

Is the high street ruining the Internet?

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Someone asked on BBCâ??s Question Time this week, â??Is the Internet ruining the high street?â?• as customers abandon retail chains such as HMV, Jessops, and Blockbuster, preferring to buy online. What about the reverse question: **Is the high street ruining the Internet?**

I remember the time before e-commerce when the Internet was a peopleâ??s medium for intellectual exchange, the fomenting of new ideas, the promotion of radical self-help activism, risk-taking entrepreneurs, and small-scale businesses and freelancers who wanted to operate internationally. It maneuvered below the radar of regular commerce, challenged convention, and was a fringe medium for the quirky, the experimental and the curious. Itâ??s still all of that â?? but with ***advertisements***. Web



mass media potential, but is anyone else annoyed by all de bar animations, and email spam?

Improved online advertising is a major avenue of Internet innovation. Content management providers examine the content of web pages automatically and position advertisements relevant to the presumed interest of the person viewing the page. This is **contextual advertising**. Ads are also tailored to the geographical location of the viewer.

More sophisticated **conversational analysis** examines the flow of words on chat lines, social media sites, discussion forums, and blog comments and directs ads towards the social context of some discussion or other. So if thereâ??s animated discussion in an online forum on how to stop dry itchy skin in winter, then ads may start to appear for skin creams.

But the more sophisticated style of ad interventions comes from web-based **behavioural advertising**, which focusses not on web page content, but rather the profile of the user. So if youâ??ve been searching around the web for a property to buy, then later on, when you turn to a book publishing site, you may be presented with advertisements for publications about home improvement, interior design, furniture or how to finance a house purchase.

These and other online marketing techniques are explained in a helpful book by Andrew McStay, called *The Mood of Information: A Critique of Online Behavioural Advertising*. Thereâ??s a good side to these advertising tactics. Sponsorship provides revenue to keep online services running, and advertising does work, in that it enlivens competition, keeps prices low and provides information to consumers â?? kind of.

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If advertising is a necessary evil then we consumers would rather be exposed to ads about things that interest us and are relevant to our life circumstances. I want fewer ads about cosmetic surgery and more about health foods and electronic gadgets please.

Mind mining

Consumers and critics have reservations about advertising in general â?? the manufacture of an acquiescent and consumer-oriented population, the hegemony of major global corporations, materialism, and the elevation of image and appearance over substance. In the case of online advertising we can add concerns about privacy, and the idea of mining not only oneâ??s personal online histories, but a general mining of *interiority*.

When it works, behavioural advertising is a kind of emotional pillage, from the inside, getting inside peopleâ??s heads, or at least the private world of likes and preferences. Neither are we consumers necessarily happy with these invisible processes. At least when I see a billboard in the high street or on a tv commercial for Mercedes Benz I know that Iâ??m not being singled out due to my personal browsing and consumption behaviour. Thereâ??s something democratic and open about high street and mass media advertising clutter. Behavioural advertising algorithms subvert that transparency under the ruse of personalisation.

McStay positions behavioural advertising in a kind of *autopoietic* (self making or reproducing) system of engagement with environment: â??Behavioural advertising reproduces itself in that users and observers of advertising browse, data is harvested, relevant advertising is served, users browse further, more data is harvested, more relevant advertising is served and so on. After a time it matters little when and where the starting point beganâ?• (p.111).

Audience engagement

Were it not that this quote is about advertising, it sounds like audience engagement: laudable interactions between performers, content providers, publishers and audience communities, and the

making of audiences, a hermeneutical circularity that produces understanding. Itâ??s even the sustaining of a **mood**: â??These moods disclose and belie how we are, and in autopoietic systems engender the mood of information, that is, the tone of interaction defined through our general orientation to the world and everyday life mediated through networked systemsâ?• (p.118).

But then McStay offers a warning. Behavioural advertising only offers a resemblance (â??passing offâ?•) of comprehension and insight. To my mind this makes online advertising even more insidious. Advertising brings the problems of data mining, profiling and putative online intelligence into sharp relief. Thereâ??s already a mood of suspicion hanging over the advertising business. But maybe the dubious relationship between computers and emotions pervade all aspects of networked computing that purport to make our devices more personable, intelligent and emotionally responsive.



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Reference

- McStay, Andrew. 2011. *The Mood of Information: A Critique of Online Behavioural Advertising*. New York, NY: Continuum.

Notes

- Andrew McStayâ??s blog http://advertising-communications-culture.blogspot.co.uk/
- McStayâ??s book has long sections on the social, legal and moral ramifications of online advertising, and provides a useful history, as well as explanations of the technologies deployed.
- Also see my blog posts tagged mood.
- For evidence that there was an Internet before e-commerce see our report on *Computers in Practice* in the early 1990s. None of the architectural practitioners interviewed about their innovative uses of the Internet and computer-mediated communications raised issues about making purchases or trading business-to-business online (though they were on to it within a few years after that report). See Whatâ??s a modem?
- So is the high street ruining the Internet? Itâ??s certainly influenced by it. Also see posts on Electronic commerce, philosophy and the Greek city and No way logo. Also see Coyne, Richard. 2005. *Cornucopia Limited: Design and Dissent on the Internet*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. 284 pages. At least thereâ??s a transparency to high street operations less evident in online advertising tactics.
- The â??high streetâ?• is simply the shopping precinct in the centre of a town, a term used especially in the United Kingdom.

Category

1. Media

Tags

1. advertising
2. behavioural advertising
3. e-commerce
4. mood

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