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Mass Reach After Mass Media

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Writing in 1829 about the newly completed U.S. postal network, William Ellery Channing marveled, “When a few leaders have agreed on an object, an impulse may be given in a month to the whole country. Whole States may be deluged with tracts and other publications, and a voice like that of many waters, be called forth from immense and widely separated
multitudes. Here is a great new power brought to bear on society, and it is a great moral question, how it ought to be viewed, and what duties it imposes.” [((Quoted in John, 1995, p. 185.))]

As Richard John [((John, Richard. (1995). Spreading the news: The American postal system from Franklin to Morse. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.))] notes in his history of the postal service, the United States’ first national distribution network was transformative for the manner in which it enabled—and at times compelled—the country’s inhabitants to think of themselves as belonging to a common public. This is what Kristy Hess [((Hess, Kristy. (1995). Tertius tactics: “Mediated social capital” as a resource of power for traditional commercial news media. Communication Theory, 23(2), 112–130.))] calls the “bonding function” of media and, while the underlying technologies may have changed since the nineteenth century, the tenet that media infrastructures and distribution networks are central to the formation and maintenance of publics is still being proven out in the work of scholars like Yong-Chan Kim and Sandra Ball-Rokeach [((Kim, Y.-C., & Ball-Rokeach. (2006). Civic engagement from a communication infrastructure perspective. Communication Theory, 16(2), 173–197.))] who highlight the manner in which people who share a broadcast radius or newspaper circulation footprint appear more likely to think of themselves as members of a common public with shared concerns and civic responsibilities.

Historian and social theorist Michael Warner [((Warner, Michael. (2002). Publics and counterpublics. New York: Zone Books.))] developed the notion of “reflexive circulation” to refer to this phenomenon—the way in which media distribution underpins many of the social imaginaries on which societies depend. Put simply, our mediated public discourse has historically relied on the notion that when we publish an item in a newspaper or air it in a broadcast that we are speaking to the same assembled audience over time. Stable distribution networks allow us the conceit that a town or a nation or a social movement deliberates as a single, inclusive body.

Of course, this notion has always been something of a fantasy. Throughout their history the news media, for example, have always left out particular groups. This is true not just of the perspectives they offer—though egregious omissions have been well documented by media sociologists from Gaye Tuchman [((Tuchman, Gaye. (1978). Making news: A study in the construction of reality. New York: Free Press.))] to Sue Robinson [((Robinson, Sue. (2018). Networked news, racial divides: How power and privilege shape progressive communities. New York: Cambridge University Press.))]—but of the
networks of distribution on which they depend. John, for example, notes the many ways in which women were effectively barred from post offices in the 19th century, when these were the community hubs in which newspapers were read and discussed. C. Edwin Baker [ (( Baker, Edwin. (2002). Media, markets, and democracy. New York: Cambridge University Press. ))] describes in detail the many ways in which commercial media systems have traditionally limited access by the poor.

Television set from 1948, the presidential election year when both the Democratic and Republican parties held their conventions in Philadelphia so as to be within the broadcast area of the nascent TV market.

Warner’s reflexive circulation, in other words, allows participants to imagine an inclusive public discourse, even as it leaves many groups out of the conversation. And sociologists like Jen Shradie (forthcoming) [ (( Shradie, Jen. (2006). The Revolution that Wasn’t: How Digital Activism Favors Conservatives. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. ))] have
begun to document how, while the contours of exclusion may be different in the age of digital media (or in some cases very similar), they are still very much with us. Likewise, though the business logics of media have long included some degree of market segmentation in forms such as interest-based magazines and cable channels, Zeynep Tufekci [((Tufecki, Zeynep. (2018, January 16). “It’s the (democracy-poisoning) golden age of free speech.” Wired. Retrieved from https://www.wired.com/story/free-speech-issue-tech-turmoil-new-censorship/))] sounds the alarm that the gulf between our sense of belonging to a common mediated public and the actual logics of our media system has grown wider than ever before.

“It’s not just our personal posts and correspondence that get delivered (or not) in this mercurial fashion. As folks like Jenkins, Ford, and Green [((Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2013). Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture. New York: New York University Press.))] have noted, legacy media industries are also learning to live in this environment. The “conversation economy” described by “Web 2.0” enthusiasts has evolved into an “attention economy” in which media industries have become adept at leveraging people’s online sharing activities to promote their products. We’ve seen the development not only of editorial and brand management strategies, but of content management systems, recommendation algorithms, playlist managers, and other technologies aimed at rapidly repackaging and repurposing editorial output for different niche audiences and social media channels, attempting to replace the broadcast tower with the capacity to tap into thousands of individual conversations and overlapping gossip networks.

As Matthew Hindman [((Hindman, Matthew. (2013). Journalism ethics and digital audience data. In P. J. Boczkowski and C. W. Anderson (Eds.), Remaking the news: Essays on the future of journalism scholarship in the digital age. (pp. 177–194). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.))] notes, it’s possible to imagine a world in which this level of attentiveness to the wants of audiences serves democratic goals, allowing creators to better identify and serve the public interest. But—as Hindman also
points out—that isn’t the world we live in right now. Instead, just as in previous commercial media systems, the emerging digital economy is one in which the interests and conversations of some groups are identified and prioritized as more lucrative than those of others. The result can be a jarring one, wherein the most profitable niche audiences are served up more of what they apparently enjoy and others are offered tone-deaf results in the name of customization.

Example of targeted marketing from Netflix

Witness, for instance, the recent revelation that Netflix has been showing users of color promotional images for its content that feature black actors, despite the fact that these actors have only minor roles in the films being advertised. [((Iqbal, N. (2018, October 20). Film fans see red over Netflix ‘targeted’ posters for black viewers. The Guardian. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/oct/20/netflix-film-black-viewers-personalised-marketing-target.))] Safiya Umoji Noble’s [((Umoji Noble, Safiya. (2018). Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism. New York: New York University Press.))] critiques of Google Search’s historical results for “black girls”—results uncritically responsive to the SEO efforts of the porn industry—provide another example, wherein the response to an individual’s query assumes the most profitable audience (male porn consumers, apparently) at the expense, on multiple levels, of other groups. Meanwhile, in journalism, scholars like Couldry and Turow [((Couldry, N. & Turow, J. (2014). Advertising, big data, and the clearance of the public realm: Marketers’ new approaches to the content subsidy. International Journal of Communication,. 8, 1710–1726.))] argue that the online advertising industry’s push for fine-scale consumer differentiation will prod news
organizations even further down the road of content personalization and destroy the potential for the news media to serve as common points of reference in democratic discourse.

Most scholars agree that these misalignments—between valuations of audience attention that serve the public interest and ones that cut against it—have to do with the commercial and ad-driven logics that dominate our media ecosystem. And so, unsurprisingly, the correctives they offer are policy-based. Noble argues that we need consumer protection policies in place to mitigate the representational harms caused by commercial search engines and other online platforms. Victor Pickard [((Pickard, Victor (2014). America’s battle for media democracy: The triumph of corporate libertarianism and the future of media reform. New York: Cambridge University Press.))] makes the case that we should alter government regulations to make it simpler for news organizations to transition to non-profit or low-profit status, and tax the corporations—ISPs, Google, Facebook, etc.—that currently profit most off the the changes that have decimated newsrooms to pay for more media in the public interest. Couldry and Turow suggest we need regulations to limit the extensive collection and use of data in the service of online advertising, so as to buffer the resulting pressures toward hyper-personalization of editorial content currently being experienced by news organizations. And Nicole S. Cohen [((Cohen, N. S. (2018). At work in the digital newsroom. Digital Journalism, advance online publication.))] argues that more unionization within digital newsrooms will give journalists the power to push back themselves on editorial policies myopically focused on producing more, and more profitable, clicks.

In many cases, these scholars say that the biggest obstacle standing in the way of such outcomes, however, is the tendency of publics to accept the media ecosystem they see as given, rather than as the artificial outcome of policy frameworks that facilitate particular market logics and valuations of audiences. How do you get people excited about tax reforms [((Pickard, V. (2014). America’s battle for media democracy: The triumph of corporate libertarianism and the future of media reform.. New York: Cambridge University Press.))]? How do you get them to understand the commercial logics governing Google Search results that they have come to trust implicitly [((Noble, S. U. (2018). Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism. New York: New York University Press.))]? How about the link between data privacy law [((Couldry, N. & Turow, J. (2014). Advertising, big data, and the clearance of the public realm: Marketers’ new approaches to the content subsidy. International Journal of Communication, 1710–1726.))] or unionization [((Cohen, N. S. (2018). At work in the digital newsroom. Digital Journalism, advance online publication.))] and public-interest journalism?
If mobilizing citizens around policy questions like these seems tricky, more scholarship on these topics can’t possibly hurt. The Warnerian conceit that our media infrastructures and distribution networks create an inclusive public is a powerful and necessary one. But it needs to be more than just a conceit. As the media industries continue to adapt to what Newsvine founder and former Twitter VP Mike Davidson has called, “the massive decentralization of conversation” [((Braun, J. A. (2015). *This program is brought to you by: Distributing television news online*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p.166.)], attempting to compensate for the collapse of traditional modes of delivery by tapping into the word-of-mouth marketing and distribution afforded by millions of individuals’ social networks, scholars need to continue to ask critical questions about how media companies are going about this and how our sociality is being commodified. To echo Channing’s thoughts on an earlier system of distribution, “it is a great moral question, how it ought to be viewed, and what duties it imposes.”

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3. [Example of targeted marketing from Netflix](https://www.flowjournal.org/2018/11/mass-reach-after-mass-media/?print=print)