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13 Tracking the Audience

Personal Information and Privacy

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Since the end of World War II, our technology has given us many boons, but it has clearly also given us the potential for previously unimagined control over personal freedom. The recent explosion of computer technology has turned Orwell's "Big Brother" into a potential everyday reality. Anyone who has ever used a credit card or subscribed to a magazine has probably received solicitations targeted specifically to his or her socioeconomic status. This means that the subscriber has become a "profile" constructed from past purchases and interests. If Big Brother isn't watching, corporate interests surely are.

In this chapter Gandy, taking a tack very different from Ang's in Chapter 12, explores the current status of personal information and privacy from the perspective of audience analysis and political economy. He especially examines the close relationship between media industries and the consumption promoted by advertisers (compare Chapter 19, by Douglas Kellner). He points out that media industries consider the attention a person pays to a TV screen during the few seconds of an ad to be a "product" sold by the broadcasting company to advertisers. He also argues that the time the audience spends viewing commercials is its "labor." He then reviews the different means of monitoring audiences, including the increasingly precise

ways advertisers target audiences, and describes the effect this capitalistic "logic" has on democracy and personal freedom.

In the United States, audiences—especially television audiences—are monitored to a very high degree. The industry view of audience as product explains the mundane paradox of why popular programs with respectable ratings sometimes disappear: Despite their size, the audiences are not the ones advertisers want. On the other hand, networks may continue to air programs that generate smaller-than-average audiences if those audiences are the kinds that advertisers covet.

Audience measurement, a form of surveillance in the pursuit of expanded profits, takes place electronically and continuously. The goal is to fine-tune the mechanisms of "audience production." Computer technology makes it easy to match viewing behaviors with other consumer information, such as food purchases, and consumer behavior can be linked to a household's viewing patterns. Cereal advertisers can learn whether children who like comedy shows prefer crunchiness more than kids who like action/adventure programs. Improvements in the technology of "addressability" permit advertisers to reach target audiences with ever-increasing accuracy.

How concerned we should be about the movement toward greater control and management of audiences depends upon our expectations of a democratic society. Computer-based systems of audience assessment weaken the balance of power between individuals and business or government organizations. Now that both government and corporate bureaucracies collect and share information about people in ways we seem powerless to control, our social security numbers have become universal identifiers capable of linking virtually all records of our interactions with the commercial system. The only way to escape the information net is to give up credit cards and buy goods and services under aliases—to become a nonperson.

Although one of a capitalist system's vaunted merits is supposedly its encouragement of risk-taking by capitalists, Gandy demonstrates that contemporary capitalism is intensely preoccupied with reducing risk, if not canceling it altogether. It is chilling to consider what this could mean for the U.S. system of government. We may not yet have reached the point where television looks at us the way we look at it, but infrared set-top "peoplemeters" will soon have the capacity to monitor numbers, ages, and family affiliations of viewers, to tell what shows they are watching, and to feed this information to computers, where it can be matched with other kinds of information and then used, often without our knowledge, and perhaps against us.

Crises of Control in the Information Age

Computers, and the telecommunications networks that carry information among them, are said to be the harbingers of the latest industrial revolution. Computers have changed the ways we work, play, understand, and relate to our environments (see Sinha & Stone, Chapter 15). As devices for storing, processing, and exchanging information, computers greatly amplify and extend the power of those who control their use. It is essential to understand that the growing importance of computer-based information systems does not rest in the technology itself, but in the continually changing interactions among technologies, the economic and social conditions that characterize their primary uses, and the cultural practices, including the systems of laws, regulations, and regulatory institutions, that govern us. This chapter examines some of these complex interactions through an exploration of the role of computers and telecommunications networks in the audience assessment process.

The use of computers and the intellectual technology of management planning and marketing research are all part of a process of rationalization. *Rationalization* refers to the pursuit of efficiency in the production, distribution, and sale of goods and services. Rationalization can also be applied to the business of government through its role in the collection and redistribution of wealth or in the performance of its police function. Rationalization is an information-dependent process, requiring more and more workers who are producing information and analysis or utilizing information technology to store and transmit this information. Thus, for some analysts, the transformation of industrial economies into "information economies" is primarily a reflection of the increased need to rationalize complex, interdependent systems, rather than a decision to produce information instead of material goods.

Surveillance and rationalization also imply an increase in the ability of capitalists to exercise control over individuals in their roles as

Panopticon-Shaped Prison, Britain

employees, consumers, and citizens. Their control is increased to the extent that the initiative, independence, and autonomy of the individual is reduced or transferred to other people. Surveillance provides the information necessary for greater control.

The kind of control that surveillance provides is not absolute. Social control under democratic social organization can be as subtle as the distinction between discipline and punishment. Discipline in individuals and society is maintained by virtue of a continual threat of punishment. Discipline also involves people's accepting for themselves the belief that the behaviors maintained by the threat of punishment are in fact correct, rational, or moral behaviors. Once accepted, or internalized, those beliefs and values provide the basis for self-control, the most efficient form of discipline.

An early-nineteenth-century design for a prison was named the *panopticon*. This prison was designed in an octopus shape so as to provide the guards at the center with continuous and unobstructed views of all the prisoners. Prisoners would never know for sure who

was watching or if they were actually being watched at any particular moment. This design for a prison was thought to be particularly efficient because it also allowed the guards to isolate prisoners and to locate them in special wings or areas on the basis of their past behavior, their degree of rehabilitation, or their particular tendencies and habits.

Many critical communications scholars see the panopticon as a useful metaphor. They see contemporary society as developing into a panoptic system with similar forms of isolation, grouping, and surveillance, organized for the purposes of discipline and control. Such perspectives may be also applied to the study of audiences.

Rationalization in the information economy involves increased, almost continuous, surveillance of individuals in all those areas of existence that have been or are being brought under the control of capitalist logic. That is, surveillance is necessary for rationalizing human behavior, for making it more efficient and profitable in all conceivable activities. More generally, we can recognize tendencies toward increased surveillance of individuals for the purposes of rationalizing their behavior in the spheres of employment, consumer behavior, and citizenship. The analysis of audiences has relevance for each and every one of these spheres. I commence this discussion with two new alternative ways of understanding audiences: as products and as labor.

Perspectives on Audiences

AUDIENCES AS PRODUCTS

Although it is not a universal or even the dominant view within traditional discussions of mass media, many critical observers see audiences as the products of an industrial or manufacturing process. The notion of audience as product provides a particularly insightful perspective from which to understand mass media in general, and advertiser-supported media in particular. The focus here will be on commercial television as the premier advertising mass medium.

There is no direct economic relationship between the broadcaster and the audience in the United States. Commercial broadcasters "produce audiences" or, more precisely, blocks of time during which it is possible to communicate with audiences, which they then sell to

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advertisers. The market that exists is between broadcasters and advertisers or their agents. When we talk of "selling time," the reference is to the unit of time, the "spot" during which the advertiser is free to make a pitch to the audience that the broadcaster has promised to produce and deliver. The rates the broadcaster is able to charge these advertisers depend upon the size and income level of audience. The broadcaster realizes profits when the costs of producing promised audiences are substantially less than the advertising fees the broadcaster is able to charge for access. Not all audiences, even audiences of equal size, are of equal value to advertisers in general, or to advertisers of particular products. Part of audiences' value is associated with the amount of their spendable income and their propensity to spend it for particular goods and services. Advertisers of expensive "big ticket" items are unwilling to pay very much at all for an audience that is unemployed, retired, or for some other reason falls into the low-income category. Thus the broadcaster, or any other producer of audiences for sale at a profit, is sensitive to demands for particular audience attributes.

The size and quality of the audience produced is also the result of the technologies and raw materials used in their production. Just as one might produce a variety of cakes with different combinations of flour, sugar, and spices, the same is true of the audience product. Because of different tastes for violence, "action," sexual explicitness, comedy, and music, different combinations of these qualities in programs will attract different audiences.

If we also consider the potential audience member as an input into the eventual "product," the availability of some of those inputs will vary across times of day and across days of the week. Now that many women work outside the home, the proportion of women available to be sold as audience members during the day is smaller than it once was. Still fewer men are available for "sale" during those hours, and the scarcity of males makes it costly to attempt their production as audience members during weekday hours. Socially active teenagers also tend not to be available on Saturday evenings, and a review of the television schedule will reveal that network programmers have generally taken that fact into account.

As with other products, the cost of input is governed by the nature of competitive demands. "Audience producers" are essentially in competition with each other for the attention of potential audience

members. However, some analysts would suggest that there has been an unspoken agreement among the major competitors (the networks) that their mutual interests are best served by each programmer's specializing in the production of a specific audience type during a particular day part. This "counterprogramming" strategy would operate to divide the audience members up without blurring objectives among the dominant audience producers.

Such specialization is more clearly the case with radio, where programming style is fairly uniform across the program schedule and stations can be easily classed into types on the basis of their formats and the audiences they traditionally produce. This specialization, which is also increasingly characteristic of cable television networks, is referred to as the *magazine model* or *narrowcasting*. Over the years, especially since the emergence of television as the principal mass medium, general-interest magazines have likewise given way to targeted advertising vehicles that treat quite narrow ranges of topics and appeal to specialized audience interests.

It is this view of audience as product that explains why popular programs may be dropped from the broadcast schedule. Not just any audience will do. If a program fails to produce or "attract" an audience with a realizable market value exceeding the cost of producing it, it will not be renewed. Thus programs that might have respectable ratings in terms of audience size are dropped from the schedule because the audiences produced are not valued by advertisers. In those markets where Black people make up a large share of the primary audience base, high local ratings have not generated corresponding support. This is attributable to low estimates of Black people's purchasing powers as well as to conventional racist assumptions.

This perspective also makes clear the tendency of networks to keep programs on their schedules that generate smaller-than-average audiences, if these particular audiences have attributes that are in great demand. This is the character of certain programs (the yuppie-centered *thirtysomething* was one such show) that have been identified as "cable proof." That is, the upscale audiences that have been increasingly turning away from the networks to view premium cable fare will return to the networks to view certain shows. Because of this, networks have been assured that higher-than-normal fees will be paid for these audiences because of their relative value as consumers.

AUDIENCES AS LABOR

Thinking of the audience as labor takes a bit more work. Communication theorist Dallas Smythe (1981) is credited with early attempts to specify the nature of the work that audiences do. Smythe introduced this concept in the context of a critique of capitalism that suggested that under advanced capitalism, we have less leisure time than we once assumed. Time away from work is the time when workers must regenerate their energies in order to return to the factories and offices the next day. Unfortunately, Smythe argued, when the workers sat down to relax, to watch a little television, their viewing is not entirely recreation; rather, it is, in part, exploitative labor. Television viewers work as audiences.

The work of audiences, in Smythe's initial formulation, is the work of watching commercials, making sense of them, and ultimately behaving as consumers appropriate to their social position. The payment for this work is the pleasure, stimulation, or entertainment derived from consuming the material that appears between the commercial messages.

More recently, Sut Jhally and Bill Livant (1986) have sharpened Smythe's analysis and attempted to extend the metaphor further. Their task was to describe how broadcasters captured the profits produced by these audience workers, and how they utilized improved technology to increase the rate of exploitation of this labor. In their analysis, audiences are made to work harder by having to view more individual commercials for each minute of entertainment. Thus we have seen the 1-minute commercial give way to 30-, 15-, and 10-second spots, increasing the amount that programmers can charge for the same minutes of audience access. This increase in productivity does increase broadcasters' profits.

Another way audience workers may be made to work more efficiently is by being exposed only to those messages for which they are best suited by virtue of lifestyle, income, or other measures of consumer potential. Thus the messages are tailored more closely for the tastes, preferences, experiences, and resources of the audience working for a particular broadcaster at a particular point in time. Audience research, within this model, is similar to the kind of management research that seeks to inform employers how to select the best workers for their factories or organizations—in audience research, the best consumers are chosen.

Many examples of this effort to improve the productivity of the audience worker can be found in those advertiser-dependent media not subject to strict government or industry regulation. Popular magazines, such as those for hobbyists interested in photography, are filled with commercials. It is impossible to turn a page without meeting an ad, or brushing aside an insert, or picking up a reader response card that has fallen to the floor. And, as one might expect, the ads are clearly linked to the editorial focus of the periodical, offering cameras, film, processing services, and so on. Some cable television programs are advertisements disguised as documentaries. These "program-length commercials" seek to increase the efficiency of the audience workforce by avoiding the tendency of some laborers to goof off, sleep, talk to each other, read the paper, "zap" commercials, "graze" between programs, or even leave the room during clearly identifiable commercials.

Audience Measurement as Surveillance: New Developments

Audience measurement is surveillance. It is performed for the same reasons as surveillance of workers in the factories, or in the secretarial pool. In the pursuit of expanded profits, the surveillance of audiences seeks to fine-tune the main mechanisms of "audience production." Gary Marx (1988) identifies several attributes of the new surveillance environment that have clear reflections in the technology and practice of audience assessment. It is clear, for example, that the new surveillance technologies transcend time, distance, darkness, and other physical barriers. Audiences are measured electronically and continuously. The records of audience behavior can be stored electronically and transmitted instantaneously to remote sites upon request. Audience viewing behaviors can be combined easily with other information about individuals or groups. Increasingly, audience assessment technology is becoming automatic, "passive" (no action, such as filling out a viewing diary, is needed), and relatively unobtrusive. People are less and less aware that their behavior as audiences is being measured. Indeed, as Marx (1988) reminds us, the new surveillance is frequently involuntary—there are no simple ways to avoid being counted.

The growth in surveillance accelerates because the process is increasingly technology-intensive, that is, dependent more upon machines,

essentially computers, that operate more efficiently than humans and are capable of monitoring multiple sites at the same time. The declining costs of surveillance mean that more and more firms in the audience business will consider its use to be essential. The new surveillance is both more intensive and more extensive. It measures more attributes and behaviors of more people across more aspects of their lives.

Increasingly, the surveillance of audiences resembles police surveillance of suspected criminals. It has become interventive and preventive, rather than reactive and investigative. Specials and "made-for-television movies" are audience "stings," pretested to see if audiences will be attracted (usually by new variants on old themes). Fringe time periods and fringe programmers test limits of public acceptability to see how many and what kinds of folk will be tempted by unusual or more "adult" content. Such a role in pushing the limits of mainstream tastes has been played by Rupert Murdoch's Fox network in reaching new depths of violence and sexual explicitness.

Rather than pursuing particular individuals or suspects, the new audience surveillance approaches focus on categories, groups, or "types" of individuals. Just as "terrorist" or "drug smuggler" profiles are used to select travelers who are subjected to more intensive customs searches, similar profiles are used to target messages to audiences likely to respond or to avoid those for whom particular messages or programs will have little appeal. "Two-car pet owners" would be an example of a consumer category.

PEOPLEMETERS

Peoplemeters are merely the latest in a continuing string of improvements in the technology of broadcast audience measurement. This search for increasing accuracy and precision in "audience ratings" has been described in fine detail by Hugh Beville (1985). From the beginnings of the industry in 1928, when market researchers relied upon costly personal interviews to determine how many American households actually owned radios, to the development of passive infrared detectors that take note of which household members are in front of the television set, the goal has been the same—rationalization. Technical developments in statistical sampling that increase the accuracy of estimates of audience behavior have been pursued with

dedication. Similar efforts have been directed at increasing the scope of the data gathered from those sampled.

Personal recall of television programs watched has always been seen as unreliable. Ratings specialists and their clients have recognized that diaries tended to be completed from memory, often on the day before they were to be returned, rather than being filled in on an hourly or daily basis. In addition, most diaries tended to be filled in by one member of the household who served as the unreliable recorder of family viewing. Telephone coincidentals, in which a sample of respondents were asked to identify what programs they were viewing when the phone rang, had long been the method used for quality control of the diary method. However, their use was severely restricted in practice by the cost of employing telephone interviewers, people's objections to intrusion, and associated problems of administration.

Automatic, passive devices have improved significantly from the time of the Nielsen audiometer, first installed in test markets in 1935. This primitive device involved a mechanical stylus inscribing a waxed-paper tape in response to the location of the broadcast tuning dial. In a creative portent of contemporary audience measurement, the early A. C. Nielsen market research services included gathering data about what kinds of consumer goods households had in their pantries at the times when their agents went to collect the audiometer tape. Although these meters were eventually improved to the extent that they could be read automatically and continuously from Nielsen's remote data-processing center, meters were still limited by the fact that they measured only the use of the household set at a time when advertisers were interested in more detailed demographics and personal viewing patterns.

The peoplemeter, introduced into the United States by AGB Research in 1982, represented a significant improvement in individual audience assessment. Although still plagued by problems of sampling and concerns about the validity of estimates of viewing by youngsters who rapidly tired of "tapping in" to note the beginning and end of their viewing periods, by 1987 the technology was firmly established. Improvements in peoplemeters can be expected in the direction of greater "passivity." Heat sources (body temperature), heart rates, and body size (adults or children) can be registered, and passive set-top devices can record when known individuals (members of the household) enter or leave the viewing environment and whether or not their eyes are open.

The presence of guests is likely to be queried with an on-screen display, and encoding devices will allow households to record relevant demographic data about guests for the duration of their stay.

ADDRESSABILITY

The peoplemeters in use, or on the drawing board, even those that now measure exposure to commercials and provide ratings for commercials, rather than programs, do not, however, provide the most valued information about audience exposure—whether audiences are paying attention to, and being influenced by, the commercial message (see Ang, Chapter 12).

Addressability refers to the ability of advanced telecommunications systems to direct a message stream to a particular device (e.g., a TV set or a mainframe computer) with a digitally encoded address. *Verifiability* refers to the ability of advanced systems to note the status of tuners, decoders, and response devices to "verify" the status of information systems, to note whether messages have been received, and at what time. *Segmentation* and *targeting* refer to the classification of audiences into groups on the basis of information provided in response to questions, or on the basis of past performance as consumers or viewers. The qualities of addressability and verifiability make it much easier to segment audiences into different types. Then these segmented audiences may be subsequently targeted with specialized messages previously determined to be highly effective in reaching similar segments. Addressability allows targeted messages to be sent to particular segments.

Thus, in test-market communities, individuals are recruited to be part of programs with informative titles such as Behaviorscan or ScanAmerica. In return for small payments and the opportunity to participate in pools for larger prizes, families agree to provide detailed personal, social, and demographic information about themselves. They also agree to utilize a special identification card when they make purchases at selected stores in the community. The UPC (universal product code) or bar code scanners in the checkout counters link the consumer purchases with the viewing behavior of the particular household. In some other systems, family members are paid to run an electronic scanner along the UPC stripes of all purchases the family makes. It thus becomes possible to establish the correlation between

the commercials family members are exposed to and the purchases they make.

Where more advanced dual-cable, or addressable, systems allow different commercials to be sent to different households, it is possible to achieve true laboratory control over the presentation of this commercial stimulus, and even to select the editorial environment in which it will be viewed. Thus marketers are able to determine whether ads for cookies that emphasize the crunch work better with youngsters than with adults. More than that, such systems provide information to advertisers about whether youngsters who like comedy shows prefer crunchiness more than youngsters who like action/adventure programs.

The goals of social management through these home networking systems have been described in careful detail by Kevin G. Wilson (1988). Advanced telecommunications systems will present more and more information to individuals in their homes through high-capacity cables. As the nation's cable systems are updated to provide more sophisticated systems capable of digital addressability of programs and messages (see Demac, Chapter 16), it will be more common for individuals to be charged directly for the material they receive; some projections call for pay-per-view TV in 40 million households by 1996. It is the blending of commercial and pay-per-view or cost-per-unit/page/screen systems that will delink advertising from generalized-appeal TV ads and will spread its reach to the entire realm of individual and family information processing. Reading, viewing, listening, banking, communication, and shopping activities will increasingly display the same quality of commercial transactions. As such, those transactions will provide the surveillance information necessary for the efficient operation of capitalism as its reach is extended into all aspects of daily life.

TRACKING THE AUDIENCE WHEREVER IT CAN BE FOUND

Tracking audiences is not limited to the volunteers who participate in paid research programs. A great many of us are part of experiments and market tests that are conducted without the courtesy of requesting our informed consent. Magazines and discount coupons are frequently utilized in efforts to link editorial content to commercial appeals. Advances in printing and binding make it possible for marketers to insert coupons in magazines that are code marked with the identification of the household or address where it was sent. Thus when an

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individual decides to use one of these coupons to purchase some item, the advertiser soon knows not only what kind of person responds to which kind of appeal, but to which store, with which prices or advertising pressure. Such coupon marking also allows market researchers to determine how many miles people are willing to drive from their homes in pursuit of apparent bargains.

Even general-interest magazines are being produced in specialized regional, neighborhood, or ZIP code-specific editions. The coming years will see magazines that are subscriber specific in terms of the advertisements they contain. Because of advances in ZIP code analysis, led by the Claritas Corporation, magazines have become highly competitive vehicles for targeted appeals, and the lists of their subscribers represent valuable data resources that may be sold at varying costs per thousand to advertisers who want them. Indeed, there is a large and growing industry in consumer lists. Each week, a newsletter serving the direct marketing industry describes new lists that have just come on the market, with prices ranging from $40 to $90 per thousand names for one-time-only commercial use. There are lists of magazine subscribers that might provide information about individuals' hobbies and recreational interests, political orientations, levels of education or sophistication, even degrees of ethnic identification. Other lists are easily developed from computerized records of sales and other transactions. Even calls to 800 numbers for information contribute to the growth of marketable lists. Commercially available telephone services automatically provide the firm with the name, address and phone number of the inquiring party. All of these lists provide the possibility for developing rather comprehensive profiles of individuals.

Advances in computer software have lowered the costs involved in simultaneous comparison of two or more lists. This procedure, called *matching*, has been used extensively by government agencies at the federal and state levels to identify individuals who, for one reason or another, would be considered ineligible for some public service. Thus matches of lists of bank accounts with requests for welfare or public assistance might turn up a "good hit": the name of an individual who appears on both lists. For marketing purposes, a good hit might involve a person turning up on a list of buyers of quality chocolates who is also on a list of participants in weight-control programs. Individuals so identified might become the prime targets for discount coupons for some new designer chocolates that will be inserted in their next issue of *Time* or *People*.

The Realm of Social Consequences

Why should we be concerned about this movement toward greater control or management of the behavior of audiences? Clearly, one's answer depends on one's expectations of a democratic society. From a critical perspective, one that recognizes the contradictions and conflicts between the logic of capitalism and the values of freedom and equality that are part of the democratic ideal, it becomes important to identify the consequences that flow from the uncontrolled and unchallenged extension of that logic to greater and greater areas of our daily lives.

One critique of the application of computer-based systems to the rationalization of audience production is that this technology deskills and devalues the contribution of labor. Where formerly skilled workers are unemployed and newly hired workers are reduced to button pushers, there is no pride in or attachment to the products of their labor. There is irony and danger in these developments. The irony is that one of the merits of a capitalist economy is supposed to be its encouragement of risk taking by capitalists. Yet the developments discussed above demonstrate an intense preoccupation with reducing risk for advertisers and their business clients—even, if possible, canceling risk altogether. It is the same logic that has led to clone products on TV and that could reduce our skills as consumers, packaging our likes and dislikes until we begin to lose the talent to make our own choices among goods and services, to use our own imagination to plan our daily consumption. And what future is there for low-income consumers when all these ads are targeted to the supposed needs of the wealthy?

Privacy and the Control of Personal Information

Perhaps the greatest threat these computer-based systems for audience assessment represent is their potential to worsen the balance of power between individuals and bureaucratic organizations. Personal information streams out of the lives of individuals much like blood out of an open wound, and it collects in pools in the computers of corporations and government bureaucracies. Public access to similar data about the firms and organizations that increasingly structure our options and opportunities is more costly to obtain and impossible to access.

Personal privacy, as currently conceived, concerns the right to control the collection, distribution, and use of information about oneself. The courts and legislatures have come to define the limits of that right in terms of what society agrees is a "reasonable expectation" of privacy. To the extent that we accept the rationale of market efficiency, and that sophisticated marketing is progress, most business and government uses of personal information can be justified in those terms. Rather than considering the overall implications of a loss of individual power and control, protective legislation focuses on restricting a specific information practice that has been identified as an abuse. Thus, rather than an absolute limit on the collection or use of personal information, we have a flexible limit that contracts each time some abuse becomes routinized by bureaucratic practice. The social security number has, through routine use, become the universal identifier capable of linking virtually all records of our interaction with the commercial system. Its collection has become so commonplace that the courts will likely assert before too long that there is no longer any reasonable expectation of privacy with regard to it.

There is fairly widespread concern that our personal privacy rights have come under attack. People know that government and corporate bureaucracies can and do collect and share information about them in ways that they are powerless to control and that will not return to benefit them. Surveys suggest that there is a glimmer of understanding about the nature and use of profiles based on the compilation of personal details. But resistance is almost nonexistent, and what little there is may be seen as passive and defeatist. Marketing and public opinion researchers are reporting more refusals and survey terminations than at any time in the past. A few individuals refuse to apply for services or opportunities because they would rather not provide the information such applications would require. A nearly invisible minority simply refuses to enter the system of records, giving up the convenience of credit cards and acquiring goods and services under assumed names or aliases. Escaping the information net means becoming a nonperson. One maintains privacy through the loss of all else.

Information Grazing and Zapping

A good many of those who still view broadcast fare have videotaped it; they are screening programs at times other than their actual

broadcast and, more important from the advertiser's standpoint, fast-forwarding through or zapping the commercials with their remote control units. This workers' revolt is taking place in the homes of relatively high-income, technologically advanced families, who are also highly valued by advertisers. Many others switch frequently among channels (grazing), which means neither advertisers nor broadcasters can rely on their being exposed to the commercials. These are all signs of dissatisfaction on a wide scale, but it is atomized, not yet a rebellion with a voice and articulated demands. What the prospects are for an increase in organized opposition is a major question to be considered.

Further Questions

1. How do you relate individuals' attempts at control with the degree to which audiences may be "active"?
2. How can we organize to protect our privacy from information surveillance?
3. What kinds of consumer education movements exist, and how important are they or could they be in developing public awareness?

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