands of readers that advertisers could assume belonged to the upper-middleclass. Not only did these magazines offer a large enough readership to satisfy the basic need of exposure, but given the socioeconomic status of the readership, they also offered the ideal target audiences for the advertising of non-essential, luxury items. To sell these items, advertisers moved away from simply announcing the availability of a product and explaining its
use value, to emphasizing the social status that a person might gain through obtaining the product. In other words, the move marked a moment where advertisers began attempting to create demand, rather than simply seek out the demand that existed. The strategy proved too effective however, for its use to be limited to targeting upper-middle class audiences to sell luxury items.

Thanks to the technological advancements at the turn of the twentieth century, print media was booming and “publishers, enjoying wider and wider markets for their magazines, were able to specialize and thereby offer advertisers access to increasingly homogeneous groups of readers” (Norris, 41). Members of the upper-middleclass did not represent the majority of these “homogeneous groups” but aspects of the techniques that were used on upper-middleclass audiences were applied to other groups as well. This was because, “advertising professionals, especially copywriters, realized that advertisements, regardless of the social status of prospective consumers, needed to appeal to the deep-seated desire of Americans for middle-class status” (Norris, 47). The ways in which the advertisers chose to appeal to that desire though, varied depending on the characteristics of the audience. The difference in the way advertisers chose to market to women versus men for example, demonstrated the desire of advertisers to differentiate their audiences and write copy accordingly.

Recent scholars have noted, “gender-based differences in perceptions, attitudes, and communication styles generate gender-differentiated responses in priorities, decision processes, and purchase outcomes” (Barletta, xxiii). It would seem that by the first couple decades of the twentieth century, advertisers were
already beginning to understand this. Advertisements designed to generate demand within female audiences played on the woman’s stereotypical role as housekeeper and caretaker of the family. It was often suggested that if women made poor consumer choices, the consequence would be the health deterioration of their family members. For example, a 1910 ad for the Monroe Icebox warned that other brands had nooks and crannies where food could get stuck and breed germs. The ad warned, “these germs get into your food and make it poison, and the family suffers—from no traceable cause” (Norris, 89). Ads that were marketed to men on the other hand, exploited their stereotypical role as breadwinner: “Men who could not ‘properly’ provide were made to feel guilty and their wives deprived” (Norris, 155). The point then, is that even if two people belonged to the same socioeconomic class or better yet, even the same household, advertisers still saw value in a customized approach that accounted for differences.

A step beyond gaining exposure within specific groups, the ultimate goal of advertisers is to create the group itself. One of the first times a market was created in the U.S., it was more a product of circumstances than a product of advertising technique. With the completed construction of the railroads, print media began to circulate on a national scale and for the first time, the concept of a national market became possible. Before this point, “what markets that did exist were divided by the local patterns of taste and consumption that had been cultivated by locally produced goods” (Norris, 2). As the intermingling of rural and urban lifestyles progressed, the people in the U.S. developed more homogenized patterns of taste and consumption. At the turn of the century, Henry Ford used the combination of technological
advancement and advertising/publicity to create his own group of consumers. Before Ford standardized the parts of the automobile to be mass-produced, a car was truly a luxury item—completely beyond the means of a working class American. Assembly line manufacturing decreased the cost of production and in turn, decreased the price of an automobile so dramatically that it created a new market of prospective car-buyers, seemingly overnight. In the last full year before the U.S. entered WWI, “Ford produced and sold over a half million automobiles, nearly a 10,000 percent increase in the eight short years since the Model T was introduced” (Norris, 165). In Ford’s case however, it wasn’t simply the advancements in technology that created the new group of consumers.

When Ford standardized the production of the automobile, there was pushback from other manufacturers who figured to sell a lot less vehicles if an affordable alternative hit the market. So much pushback in fact, that George B. Selden, who was affiliated with the Electric Vehicle Company, filed a lawsuit in an attempt to halt Ford’s production. The basis of the suit was a patent that Selden claimed gave his company exclusive right to production. The company formed the Association of Licensed Automobile Manufacturers (ALAM), which allowed other manufacturers to stay in production if they conformed to conditions that would maintain the status quo. As more and more manufacturers joined the ALAM it seemed likely that Selden would win his suit, and Ford enjoyed press coverage of the case that painted him as veracious underdog, fighting for the rights of the working class man. In 1910, the Detroit Free Press published an editorial called “Ford the Fighter” which said of Ford: “as a human figure he presents a spectacle to
win the applause of all men with red blood, for this world loves the fighting man’” (Greenleaf, xx). By the time Ford won the case, he had become a sort of cult hero to the working class. When Ford’s automobile hit the market, the record sales increase may have reflected a desire to pledge allegiance to this cult hero, as much as it reflected the affordability of the price.

The television and film industries have become favored territory for advertisers, and a significant reason why is that they are conducive to the three main goals of advertisers. As of last year, it was estimated that the average person in the US spent five hours and eleven minutes per day watching television. It was also estimated that 99% of households owned at least one television set, and that 65% of them owned three or more (Television Watching Statistics). And built into our use of television and film is a way for advertisers to differentiate us from other viewers. Advertisers are going to make different assumptions for example, about viewers of Oprah than about viewers of South Park, or a horror film, or a sporting event. These assumptions are even reflected back to viewers in the advertisements that are featured. If it’s a baseball game, the advertisements between innings are more likely to feature baseball-related content, even if the product being sold has nothing to do with the sport. If it’s at the movie theater, the other films previewed will likely belong to the same general category as the feature film. But beyond providing general exposure and better, exposure within specific groups, television and film are also conducive to the most sought after goal in advertising—the ability to create the groups themselves.
Star Wars is a good example of this, as the market value of the franchise has extended far beyond the bounds of the box office. With a cult following of Star Wars fanatics in existence, almost any product can be Star Wars-themed and thus, have added value among the community of fans. The franchise created a large consumer community that simply did not exist before, and with it came the potential to sell a wide range of new products. The advantages that TV and film provide make them irresistible mediums for advertisers. But as advantageous as television and film have been, no technological advancements have been as advantageous to advertisers as the advent of Facebook—specifically, nothing has been more conducive to goals of gaining exposure, of gaining exposure within specific groups, and of having the ability to create the groups themselves.

Not only does Facebook have over 2 billion users, it’s also designed to maximize the amount of time spent on the platform. In other words, it’s designed to maximize the potential for exposure. Tristan Harris is a former “Google Design Ethicist” with unique insight into how technology is designed to manipulate human behavior. His latest project is a non-profit initiative called Time Well Spent which, according to Harris’s website, “aims to catalyze a rapid, coordinated change among technology companies through public advocacy, the development of ethical design standards, design education and policy recommendations to protect minds from nefarious manipulation.” It’s Harris’s position that tech companies are competing in what he calls an “attention economy”, where the more attention they capture from
their users, the more money the companies make. This has led to design strategies that aim to maximize the time a user spends.

On January 11th of this year, Mark Zuckerberg referenced the concept of “time well spent” in a Facebook post that promised a “major change” to how Facebook is built. He promised that the goal has shifted from “helping you find relevant content to helping you have more meaningful social interactions.” The suggestion seemed to be that decreasing the presence of public content, vaguely defined as posts from businesses, brands and media, and increasing posts from friends and family is the way to promote more “meaningful social interactions.” In the post, Zuckerberg mentioned that he expects the changes to decrease the amount of time people spend using Facebook. The sentiment may seem in step with exactly what Harris wants, a “coordinated” effort among tech companies, but it’s worth noting that Facebook was the target of some of Harris’s most pointed criticisms to begin with, and that Zuckerberg’s proposed changes do little to respond to those criticisms.

In an essay he wrote in 2016, Tristan Harris explained ten ways he believes tech companies are “hijacking” people’s minds to maximize time spent using devices. One of the main ways they do this is by designing devices to be similar to slot machines—they have built in intermittent variable rewards. As he sees it, when people check their phones they either find a message or notification to function as a reward or, they find nothing to function as a loss. According to Harris, the same principle of awarding intermittent variable rewards is what makes slot machines so addictive. While some devices function in this way by accident, Harris implies that
websites like Facebook intentionally function in this way “because it’s good for business.” Harris mentions Facebook’s red notification icon as being an example of an addicting reward system, but he leaves room to expand on it. For example, Facebook is designed to maximize the number of notifications that a user gets. One major way it does this is by opting- in users to receive notifications on posts they’ve commented on, every time another user comments on the same post. And Facebook actually has three possible notification icons, one for general notifications and one each for friend requests and messages through messenger. It is interesting to note that the standard design for slot machines also features three icons. I’ve recently noticed an additional strategy for maximizing notifications, which takes advantage of the fact that Facebook users are often connected through multiple devices. If I check a notification on my phone, the next time I turn on my computer I’ll still receive a notification for the content I’ve already seen. Similarly, if I check a message through messenger on my computer, I’ll still see a notification for it the next time I check my phone. This particular strategy likely adds to the addictiveness of Facebook, because it makes the intermittent variable reward system even less predictable.

Harris also identifies at least two other “hijacks” Facebook uses that will likely become more effective if News Feed features a higher percentage of content from friends and family. First, Facebook plays on people’s vulnerability regarding social approval. The example Harris uses it that Facebook automatically suggests tagging people in photos, and makes doing it as easy as clicking a button. This maximizes the number of tags and each time a person is tagged, it represents a
moment of exposure to potential social scrutiny. Similarly, Harris notes that Facebook can keep new profile pictures at the top of people’s News Feeds, in order to maximize likes and comments. Each time the owner of the profile picture receives a notification; it creates an impulse to check how people are responding to the photo. Photos are obvious targets if the goal is to exploit vulnerability to social approval—physical appearance often has too weighty an influence. But because Facebook is so public, tagging a user’s name to something or posting on his or her wall can also potentially pose a threat to social approval, because everybody can see it. If Facebook means to promote more social interaction with their changes, doing so will likely increase the potential for social vulnerability and consequently, increase the impulsive use that the vulnerability induces.

The second “hijack” that will likely benefit from changes that promote “more meaningful social interactions” exploits a tendency for social reciprocity. Humans tend to naturally feel some level of responsibility to reciprocate social gestures. The most basic example is a smile—when someone greets me with a smile I feel an obligation to smile back, or risk being rude. A smile is an example of how this occurs naturally but Facebook is designed to generate similar feelings of obligation, which increase the amount of time a user spends. Facebook’s use of birthdays is a good example. Like tagging people in photos, Facebook makes wishing a person “happy birthday” as easy as it can be. Not only do users receive notifications reminding them of their friends’ birthdays, there is also a shortcut through the notification for writing “happy birthday” directly to a person’s wall, without having to visit their profile. For the birthday celebrant, this often leads to an onslaught of notifications
that not only function as intermittent variable rewards; they also play on social reciprocity to generate more activity. Despite Facebook’s prompting, recipients of birthday well wishes often see the messages as thoughtful gestures that deserve some kind of response. Even the language of Facebook seems to play on social reciprocity. For example, the fact that you can “invite” someone to “join” a group or like a page, rather than having to “ask” them to “support” something, likely increases the chances of a response.

At least relating to the three specific “hijacks” discussed so far, promoting more social interactions is unlikely to hinder the most impulsive uses of Facebook. More social interactions will likely lead to more notifications to act as intermittent variable rewards, especially since two out of three notification icons announce social interactions exclusively. And given that Facebook has already established methods of promoting social interaction that play on social vulnerability and a tendency toward social reciprocity, it’s easy to assume that increased promotion might do the same. In a follow-up post written on January 31st though, Zuckerberg announced that Facebook’s changes, which included a decrease in public content, had resulted in a decrease in time spent using the platform. In Zuckerberg’s words: “We made changes that reduced time spent on Facebook by an estimated 50 million hours every day to make sure people’s time is well spent. That’s how serious we are about this.” It’s an impressive number, but it’s worth asking what this actually means in terms of time spent by individual users. In this post, Zuckerberg confirmed the statistic from Zephoria Digital Marketing, which claimed that Facebook has 1.4 billion daily users. Put into context, the 50 million hour decrease
only translates to two minutes and eight seconds saved per user. For now, it would seem that any advertiser interested in gaining exposure through Facebook need not worry about a significant decrease in user engagement. In fact, considering that the changes do little to nothing to address some key causes of impulse use, advertisers can be confident that Facebook will continue to function in ways that maximize user engagement.

Zuckerberg has referred to the explosion of public content on Facebook as if it were a natural, organic occurrence. In his post on January 31st he said, “the ecosystem of public content like video, news, and posts from businesses has grown massively—to the point where it’s crowding out the personal connection people value most.” Facebook though, is absolutely complicit in this growth. In what is somewhat reminiscent of a successful Kodak campaign in the late 1800s, which advertised a product that made photography accessible to amateurs (Norris, 80), Facebook has successfully made advertising accessible to amateurs. (In fact, one click on the link to “Create Ads” reveals that every Facebook user already has an advertising account number, whether they have created any ads or not.) Consolidating the attention of so many people, as Facebook does, provides obvious advantages to anyone interested in gaining exposure—but the fact that Facebook is designed to control where that exposure occurs is primarily what allows amateurs to enjoy success in a foreign profession.

With a click on the “Advertising on Facebook” link, users arrive at the Facebook Business page and at the top; they are prompted to “Learn about Ads”. Another click and users are being sold on the value of using Facebook to advertise
because the platform “makes it easy to find the right people, capture their attention and get results.” Scroll down and the site boasts its 2 billion monthly users and claims that twenty percent of the time spent on phones in the U.S. “is on Facebook or Instagram.” (It’s worth noting that using the latter statistic as a selling point is in conflict with what the new Facebook changes supposedly aim to do.) Below this, Facebook assures that advertising can be done on any budget, which is likely especially appealing to amateurs, and then announces the ability to “choose your audience” based on a variety of characteristics. In fact, there are even three different templates for choosing audiences—“Core Audiences”, “Custom Audiences”, and “Lookalike Audiences.”

With “Core Audiences”, advertisers choose audiences based on demographics, location, interests, and behaviors. With “Custom Audiences”, advertisers target people that they’re already connected to, whether it be established customers, website visitors and mobile app users, or even friend groups from the advertisers’ personal Facebook profiles and the contact lists in their cell phones. With “Lookalike Audiences”, advertisers can target people who are “similar” to the people in any of the audiences that have already been built. In the “Choose your Audience” section, Facebook also advertises their “Facebook IQ” feature, which provides data in real time on the effectiveness of ads and on the types of people who engage with them. The advantages to the advertisers are obvious—rather than having to hire pilots to write copy in the sky or build billboards to reach the eyes of new consumers, advertisers can simply select a city they want to expand to and reach the News Feeds of its residents. Rather than feature ads in specific
magazines or on specific television shows based on the assumption that there are shared characteristics among the readers or viewers, ads can now be placed in the palms of the hands of people who have self-identified as having the ideal characteristics. And rather than having to conduct research into the effectiveness of the ads, Facebook does this for the advertisers and points them in the direction of the most receptive targets for additional campaigns. The information is enticing, yet vague—for example people can be targeted based on interests like “hobbies, favorite entertainment and more” or based on “purchase behaviors, device usage and other activities”. The information is also laced with links to begin creating an actual ad, which might be a way to encourage learning through doing.

I asked for and was given access to the “Ads Manager” page of a local liquor store, in order to see what creating an ad and targeting an audience through Facebook actually looks like. It turns out that not only is it possible to build audiences based on things like location and interests, but the price you pay determines the number of people you can expect to “reach”, which is defined as people who have “any posts from your page enter their screen”. When the liquor store pays to “Boost”, or promote an ad, they typically select “Longmont” where they’re located and eight or nine of the surrounding cities and towns. They filter their audience to include people aged 21-65+, and select around twenty interests like “Beer”, “Parties”, and “Nightlife”. These ensure that the members of their audience are local, that they’re old enough to buy alcohol, and that their profiles reveal one or more interests related to the product being sold. The result is a customized group, and the ability to pay for exposure within that group. These
particular filters resulted in an audience compiled of as many as 1.5 million members. Tinkering with the budget for the campaign revealed that $20 per day was likely to garner 1,600-6,300 people “reached”, and that $750 and $17,000 per day were likely to garner 24,000-150,000 and 220,000-1.5 million people, respectively.

The fact that people “reached” is defined as is it is cause to revisit Tristan Harris’s “hijacks.” One that hasn’t been mentioned yet is the concept of the “bottomless bowl.” Harris refers to a study by Cornell professor Brian Wansink, which found that people could be tricked into eating more soup by giving them a bowl that automatically refills. On average, the people with the bottomless bowls ate 73% more soup, and they tended to significantly underestimate how much they ate (Wansink). According to Harris, tech companies function in the same way and he uses the video auto-play feature of several websites, including Facebook, as an example. Rather than wait for users to decide if they want to keep watching videos or not, these websites automatically load related videos to prompt them to keep watching. What Harris doesn’t mention though, is that the News Feed itself functions like a bottomless bowl—it’s a never-ending stream of posts. Even if a user reaches the point where nothing new (except ads) can appear in the News Feed, Facebook will continue to load posts that the user has already seen. This prompts sustained use, however mindless it may be, and with the cost of advertising on Facebook attached to the number of times an ad enters a user’s screen, there is a tangible, financial incentive for the network to function this way.
A closer look at the numbers from the liquor store example reveals that Facebook has an incentive to feature some ads more frequently than others. Counter intuitively, the more an advertiser pays for their campaign, the more they pay per person reached. For the advertiser who could only afford $20 per day, the price per person reached was as much as 1.25 cents. For the advertiser investing $17,000 per day though, the price per person reached was as much as 6 times that, at 7.7 cents. In Zuckerberg’s posts about the changes he has planned for Facebook, he’s written disapprovingly of how the personal connections people look for on Facebook are often lost in the “crowd” of public content. Not only does he claim that the changes aim to reduce the amount of public content, he also claims that the public content that will remain will be designed to “encourage meaningful interactions”. It’s worth pointing out though, that featuring the public content from large, corporate advertising campaigns is significantly more profitable for Facebook, regardless of how much, or how little, it encourages interaction. And it’s also worth pointing out just how profitable a lost user in the crowd of public content can be. If a user is looking for a post they saw earlier for example, but can’t remember who posted, they’re likely to quickly scroll through the endless stream of posts. As they do, countless ads “enter their screen”—and Facebook can charge as much as 8 cents for each one. Rather than some organic growth, public content has exploded on Facebook because the platform has made targeting specific audiences easier than ever before, and advertisers at every scale are taking advantage of it.

Promoting more social interaction is far from a step in the opposite direction anyway—the social interactions themselves have been feeding the ad machine for
years. In 2010, Time Magazine ran a cover story about how Facebook was encouraging people to be more open, and even breeching privacy with updates that users were automatically opted-in for, because the openness was lucrative: “you can celebrate your niece’s first steps [on Facebook] and mourn the death of a close friend—but the company is making money because you are broadcasting those moments online.” From the perspective of the article, user activity is critical to making Facebook such a valuable asset to advertisers. As the article explains it, “the more updates Facebook gets you to share and the more preferences it entreats you to make public, the more data it’s able to pool for advertisers [...] The result is that advertisers are able to target you on an even more granular level.” A couple years after the article ran the author, Dan Fletcher, was hired to be the new managing editor of Facebook. His primary role was to manage Facebook Stories, which was meant to produce stories about technology in the world. When Facebook Stories turned out to be more of a branding campaign, designed to highlight the ways Facebook was helping people around the world, Fletcher resigned after only 15 months. Around the time he left, he remarked that he was confused as to why Facebook hired him to begin with, because it doesn’t need reporters—the users themselves should produce the content (Cohen). I recently had the opportunity to interview Dan Fletcher, and he offered insights into the various ways Facebook benefits advertisers.

I started by sharing my topic with him, and that I was interested in how Facebook is designed to maximize time spent on the platform. I asked if part of the push for Facebook to produce it's own content was to increase time spent. He said
he didn’t think so, that it was truly about brand reporting, but he added that Facebook is intentionally designed to produce impulsive use. “Facebook looks at two metrics really deeply,” he said. “The first one is time on site—so how much time do you actually spend inside Facebook—and the second is how frequently do you come back.” He went on to explain to me that Facebook has a scale that measures the frequency of use, and that the distribution is very unequal. People either check their Facebook once a week or less, or they check it nearly every time they look at their phone. From Fletcher’s perspective, “the entire new user onboarding experience is designed to change you from a tier one user, to a tier nine user as quickly as possible.” I asked him why he thought it was designed this way and he told me that from a business perspective, the tier nine user is much more lucrative. “The more time you spend on Facebook, the more ads they can show you, the more money they make,” he said.

Before speaking with Fletcher, I had overlooked an obvious example of an effort Facebook made to increase time spent. He explained to me that when Facebook went from a website for college kids to a website for everybody, young people started producing significantly less content—college kids don’t want to share evidence of their lifestyle with their parents. Facebook’s response was to dedicate time and energy to convincing news organizations to bring their content to the platform. The thinking was if people weren’t going to be sharing as much on Facebook, at least it could be a place for them to see the news and talk about it with their friends. Facebook did a great job of courting the news organizations, and Fletcher pointed out an interesting consequence of their success. Facebook is to
some extent, dependent on these news organizations for content however, the news organizations “no longer own their readerships, Facebook does.”

The next thing I asked about was how Facebook makes targeting specific groups easier than ever. The various groups they belong to already divide the users on Facebook, and I asked Fletcher if this was key to what makes Facebook so advantageous to advertisers. He said that while the groups we belong to probably play into Facebook’s data, it only scratches the surface of how Facebook characterizes people:

They’re tracking everything from things you share yourself, groups that you’re members of, links you click, words you use, to data that they’ve bought from third party vendors that are tracking you in other places on the web, to try to give advertisers as many different variables to target to people, as they can [...] the ways to slice and dice different audiences are truly endless. That’s why Facebook makes all its money—because it has more data on you as an individual than any other source out there and as such, has more to share with advertisers.

I told him that it seemed to me that Facebook publicly promotes its social benefits, while on the business side of things it promotes the benefits it provides advertisers. I asked if he thought Facebook really prioritizes meaningful social interaction, or if it misleads its users because social interaction is critical to the data it collects. He said he doesn’t think Facebook misleads its users—they just have to appeal to two different audiences. He said that while Facebook definitely doesn’t want users to know how much data they have on them, the platform’s argument is that users have
to see advertisements anyway, so the ads might as well be for things that interest them.

When I spoke with Fletcher the Cambridge Analytica story had just broken, and the public outcry from that makes it easy to understand why Facebook doesn’t want users to know the extent of the data. There are several reports that profiles are being deleted, and there’s no telling the financial damage the incident will cause, now that it’s out in the open. In 2013, Cambridge Analytica introduced an app that allowed them to scrape the data from hundreds of thousands of Facebook users, and the data of all of those users’ friends. The privacy breach extended beyond Facebook—all told, Cambridge Analytica claims to have collected “up to 5,000 data points on over 230 million Americans” (Zuiderveen Borgesius, 83). Particularly troubling, Cambridge Analytica was even able to scrape the call and text data from cell phones. Both Facebook and Cambridge Analytica are taking heat in the coverage but when I asked Fletcher about it, he told me that a ton of companies did exactly what Cambridge Analytica did in 2013:

The more that Facebook can make the story about Cambridge Analytica, the more they’re able to hide the fact that you don’t need to do what Cambridge Analytica did in order to do the super granular types of advertising and targeting that they’re getting in trouble for. So in my mind, the story is a way to shift the blame and the fear onto a third party, rather than keeping the focus on Facebook itself.

In a recent episode of “Real Time with Bill Mahr”, MSNBC news contributor Malcolm Nance offered his take on the situation: “I think Facebook’s getting sort of a bum rap
[...] Cambridge Analytica is the real evil villain here. I mean these guys are like James Bond evil.” Given the co-dependence that seems to exist between news organizations and Facebook, it will be interesting to see how successful Facebook is in steering the narrative.

Beyond simply enabling exposure among specific groups, Facebook has revolutionized the ability for advertisers to create the ideal groups themselves. Past examples of group making have been more limited—Ford arguably created a new market for example, but his process for creating the group didn’t exactly represent a blueprint for others to follow. Standardizing the means of production is applicable to a variety of products, but doing it doesn’t always result in the formation of a new group of consumers. And in the cases where the standardization does create a new group, the ability to create the group is exhausted once the standardization is complete. Furthermore, the type of publicity Ford enjoyed is still sometimes used to create groups out of cult followings however, the strategy is far from foolproof. Facebook enables anybody to create a group, for any reason, and the platform has had an added incentive over the last few years to make creating/joining groups as attractive and as easy as possible. As mentioned, when Facebook became a website for college kids and their parents, the site saw a significant decline in user-produced content. In addition to courting news organizations, Facebook also responded by dedicating development energy to groups. Fletcher explained to me that Facebook wanted to enable group making because people were a lot more likely to produce content if only their fellow group members could see it. Fletcher also shared
insights though, into some unexpected ways that advertisers are taking advantage of how easy group making has become.

He explained that one popular strategy for advertisers is to create a group around a current event, and then change the group name when the next, similar event takes place. This attracts people looking to talk about the event, and the group names are often aimed at creating a more homogeneous or partisan group. For example, a Parkland shooting support group might be created under the guise of advocating gun control. Then the group name can be changed, if DACA is in the news, to something that attracts users who are pro-immigration. Fletcher explained that every time the name of the group changes, members who joined under previous names aren’t removed, and they aren’t even notified of the name changes. With enough of these switches, operators can amass groups of hundreds of thousands of presumably likeminded people. Fletcher said that once a group reaches its desired size:

The operators start bombarding the group with fake news or conspiracy theories, products to sell, or affiliate links. Most people don’t understand where the stuff in News Feed comes from, and Facebook is not at all transparent about how your News Feed is calculated, so if you forget that you join a group, or the group changes its name, you may not know that the reason you’re suddenly seeing spam is because you joined a group.

With this example, users at least have to actively join a group before being susceptible to the targeted ads. Facebook is so group-friendly however, that it even allows for people to be added to groups without their consent.
Butler

Facebook users can add their friends to groups without having to ask for permission. I asked Fletcher what advantages this provides to advertisers, and if it incentivizes them to create fake user profiles. He told me that fake user profiles are created for various reasons, and that one might be created to accumulate friends and add them to groups, but that the advantages weren’t limited to that. A fake user could be created for example, to join various groups and produce ads feigning as customer reviews. In another example, military personnel are often targeted by accounts made to look like beautiful women. If the friend requests are accepted, the fake users can see Facebook posts, which might inadvertently reveal relevant information about something like movement or new deployments. I asked Fletcher if he thought that Facebook was making an effort to police this type of use of the platform and he told me that he thought so, but that it’s a difficult situation to monitor. Facebook is just too big, and there is too much to police. In fact, Fletcher told me:

There are services that exist to build fake profiles that can be bought for these purposes, and these profiles have been around for three or four years. They call them ‘aged profiles.’ They have real friends. They’ve been posting things. So it’s really tough for Facebook’s bot-detection to wrap up these profiles, because for all intents and purposes, they look like real people.

I think it’s worth noting though, that Facebook actually has an incentive to not police this kind of activity—fake user profiles can still have “ads enter the screen” so to some extent, they are just as valuable to Facebook as the real user profiles.
The advantages that Facebook provides to advertisers played a critical role in Russia’s interference with the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the abilities to create groups and fake user profiles were especially key. According to special counsel Robert Mueller’s indictment against thirteen Russian nationals, the Russians used the exact strategy that Fletcher described in order to amass large groups of like-minded people. As the indictment states:

ORGANIZATION-controlled pages addressed a range of issues, including: immigration (with group names including “Secured Borders”); the Black Lives Matter movement (with group names including “Blacktivist”); religion (with group names including “United Muslims of America” and “Army of Jesus”); and certain geographic regions within the United States (with group names including “South United” and “Heart of Texas”). By 2016, the size of many ORGANIZATION-controlled groups had grown to hundreds of thousands of online followers.

And also according to the indictment, the Russians created fake user profiles in order to expand their influence. An important component to their operation was that the profiles appeared to be operated by real people in the U.S. They took U.S. time zones and holidays into account, and wrote about issues like U.S. foreign policy and the economy. By blending in with actual Facebook users in the U.S., the Russians were able to communicate with and have influence over them, reportedly with the goal of creating “political intensity through supporting radical groups, users dissatisfied with social and economic situations, and oppositional social movements.” Facebook would probably prefer Russia to be characterized as the
villain, and in many ways it is, but much of what Russia did was simply to use Facebook exactly as it’s designed to be used.

Early efforts by the Russians included purchasing advertising through Facebook’s business page, in order to promote their own groups to specific types of people. According to the indictment, the Russians invested thousands of dollars a month in order to do this. (It’s worth noting that given the amount of money that was being invested, the ads they were producing would have been particularly profitable for Facebook to show.) They also reportedly took advantage of the tools Facebook provides to track the impact of their ads, measuring things like people “reached” and engagement with a post. The fact is, the same structure that makes Facebook so appealing to commercial advertisers also appeals to people interested in online political micro targeting, which “involves creating finely honed messages targeted at narrow categories of voters based on data analysis garnered from individuals’ demographic characteristics and consumer and lifestyle habits.” There is no website or platform that is more conducive to such a goal. While Facebook might argue that the advantages they provide to commercial advertisers lead to users seeing ads for products they’re actually interested in, such an argument might oversimplify what commercial advertisers actually intend to do. The goal of political micro targeting is often explicitly to deliver the message that is “most likely to persuade people” (Zuiderveen Borgesius, 83), and it may be naïve to assume that commercial advertisers seek anything less.
An obvious consequence of Facebook’s structure is that its users are no longer simply consumers of advertisements—the users who use Facebook Business also become the advertisers, and the ones who don’t become the products to be sold. A less obvious consequence however, is that the structure of Facebook, and the ubiquity of its use, may pose a threat to social autonomy. The theoretical work of Jean Baudrillard is helpful in explaining this point. Long before the existence of Facebook, Baudrillard wrote about a form of “controlled socialization" that could almost describe the social media platform. He described it as:

Retotalization in a homogenous space-time of all the dispersed functions of the body and of social life […], retranscription of all the contradictory currents in terms of integrated circuits. Space-time of a whole operational simulation of social life. For that, the mass of consumers must be equivalent or homologous to the mass of products. (67)

According to Baudrillard’s theory, there are three orders of simulacra. He describes the first order as “natural" and “founded on the image". An example of this might be a photograph of a tree. In this example, the simulation reproduces the image of the tree but doesn’t threaten the tree’s status as the original object. He describes the second order as “productivist, founded on energy, force, its materialization by the machine and the whole system of production.” I take this to mean the simulation inherent to the mass production of identical objects and in this example—the concept of the original becomes nonsensical. What can be considered the original, for example, of an endless stream of identical products that are simulations of each other, especially if they are all produced from a mold or a cast that is fundamentally
different from them? Baudrillard describes the third order as “simulacra of simulation” with the aim of producing “total control” (121). He uses Disneyland as an example and says that the amusement park “is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real” (12).

On Facebook, the mass of consumers has become the mass of products, and the types of products they’ve become provide another example of simulation of the second order. There are billions of user profiles that are all identical products—they all have the same value to Facebook in terms of putting ads on screens. Beyond the value to Facebook though, the profiles are fundamentally the same. Just as various materials can be poured into a mold, details from the users’ real lives can be plugged-in to create the semblance of difference, but the profiles are all produced from the same template and the users all select from the same menu of options. The semblance of difference among profiles is important on Facebook—it helps users feel like the profiles capture their individuality but more importantly, it is what allows Facebook to sell customized audiences. The fact that users can customize their profiles though, and that the process for doing so is standardized, means that the process of self-identification for billions of people has been standardized. Beyond self-identification processes though, the effect extends to social interactions more generally.

Just as Ford standardized the means of production for automobiles, Facebook has standardized the means of production for social interactions. Baudrillard may have anticipated something like this when he wrote “the meticulous operation of technology serves as a model for the meticulous operation of the social. Here as
well, *nothing will be left to chance*, moreover this is the essence of socialization, which began centuries ago, but which has now entered its accelerated phase” (34). When he says that the essence of socialization is that nothing will be left to chance, he’s speaking to the fact that the social groups we’re a part of have, for centuries, influenced our behaviors, our ideologies, and even the very conception of who we are. In a way, the limited menu of options that Facebook gives us for identifying ourselves and for interacting with each other is a model of the limited menu of options that socialization produces. Given that Facebook users represent such a large and diverse portion of the world’s population, the platform enables socialization on a global scale. Baudrillard points to the Chinese adoption of the Roman alphabet as a consequence of this kind of socialization, claiming that it signified “the ‘orbital’ instantiation of an abstract and modelized system of signs, into whose orbit all the once unique forms of style and writing will be reabsorbed” (35). Facebook is available in almost every language in the world, an effort to make the user experience feel as localized as possible, so users always communicate in their unique forms of writing. But as liking, sharing, and tagging becomes universal as a form of social interaction, it’s worth questioning which unique forms of social interaction will be reabsorbed.

If Facebook functions as a model for the social, then the platform can be seen as belonging to the third order of simulacra. Similar to how Disneyland is presented as a made-up world in order to preserve the reality principle of the world we live in, the controlled structure of the social on Facebook fosters the illusion of relative social autonomy in real life. Rather than merely serving as a point of
reference though, the social of Facebook has real implications for the social in real life. I first became interested in this topic after traveling around Europe and South America. The friends I made along the way meant that for the first time, my News Feed on Facebook had an international feel. The posts that streamed in from the various countries however, told an unexpected story. They showed that people from all over the world, people from a diversity of cultures, are exposed to the same content on Facebook—the same memes, the same viral photos and videos, the same news articles. My interview with Dan Fletcher helped me to understand why. As he explained, Facebook made a push to bring news content to the platform in response to a decline in user-produced content. The news was meant to give people something to talk about. People are much more likely to initiate conversation with each other, around the content they consume, if they’re all consuming the same content. And the content we consume is a critical factor in our socialization process—it can have tremendous influence over our behaviors, our ideologies and more.

In the context of a world full of Facebook users, the meticulous operation of technology can no longer be said to serve as a model for the meticulous operation of the social—the operations are now one in the same. When people feel like they are losing control over their own political ideologies they push back, as we’ve seen in the reaction to the Cambridge Analytica story. People have also expressed concern recently, upon finding out that political affiliations are classified on Facebook based on activity on the platform. Users can be labeled as very conservative, very liberal, or somewhere in between, and the label determines the type of political ads that the
user sees, which poses a threat to social autonomy. If a user self identifies as a political independent, for example, but gets labeled as a conservative or liberal, the content on Facebook might push that user to develop a more partisan ideology. People seem less threatened by the influence that commercial advertisers may have however; commercial advertising can be just as manipulative. Ever since advertisers began trying to create demand, rather than simply trying to secure a share of it, the focus has not been on providing information about goods that consumers need. Instead, advertisers have focused on persuading consumers, by any means necessary, that they need the goods to begin with, or that the goods will enhance their lives. From a Baudrillard scholar:

Baudrillard’s explanation of advertising begins from the observation that advertising sets itself the task supplying information about particular objects and promoting their sale however, he insists that there is no such thing as advertising that is restricted to the supplying of information, rather advertising exists to persuade and to awaken desires that consumption cannot ultimately satisfy. (Smith, 7)

Even if Facebook starts to crackdown on the ways that users’ political ideologies can be manipulated, there should still be concern about how easy the platform makes it for commercial advertisers to accomplish similar goals.
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