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Making Up Digital Advertising Audiences: The New Form of Contracting Human Attention

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Motivation

Digital services are often funded by showing advertisements to an audience of users (e.g. Google)

An audience needs to be 'attracted' rather than contracted as is the case with most other resources

Audience measurement gives shape and size to an audience so that it can be exchanged on a market

What if people would work as an audience?

The idea was put forward by critical media theorist Dallas Smythe (1977, 2006) as **a metaphor** for capitalist exploitation of people's private time

Case study of an advertising-funded telecommunications operator – an innovative company that offers free voice calls and text messages in exchange for sending advertisements to people's mobiles

Could it be more than just a metaphor?

Employment as a form of actorhood

Employment relationship is a modern institution that provides meaning, self-esteem and socialization for individuals

The separation of corporate role from the individual person is heavily shaped by the employment contract (Kallinikos, 2003)

The erosion of traditional employment contracts is well documented (e.g. fixed wage can be managerially inefficient)

The rise of digital ecosystem

Digital ecosystem produces masses of ‘naturally’ occurring data – granular, comprehensive (non-sample) and often real-time records of minute behavioral details

“The record produced by the computer can allow the contracting parties to condition the contract on terms that were previously unobservable, thereby allowing for more efficient transactions.”

(Varian, 2010)

Analysis: contracting human attention

1. There is a **contractual obligation** to receive advertisements
2. Behaviour is **verified using CDR data** from the network infrastructure
3. There are **individual sanctions and interactions** with audience members based on 1. and 2.

The subscriber contract is (of course) not perceived as an employment contract, yet is an actual contract that legitimizes and grants means to steer individuals' behavior

Discussion (and speculation)

1. Working as an audience is **more than just a metaphor**
2. The relationship between the company and its subscribers **does not constitute employment**
3. **The unbundling of work and employment** (not just erosion of traditional employment)
4. **The rise of a ‘consumer–worker’** who performs tasks for specific goods without having an employment (actorhood)?

A contract between the media and people

“Company will keep track of how many messages you have received. Company understands you can’t have your phone on all the time, so doesn’t require you to receive all the messages it has sent to you. However, if you have not received more than half of the messages sent to you during a 30- day period Company may advise you via text or email to help you get back on track. If after being sent notice by Company you continue to receive less than half of the messages sent to you, your Refill may be suspended and your membership may be terminated as specified below.”

(Terms and conditions document)

Individual sanctions and interactions

MCM and BMMA discuss how many message a member must have received – one picture message and one text message advertisement. [...] They continue adjusting the set of members based on text and picture message reception rates. BMMA notes that it might be that we have not sent any picture messages. MCM points out that we have sent at least one picture message to all of the members under scrutiny.

(Observation log entry, 20 February 2009)