Let's Just Kill The Advertising Industry

William Gillis

December 31st, 2011

I was watching Redbeard's presentation from 28c3 summarizing the current context of corporate datatrawling and not for the first time it struck me just how wrongheaded and wasteful the standard radical/hacker kvetching about public sharing is. I mean, I get it. It would be great if people thought more about all the knickknacks of personal information they put in essentially public spaces and it would be fucking wonderful if they avoided putting it all directly in the hands of centralized servers run by big corporations like Google and Facebook. And there's some serious late-game efforts to try and provide users with alternatives that encourage and facilitate more consciousness about privacy. But by and large that ship has sailed. Hell, it was pretty much a done thing back in prehistory (ie the 90s). Address books on Hotmail = we're fucked. We might be able to win back some ground in the future, but it's going to be an uphill battle.

Here's the thing: I don't like uphill battles where we can bypass them altogether. (Especially when we've had a hard enough time fighting various *downhill* battles when the tech and the math was

outright in our favor.) Datatrawling is a legit concern, especially for resistance movements. But it's important to note that while obviously the state stands to gain a lot, the main impetus for development on this front has arisen from advertising concerns. Yes, to many users the slippery slope of openness that's been generated by social networking is a feature not a bug. Yet Google and Facebook have played no small role actively encouraging it in hopes that they'll be able to monetize on it with better targeting for advertisers.

I want to stop and examine that: *Their whole empire is predicated on the assumption that advertising dollars are even a thing.*

But openness is antithetical to a core presupposition of advertising: people are susceptible to suggestion and anecdote because they don't have enough information–or time to process that information–when it comes to purchasing choices. Forget everything you've learned about madison avenue manipulations. Those manipulations are only possible when people have any reason to pay attention. Build a box that delivers all the relevant information and perfectly sorts through it in an easily manageable way and any form of advertising starts to look like laughable shucksterism. Who are you trying to fool? Why aren't you content to let your product speak for itself?

In this sense much of the fertile territory being seized by Google is detrimental in the long run to one of its core income sources. As search improves and our instincts adapt to it there's simply no reason to click on the 'featured product' getting in the way of our actual results. The more intuitive, streamlined and efficient our product comparison the less need there is to pay any attention to anything else. And if the app providing our results is tampered with then we can swap to another app. Walk into any given store with its inventory already listed and analyzed on our phone. Of course advertising covers more than just price comparisons between laundry detergents, but there's no end to what can be made immediately transparent. "How cool is this product with a certain subculture or

circle of my friends?" "Give me a weighted aggregate of consumer reports highlighting the ups and downs." "List common unforeseen complexities and consequences." "How would I go about navigating the experience of changing checking accounts?" Et cetera. Every conceivable variable. With ease of interface and sufficient algorithmic rigor one can easily recognize a tipping point.

Algorithms trawling for greater targeting power on the part of advertisers are jumping at comparatively trivial increases in efficiency with serious diminishing returns. (And insofar as new understandings might inform actual development/policy wouldn't that a good thing?) Further, taken in a broad view, the issues of complexity to such datatrawling and analysis leans to the favor of consumers because there's simply far more of us than there are sellers. Relatively simple advances in consumer analysis of sellers would drastically turn the tables against advertisers and corporate bargaining advantage in general. In such light their current golden age of analysis is but one last rich gasp.

In no way do I mean to underplay the threat posed by governments themselves, who surely have a huge investment in the establishment of institutions like Facebook and or projects like that of Palantir. At the end of the day they will remain a threat and continue working on these kinds of projects. But the context they're operating in makes a big difference. The NSA isn't going to cut Facebook a check to keep it afloat. The government simply doesn't have the kind of money that the private sector is putting in to distort the development of norms in social networking / communications in the first place. Those are slippery cultural / user-interface issues that are far too complex for the state to navigate with requisite nuance.

The sooner we take it upon ourselves to kill the advertising industry the less time it'll have to build weapons for the state.

Sure, like our current struggle to kill the IP Industry, it'll be a fight that'll last a while and involve complex cultural/political campaigns alongside purely technical ones. But at core it'll be a down-

hill battle for us. Easier to spread information–both technologically and culturally–than to contain it.

Such a push would provide a number of agorist benefits too. Both through the integration of projects like this that empower the counter-economy, and through the further development of dual-power anarchist justice systems like those longstanding radical listservs that disseminate information on and track rapists and abusers, forcing them to accountability through organized dissociation or at the very least warning others. At the end of the day the wider availability of public information is a good thing. In any society we need to be able to convey and measure trust on various things in various ways. It's an old trusim: just because institutions of power have seized monopolistic control over certain functions of civil society, perverted them and threatened us with them, doesn't always mean we should entirely turn against or seek to abolish those root functions themselves.