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Gendering the commodity audience in social media

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Commodification and gender in social media

Social media is a term typically used to describe a host of web-based technologies that support communication and interaction between people, or users, who both communicate using these technologies and contribute to the creation of online content. Media scholars examining social media platforms from the perspective of gender might well study the ways in which gender and sexuality influence communication behaviors, identity play, and self-promotion and branding (Consalvo and Paasonen 2002). In these respects, social media technologies can be seen as platforms for creativity and communication, as exemplified in websites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram. But these sites also are corporations seeking to turn a profit. The way that social media sites function as corporations is the starting point for a gendered analysis of social media's political economy.

This chapter employs a feminist political economy approach to examine how the business practices of social media, especially advertising, work to construct users as gendered commodities. Generally speaking, the political economy tradition of studying communications and the media attends to the impact of economic structures such as media ownership, government policy, and advertising models on communication as a political and social instrument of power (McChesney 2000). A feminist political economy adds to this broad perspective an understanding of economic structures as fundamentally gendered. In seeing the politics of media ownership, government policymaking, and advertising practices as following not only class divisions but also the deep-seated gender divisions that organize social relations, feminist political economy highlights the central role that gender plays in arrangements of labor (Mosco *et al.* 2008). Accordingly, the economic structures that underlie social media platforms show how these platforms are not just spaces in which gendered identities might be explored, but business models that create particular gendered identities in the interest of capital.

Typically, the business models of most major social media platforms involve advertising, where services are provided without cost so long as users look at advertisements and agree to a set of terms and conditions that allow for the

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collection of their information. In this context, advertising takes on new dimensions in addition to the familiar model from earlier print media or television—advertisers can know significantly more about the people using social media websites, since users share their personal and behavioral information as a condition of signing up for and using the service.

The practice whereby advertisers gain access to user data on social media websites is known as data-mining. As a market research strategy, data-mining involves the large-scale collection of the personal information that users disclose as part of participating in social media. This personal information is then aggregated so that no one is personally identifiable (i.e. it cannot be used to single out individual users), but it can show overall trends among user demographics, interests, and preferences (Chung and Grimes 2005). Broader trends within the aggregated data are used in turn to construct profiles of particular user groups, including gendered user groups, so that they may be targeted more precisely by advertisers. As advertiser-supported platforms, commercial social media websites are fundamentally built on sophisticated data-mining as their central business model (boyd and Ellison 2008; Cohen 2008). More recently, the construction of user profiles based on aggregate data has gone a step further by attempting to predict users' future consumer behavior through collecting not only personal information, but behavioral information. In this version of data-mining, known as behavioral advertising (Stallworth 2010), tracking technologies pick up how many times a user visits a particular site, or uses a particular search term, or clicks on a particular hyperlink, as part of making predictions about what kinds of consumption patterns a group of users is likely to engage in over time.

In this context, the person using social media websites becomes part of the system of exchange that supports these apparently “free” online services. The user's role in this system can be understood through Vincent Mosco's (2009) theory of “immanent commodification.” Commodification is the process whereby something—an object, a piece of information, an idea, a creative work, a service, and so on—gets transformed into a good or service with a certain exchange value, as determined by market economics. Mosco looks at how social media platforms covertly deploy “new measurement and surveillance technologies to expand the production of media commodities,” so that users' content, communications, personal information, and online behavior all become commodified automatically (2009: 143). For instance, mechanisms for collecting information about users, such as cookies, flash cookies, beacons, log files, and deep packet inspection, to name a few, inherently involve packaging the data collected so that it can be exchanged at market value (Shade and Shepherd forthcoming). Advertisers are keenly interested in measuring this social media user data, because it allows them to target specific groups of users with relevant ads in the most efficient, and profitable, manner.

At the same time that immanent commodification works to turn users into commodities or products for exchange, mechanisms like target marketing and behavioral advertising classify these user-commodities differentially. For example, as mentioned above, target marketing involves organizing aggregate data into discrete profiles based on demographics, interests, and preferences. Joseph Turow, citing the profiles constructed by marketing company Axiom, notes how the company's collection of segmented consumer groups like “Corporate Clout,” “Soccer and SUVs,” “First

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Digs,” and “Single City Strugglers” creates added value for its clients by arranging customers along a spectrum of income levels and lifestyles (2011: 97).

Taking target marketing a step further, behavioral advertising constructs such user groups based on predictive measures of how they might behave as consumers. So extensive are these constructed user groups that they enable advertisers to anticipate and thus shape users’ needs, tastes, and purchasing habits differentially. Because of this, behavioral advertising is also referred to as “online profiling” (Stallworth 2010: 478). The differential treatment of users in social media advertising practices is not just reflective of what users are doing, but it seeks to construct their ideal consumption behaviors from the advertisers’ point of view. Such constructions of ideal user profiles tend to follow certain prevailing stereotypes; this chapter focuses on gender stereotypes in particular to examine how users are constituted as gendered commodities through social media.

The (gendered) commodity audience

Audience power is produced, sold, purchased and consumed, it commands a price and is a commodity.

(Smythe 1981: 256)

While social media platforms fundamentally constitute users as commodities in sophisticated and detailed ways, the mechanism of user or audience commodification is not entirely new. In all advertiser-supported commercial media, advertisers seek access to audiences, which they effectively rent from publishers, broadcasters, or platforms (Jhally and Livant 1986: 125). These audiences become more valuable to advertisers the more specific they are, and so media industry players have increasingly sought to gain more precise information on the make-up and behavior of audiences in order to deliver particular target markets to advertisers.

Describing the advertiser-supported media platform of television in the 1970s and early 1980s, political economist Dallas Smythe formulated the “audience commodity” as the chief product of culture industries (1977, 1981). His theory addressed what he noted was a “blindspot” in the study of communications that focused on how the culture industries produced texts, as opposed to looking at the production of audiences. Smythe instead argued that a media text, for example a television program, is only the “free lunch” that entices viewers to watch (1981: 242–3). The viewers themselves are the product being bought and sold within the commodity exchange system. Advertisers spend their money to access audiences and thus harness audience power as a kind of labor—a notion that Sut Jhally and Bill Livant (1986) further expanded upon in their account of how exactly watching television advertisements constitutes a kind of work.

Smythe’s theory captures how viewers are engaged in a labor of watching advertisements, where their viewing power is produced and circulated through the economies of ratings systems. Television ratings perform the function of segmenting audiences through demographic information as well as behavioral information. For instance, in the 1980s, the television ratings firm Nielsen introduced “people meters,” a device attached to a household television set that encouraged individual

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family members to punch in and out as a measure of how much they were watching (Jhally and Livant 1986: 139). Nielsen and other ratings firms then used this data on audience demographics and viewing habits to describe and in fact create segmented niche markets for advertisers to target by situating their ads in the most effective timeslots and programming environments.

Crucially, as Eileen Meehan (1986) underscores in her revision of Smythe's theory in what she calls the "commodity audience," ratings systems also serve to classify and categorize viewers according to gendered lines. The gathering and combination of demographic and behavioral data by firms like Nielsen, she argues, is far from a neutral practice (Meehan 1984). In the first place, ratings firms seek to measure consumers with disposable income to spend on advertised products, and so only higher-income households are measured. Second, the measurement and creation of desired audience groups do not necessarily follow actual viewing, but instead arise from power dynamics between television networks, ratings firms, and advertisers. In this way, as ratings firms negotiate market dynamics in their active construction of the most desirable audience, they transform groups of viewers into differential commodities, where "noneconomic assumptions undergird beliefs about what sorts of people *ought* to be the audience" (Meehan 2002: 217, emphasis in original). Moreover, the clerical work of measuring audiences was typically performed by low-status, female employees, who comprised the backstage of ratings that valued certain audience groups following "familiar patterns of discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, social status, sexual orientation, and age" (Meehan 2002: 215–17).

The process of transforming audiences into gendered commodities relies on asymmetrical market relations, and especially on the imbalance of power in the culture industries between ratings firms and viewers. In the case of television, ratings firms enjoy a relative monopoly over the practice of collecting and packaging audience data (Smythe 1977: 4–5). Meehan affirms that ratings monopolies construct audiences and their labor as "truly *manufactured* commodities whose content depend[s] on changing power relations within that market" (2002: 215, emphasis in original). These power relationships are reflected in the differential demand for certain ratings results, where a need for a common system of measurement—one that hierarchically organizes different audiences according to market value—produces monopolistic tendencies (Meehan 1993: 387–9). For example, Nielsen enjoys a relative monopoly over television ratings because the firm has succeeded in producing the ratings that advertisers want, ratings that are mostly artificially manufactured based on noneconomic assumptions about audience value. As such, ratings do not simply measure audiences but create them as commodities, reflecting gendered assumptions in demography that work to segment audiences according to institutionalized sexism (Meehan 2002: 217). In this way, the audience as commodity is always already gendered as a condition of the existing gendered constructions of meaning that take place within structures of capital accumulation.

Social media users as gendered commodities

The concept of the gendered commodity audience, developed in relation to television viewing, can be mapped productively onto the context of social media. Here,

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audience members become users—an important terminological shift that signals some of the key differences between television viewing and participation in social media platforms that are important to account for in adapting the commodity audience to this new context. Examining the qualitative changes in the commodity audience from television to social media—where audience members have become users, programming has become site content, ratings systems have become data-mining, and narrowcasting has become target marketing—sheds light on how gendered assumptions work in the system of immanent commodification that characterizes commercial social media.

Audience as users

When cast as users of networked technologies, the people that once comprised audience members are imbued with an implicit sense of agency, as “active internet contributors” (van Dijck 2009: 41; Livingstone 2004). But at the same time that the term “user” implies an active use of online media platforms, it still, like “audience,” avoids any connotation of the gendered labor involved in social media participation. Jhally and Livant contend that “when the audience watches commercial television it is working for the media” (1986: 135), and the work that audiences do often follows gendered patterns. Even more so than television audience members, social media users function as workers who look at (and click on) advertisements that are targeted to specific gendered audiences, but they are also, crucially, suppliers of personal information and producers of content—particularly on a platform like Facebook, where members must disclose personal information at the outset in order to use the site, and then provide an overwhelming amount of site content as a function of their participation.

The additional layer of user labor required to populate Facebook with content adds to the complexity of the gendered commodity audience in social media, where user viewing or clicking power is bought and sold in the exchanges between the site and its advertising partners. At the same time that viewing power becomes commodified, much as it did in the context of television, the productive or creative power of Facebook users also is ripe for commercial appropriation. Consider, for example, the clauses in Facebook’s Terms of Service—recently renamed its “Statement of Rights and Responsibilities”—that allow the company to retain a “non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license” over all content posted to the site (Facebook 2012). Facebook can appropriate users’ images and text legally as part of its profit motive, and so user creativity and intellectual property become commodified along with viewing power. As Fernando Bermejo puts it with regard to online search engines, the market for viewing power has been transformed into a wider market for words in a “global language auction” (2009: 150). On Facebook, global language and image transactions contribute to the site’s profit margins, while the labor of producing that content gets downplayed as everyday communication behavior among users. At the same time, the real access and privilege in digital labor remain with the mainly young, white, male “innovators” of social media platforms, like Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg or Google’s Larry Page and Sergey Brin.

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Moreover, the licensing agreement enshrined in Facebook's Terms further amplifies the division between user labor and the platform "owners" by invoking the legal language of End User License Agreements—the standard legal contracts that delimit the rights of users once they have agreed to use a particular software. By framing Facebook users as "end users" who contractually agree to use the service as-is, without being able to modify it, the term "user" invites a legal way of limiting people's agency and obscuring their labor. This practice of obscuring the labor involved in creating content for Facebook recalls the way that women's labor, typically performed in domestic settings, has long been obscured by cultural, ideological, and legal means (Fortunati 2007). Housework, cooking, and providing care are feminized and thus devalued as "shadow labour," despite their integral function in capitalist accumulation (Weeks 2007: 237). Yet, like women who work often invisibly to main the cycle of reproduction and production, user labor on Facebook is elided in order to keep the site viable as a communication network predicated upon the site content that users contribute.

Programming as site content

Smythe famously characterized television programming as the "free lunch" that would draw audiences to watch advertisements. As Jhally and Livant further elaborate, it is not enough for the programming to be generally appealing to audiences, it must also provide the right environment for advertisements: "Advertisers seek compatible programming vehicles that stress the life-styles of consumption" (1986: 140). These lifestyles of consumption are gendered through the ways that programming targets certain audiences, where soap operas offer the quintessential example of programming that was developed as a vehicle for soap ads targeted toward "housewives" (Brown and Barwick 1988: 76). On a site like Facebook, the programming or content would seem to be less deliberate than television programming, given that, in theory, users can add whatever they wish to their profiles that constitute the network. In fact, there are a number of restrictions on the content added to Facebook, as outlined in the site's Community Guidelines and policed by both users who flag certain items as well as employees who proactively seek out and remove any content deemed "unacceptable"—with detailed guidelines around nudity, violence, hate speech, self-harm, and harassment, for example (Gillespie 2012).

Excepting these instances of unacceptable content, users enjoy relative freedom to add whatever they wish to their Facebook profiles and communicative exchanges. Yet the site does employ certain design elements that encourage an environment conducive to advertising. For instance, one of the site's trademarks is the "like" button, which allows users to "like" any content posted to site. The "like" button appears underneath wall posts, photos, and videos, and also underneath sponsored posts and sidebar advertisements. Moreover, the like button extends beyond Facebook itself to be integrated across many different websites for news content, e-commerce, and multimedia. The prevalence of the "like" button, along with its ease of use—just pressing "like" as opposed to formulating and writing a response in the comment box—fosters an environment of positive endorsement. There is no option to "dislike" or even to "not care"; liking something effectively feeds into the

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commodification structure of the site as part of users' labor of endorsement that takes place in a positive atmosphere.

Endorsement on Facebook is further supported by the individual user's personal profile as the unit of reputation that lends weight to the "like" button, by attaching a "like" to someone's identity (McGeeveran 2009). Users' identities get associated with certain products, for example through clicking "like" on an e-commerce site outside of Facebook, or even certain life stages, through liking the activities of friends getting married or having children. That endorsement data is in turn connected to the vast stores of information that is networked through the site. So, for example, liking a Facebook friend's baby photos can lead to targeted ads for baby-related products, especially for women Facebook users who are listed as "married" (Delo 2012). The construction of Facebook users as commodities thus follows the patterns established more broadly in consumer targeting that naturalizes heteronormative gender roles, with the addition of much finer personal and behavioral information.

Ratings systems as data-mining

Given that users actively construct the content of a site like Facebook within the site's structure, which not only encourages a positive atmosphere of endorsement through the like button but also solicits explicitly gendered autobiographical narratives through the unit of the profile, the data to be gleaned from users represents both a quantitative and qualitative change from the data gathered through television ratings systems. Nielsen's "people meter" accounted for what programs each family member was watching and for how long; Facebook compiles personal information about users' identity, location, work, and education, along with preferences in books, music, film, and activities, as articulated among an entire network of "friends," situated within the user's photographs, wall posts, messages, and event pages, and complemented with behavioral data on her or his "likes," clicks on hyperlinks or advertisements, and search terms. And because all of these pieces of information are transmitted digitally, they leave traces that are generated automatically and persist potentially indefinitely (Bermejo 2009: 143). Such an exponential expansion in the quantity, quality, and durability of user data means that commodification on social media sites takes place at an accelerated rate and happens immanently to participation in these sites.

When compared to this context of "big data" and increasingly sophisticated technologies for harnessing that data through the valorization of online surveillance (Cohen 2008), the television ratings systems of the past appear clumsy and quaint. But at the same time, the ways in which television audiences were segmented along gendered lines was not strictly empirical, as Meehan points out, but was a function of ratings companies' creation of particular audience groups (Meehan 2002: 215). While data-mining techniques may involve greater precision, the "exact and dispassionate measurement of audiences" remains somewhat fictional (Caraway 2011: 699). In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that the gendered segmentation of television audiences continues to influence marketers in social media. Much like the Axiom consumer profiles described by Turow, obvious gender stereotypes guide the naming of specific gendered groups for Facebook's data management partner

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Datalogix, especially in groups like “Soccer Moms,” “Green Consumers,” and “Sports Fans” (Datalogix 2012). In turn, the categorizations of such groups based on gender (and also other stereotypical features of class, race, ethnicity, and age) function as a kind of discrimination by assigning differential value to these different target markets.

Narrowcasting as target marketing

Organizing user groups into target markets finds its precedent in the narrowcasting strategies of cable television in the 1980s, where the gap between programming and advertising content was increasingly blurred by the targeting of both toward specific audience groups, often marked by gender (Jhally and Livant 1986: 140). Yet different audience groups were not created equally in this new television landscape, where the more valuable audiences—usually comprised of white, higher-income, male viewers—were the ones who were measured by ratings meters and thus the ones who set the benchmark market value for audience power (Meehan 1990: 132). “Narrowcasting’s very foundation rests on hegemonic structuring” (Smith-Shomade 2004: 74).

In the age of online social media, this hegemonic structuring of targeted markets takes on much more detailed and sophisticated contours, where individual users may themselves be split into several niche interest groups. This micro-segmentation of the online commodity audience reflects what Tiziana Terranova traces as the way that, as broadcasting gave way to narrowcasting, narrowcasting has now given way to pointcasting—online advertisers target sub-individual units (2004: 34). But in the same manner as narrowcasting, the segmentation of user groups in pointcasting is both productive and discriminatory; pointcasting does not just reflect user desires, it produces them in ways that are differential according to already existing structures of privilege. For example, the user profiles that underlie the targeting of specific content to specific user groups also result in price and marketing discrimination (Danna and Gandy 2002). In a process known as “weblining,” data-mining firms like Datalogix organize the information collected through Facebook into profile groups based on income, such as “Homeowner Status,” “Presence of Children,” and “Credit Card Buyers” (Datalogix 2012). In turn, these groups are presented with differential pricing or different products, based on their perceived spending power. As Anthony Danna and Oscar Gandy point out, this unfair treatment tends to involve discrimination against lower-income groups, non-whites, and women; this discrimination is particularly troubling when it extends beyond the ability to make consumer choices into the ability to access information in the public sphere (2002: 383).

Conclusion: the social impact of gendered commodification

Returning to the concept of the gendered commodity audience is crucial in the context of social media, when not only consumer behavior but public and political behavior is increasingly shaped by social media as a key information infrastructure. When people get their information through sites like Facebook or Twitter, the way that they encounter and negotiate commodification can have far-reaching consequences. As Meehan once said of Smythe, “By looking first at Smythe’s formulations in light

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of political economic research on the ratings industry, one finds that Smythe's basic claims have survived the tests of time and research" (1993: 379). The same might be said of Meehan today, when it is increasingly important to examine audience or user commodification from the point of view of social media labor and data collection processes that are fundamentally gendered.

While certain qualifications must be made around the gendered commodity audience when transposed from the context of television to that of social media—where audience members have become users, programming has become site content, ratings systems have become data-mining, and narrowcasting has become target marketing—the continuities between these media environments are significant. The widespread popularity of television forms a necessary precondition for the advertising environment of the web, where looking at advertisements is a long-quotidian practice and advertising is naturalized as the most efficient profit model for delivering “free” programming. This continuity between television and social media highlights how, while social media platforms often present themselves as general “means of survival,” their use is designed to serve their own profit interests (Fuchs 2012: 703).

Like Smythe's initial contention about the audience commodity addressing a “blindspot” in the study of political economy, the gendered commodity audience contributes a consideration of commodification as the underlying structure of social media. Forging links between users' everyday online behaviors and the larger substrates that shape those behaviors and profit from them, the gendered commodity audience concept brings to light commodification processes that tend to be invisible in practice (Manzerolle and Smeltzer 2011: 334). Users function as commodities in social media sites, but are also laborers, performing the free labor necessary to uphold the advertising system as well as the content of the sites themselves (Terranova 2004; Cohen 2008; Fuchs 2012). In thinking about users as workers, and particularly as gendered workers within a system of differential commodification, the gendered commodity audience continues to be a productive framework for attending to ideological dimensions of the political economy of communication.

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