Power without responsibility

Digital giants, data and behaviour

Given the wall-to-wall coverage of Brexit, few other issues have made much of an impact on UK news recently. One exception is stories about the role of social media companies. Martin Holborn considers the issues that have prompted a renewed concern about their influence.

Recent news stories about social media have included concerns about the death in 2017 of 14-year-old Molly Russell, who apparently took her own life after viewing material about self-harm on Instagram. There has also been coverage of a campaign to ensure media companies enforce minimum age limits, as well as ongoing concern about the use of data by tech companies in political campaigns. Important new sociological research has also looked at the way companies gather and use data on individuals.

A greater threat?

Sociologists studying deviance and mass media have often cautioned that it is difficult to demonstrate that the media cause harmful behaviour since so many factors can influence behaviour. However, perhaps digital media pose more of a threat than other types of media.

Unlike traditional mass media, digital media companies and platforms such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter have unparalleled opportunity to harvest data from individuals.

Such data can extend to information about their tastes, preferences, interests, political views, physical movements and so on. This information can come from individuals’ browsing history, posts, ‘likes,’ answers to online quizzes, and even their physical movements and conversations (which can be recorded by GPS systems and smart speakers).
Exploiting personal data

Using and selling these data is vital to the business model of digital media companies. Algorithms can then be used to target advertisements and other material at individuals based on computer analysis of the data to predict their future behaviour and identify the most effective ways to influence this.

These abilities have been exploited in politics. During the Brexit referendum, for example, Cambridge Analytica used such data to target individualised political advertising at potential leave voters (Beer, 2018).

Because digital media companies can change the virtual environment which people experience, and this experience is increasingly important (especially perhaps for young people), they may be able to manipulate behaviour, psychological states and beliefs (whether consumer behaviour or voting behaviour) to a greater extent than any previous media.

Surveillance capitalism

This possibility is central to the discussion in a recent bestseller, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, by the US sociologist Shoshana Zuboff (2019). This book claims that a new type of capitalism, surveillance capitalism, is developing in which the tech giants have turned information about the users of digital media into a new commodity, largely without seeking permission or taking responsibility for the way the information is used.

The information harvested by tech companies such as Facebook is what Zuboff calls a ‘behavioural surplus’ and it can even be used to manipulate people’s movements as well as other types of behaviour.

An example of this is the game Pokémon Go, which requires players to visit particular locations in order to capture virtual creatures they can then ‘train.’ Free to play (though you can purchase add-ons), the creators make most of their money through selling Pokémon locations to businesses such as Starbucks and McDonald’s so that more people would visit their outlets.

Challenging the tech giants

Zuboff sees the ability of digital media companies to manipulate behaviour with little regulation, or even debate about invasion of people’s privacy, as a threat to democracy, but resistance to them is growing. For example, in a rare victory for individuals over the digital media giants, the parents of Molly Russell persuaded Instagram to ban graphic material on suicide and self-harm from their site (Marsh and Waterson, 2019).

The battle over personal data seems likely to be an ongoing source of controversy in years to come and, like Brexit, how it turns out will undoubtedly have a major impact on the sort of society we live in for decades to come.

Questions

Listen to the 4 February 2019 edition of *Start the Week*, in which Shoshana Zuboff discusses *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* with Andrew Marr and others. It is available at [www.tinyurl.com/y2343lxw](http://www.tinyurl.com/y2343lxw). As you listen, answer the following questions:

1. What is Zuboff’s new model of capitalism?
2. What sort of data do tech companies gather, how do they collect them and what do they use them for?
3. What are the dangers of surveillance capitalism, according to Zuboff?

Weblinks

Read an article about the power of social media data here: [www.tinyurl.com/yxoq3n6f](http://www.tinyurl.com/yxoq3n6f)

You can read a *Guardian* report on Instagram’s change of policy on self-harm imagery here: [www.tinyurl.com/y8uxtup7](http://www.tinyurl.com/y8uxtup7)

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