Book Review

The Daily You: How the new advertising industry is defining your identity and you worth

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Joseph Turow’s *The Daily You* takes us behind-the-scenes of the advertising industry to get a better sense of not just how its capitalistic rationale is put into practice, but its potential impact on individuals in a consumer society. While readers are probably most familiar with his *Breaking Up America* (1997), this current book is a more natural development of its 2006 antecedent, *Niche Envy*. Indeed *The Daily You* contains familiar arguments Turow has made previously about marketing discrimination and profiling in a digital age, but this book delves further into the actual mechanics and end-goals of how advertising companies gather data, profile people, and try to follow ‘valuable’ individuals across as many possible geographic locations and devices as possible.

This ‘massive stealth effort in social profiling’ (p. 1) may be hardly noticeable to most people, but Turow’s argument is that we need greater awareness of how this data-based revolution is shaping our lives, as marketers perform ‘a highly controversial form of social profiling and discrimination by customizing our media content on the basis of marketing reputations we don’t even know we have’ (p. 2). Turow has clearly done his homework, conducting in-depth interviews with a bevy of insiders to gain insights into firms familiar to us all (Microsoft, Google) as well as increasingly powerful media buying and data aggregating ‘boutique’ firms (eXelate, BlueKai) of which we should probably be more aware. It makes for disquieting reading as Turow outlines how ‘targets’ and ‘waste’ are unsympathetically determined in a digital world, irrespective of privacy or ‘snooping’ restrictions. Many readers will find equally troublesome his evidence that in the current fiscal climate, traditional media outlets are increasingly sacrificing their ethics and adapting content to meet the demands of advertisers.

The title of the book is set against Nicholas Negroponte’s idea of an empowered ‘daily me’ and similar academic accounts from recent years outlining the democratic potential of new media technologies. While Turow doesn’t deny this possibility, his point is that these small waves of liberation offer little comfort against the tide of a ‘media-buying system that is the prime mover in the emerging digital world’ (p. 18). Turow digs beneath the simple rhetoric of capitalism to reveal its (increasingly-sophisticated) mechanisms such that by the end of the book industry concepts like cost per mille (CPM), advertising exchanges, and reputation silos are all familiar. His detailed and systematic explanations give a real sense how these potentially alienating marketing strategies are operationalized in practice.

The book starts off by explaining, ‘The Power Under the Hood’ (Ch. 1), making its core argument that while there is much public concern about privacy on the net, there is little attention or concern about the forces that actually cause it. From there the book outlines some of the techniques of data tracking and aggregation looking at ‘Clicks and Cookies’ (Ch. 2) before getting into the question of the relative power of different advertisers, corporations, publishers, and media buyers in ‘A New Advertising Food Chain’ (Ch. 3). ‘Targets or Waste’ (Ch. 4) examines the specifics of ‘targeted personalization’ (p. 93), a form of social discrimination, according to Turow. Chapter 5 engages in predictive theorizing, positing that the trajectory of these changes leads to a world where ‘the principle of personalization will no longer be applied just to advertisement but will shape news, information, and entertainment as well’ (p. 112). The point of these chapters is to demonstrate the decreasing control of citizens and limited clout of content providers (i.e. the news industry) on the web. Individuals remain largely ignorant of how effectively they are followed and profiled online,
while publishers find themselves personalizing content based on database-driven advertising logics, and creating ‘privacy policies to hide particulars of buyers’ audience-tracking and targeting activities’ (p. 87). This culminates in ‘The Long Click’ (Ch. 6), which outlines the utopian future for advertisers: using social, locative, predictive and continuously aggregated data to build profiles that allow marketers to serve ‘customers personalized commercial messages at the moment of sale, what Proctor and Gamble calls the “moment of truth”; and convince them to swipe their frequent-shopper card, credit card, or debit card to complete the gauntlet—and offer up more data’ (p. 139).

If the cumulative effect of the first six chapters is one of resigned inevitability, a note of optimism creeps in for the concluding chapter. In it, Turow outlines possible remedies or defences against the inexorable death march of advertising’s hold on the web. In essence, these boil down to increased literacy beginning at an early age and better government oversight (pp.197-200).

While extremely detailed and systematic, Turow’s argumentation is not faultless. His early assertion is that the dominant focus on content in advertising is misguided, yet he somewhat contradicts this with a repeated emphasis on discriminatory advertising exposure as the key risk of increased advertising control. If Turow is worried that people’s feelings of self-worth will be determined by what they see and encounter online, surely this is an argument for the importance of content? In addition, sociocultural context is crucial in identity-formation and sometimes Turow may overstate the primacy of economic control of the media in this process, and perhaps media itself. At a talk Turow gave on this book, I and the other respondent, Liz Moor, noted that The Daily You sometimes seems to posit media as a cause, rather than a dynamic symptom of identity. Being targeted with ‘trashy’ advertisements may not make a person self-define themselves as of lesser worth. Indeed, it is far more likely they are quite aware of their socioeconomic standing and that the media messages they encounter online are simply further evidence of this status (along with housing, schooling, and many other more present and central everyday reminders). The economic control of advertising and production surely matters, and Turow is correct to point it out, but the other panels of the communication triptych – reception and content – are equally important to complete the full picture.

To be fair, this is a minor shortcoming largely derived from the necessity of stabilizing the object of study, and in terms of gaining a much-needed investigation into the machinations and logics of digital advertising culture, The Daily You is a thoroughly-researched insight. This timely book does an exceptional job convincing us of the sheer breadth, depth and sophistication of the information being collected, collated, and circulated about us. Turow’s provocative arguments about privacy and the downsides of personalized informational landscapes wisely alert us to question the structural (dis)empowerment that potentially underlies the more positive potentialities of new media.