

The Daily You

How the New Advertising Industry Is
Defining Your Identity and Your Worth



JOSEPH TUROW

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Joseph Turow

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To Judy

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The Daily You

Introduction

At the start of the twenty-first century, the advertising industry is guiding one of history's most massive stealth efforts in social profiling. At this point you may hardly notice the results of this trend. You may find you're getting better or worse discounts on products than your friends. You may notice that some ads seem to follow you around the internet. Every once in a while a website may ask you if you like a particular ad you just received. Or perhaps your cell phone has told you that you will be rewarded if you eat in a nearby restaurant where, by the way, two of your friends are hanging out this very minute.

You may actually like some of these intrusions. You may feel that they pale before the digital power you now have. After all, your ability to create blogs, collaborate with others to distribute videos online, and say what you want on Facebook (carefully using its privacy settings) seems only to confirm what marketers and even many academics are telling us: that consumers are captains of their own new-media ships.

But look beneath the surface, and a different picture emerges. We're at the start of a revolution in the ways marketers and media intrude in—and shape—our lives. Every day most if not all Americans who use the internet, along with hundreds of millions of other users from all over the planet, are being quietly peeked at, poked, analyzed, and tagged as they move through the online world. Governments undoubtedly conduct a good deal of snooping, more in some parts of the world than in others. But in North America, Europe, and many other places companies that work for marketers have taken the lead in secretly slicing and dicing the actions and backgrounds of huge populations on a virtually minute-by-minute basis. Their goal is to find out how to activate individuals' buying impulses so they can sell us stuff more efficiently than ever before. But their work has broader social and cultural consequences as well. It is destroying traditional publishing ethics by forcing media outlets to adapt their editorial content to advertisers' public-relations needs and slice-and-dice demands. And it is performing a highly controversial form of social profiling and discrimination by customizing our media content on the basis of marketing reputations we don't even know we have.

Consider a fictional middle class family of two parents with three children who eat out a lot in fast-food restaurants. After a while the parents receive a continual flow of fast-food restaurant coupons. Data suggest the parents, let's call them Larry and Rhonda, will consistently spend far more than the coupons' value. Additional statistical evaluations of parents' activities and discussions online and off may suggest that Larry and Rhonda and their children tend toward being overweight. The data, in turn, result in a small torrent of messages by marketers and publishers seeking to exploit these weight issues to increase attention or sales. Videos about dealing with overweight children, produced by a new type of company called content farms, begin to show up on parenting websites Rhonda frequents. When Larry goes online, he routinely receives articles about how fitness chains emphasize weight loss around the

holidays. Ads for fitness firms and diet pills typically show up on the pages with those articles. One of Larry and Rhonda's sons, who is fifteen years old, is happy to find a text message on his phone that invites him to use a discount at an ice cream chain not too far from his house. One of their daughters, by contrast, is mortified when she receives texts inviting her to a diet program and an ad on her Facebook page inviting her to a clothing store for hip, oversized women. What's more, people keep sending her Twitter messages about weight loss. In the meantime, both Larry and Rhonda are getting ads from check-cashing services and payday-loan companies. And Larry notices sourly on auto sites he visits that the main articles on the home page and the ads throughout feature entry-level and used models. His bitterness only becomes more acute when he describes to his boss the down-market Web he has been seeing lately. Quite surprised, she tells him she has been to the same auto sites recently and has just the opposite impression: many of the articles are about the latest German cars, and one home-page ad even offered her a gift for test-driving one at a dealer near her home.

This scenario of individual and household profiling and media customization is quite possible today. Websites, advertisers, and a panoply of other companies are continuously assessing the activities, intentions, and backgrounds of virtually everyone online; even our social relationships and comments are being carefully and continuously analyzed. In broader and broader ways, computer-generated conclusions about who we are affect the media content—the streams of commercial messages, discount offers, information, news, and entertainment—each of us confronts. Over the next few decades the business logic that drives these tailored activities will transform the ways we see ourselves, those around us, and the world at large. Governments too may be able to use marketers' technology and data to influence what we see and hear.

From this vantage point, the rhetoric of consumer power begins to lose credibility. In its place is a rhetoric of esoteric technological and statistical knowledge that supports the practice of social discrimination through profiling. We may note its outcomes only once in a while, and we may shrug when we do because it seems trivial—just a few ads, after all. But unless we try to understand how this profiling or reputation-making process works and what it means for the long term, our children and grandchildren will bear the full brunt of its prejudicial force.

The best way to enter this new world is to focus on its central driving force: the advertising industry's media-buying system. Media buying involves planning and purchasing space or time for advertising on outlets as diverse as billboards, radio, websites, mobile phones, and newspapers. For decades, media buying was a backwater, a service wing of advertising agencies that was known for having the lowest-paying jobs on Madison Avenue and for filling those jobs with female liberal arts majors fresh out of college. But that has all changed. The past twenty years have seen the rise of “media agencies” that are no longer part of ad agencies, though they may both be owned by the same parent company. Along with a wide array of satellite companies that feed them technology and data, media agencies have become magnets for well-remunerated software engineers and financial statisticians of both sexes.

In the United States alone, media-buying agencies wield more than \$170 billion of their clients' campaign funds; they use these funds to purchase space and time on media they think will advance their clients' marketing aims. But in the process they are doing much more. With the money as leverage, they are guiding the media system

toward nothing less than new ways of thinking about and evaluating audience members and defining what counts as a successful attempt to reach them. Traditionally, marketers have used media such as newspapers, magazines, radio, billboards, and television to reach out to segments of the population through commercial messages. These advertisers typically learned about audience segments from survey companies that polled representative portions of the population via a variety of methods, including panel research. A less prestigious direct-marketing business has involved contacting individuals by mail or phone. Firms have rented lists of public data or purchase information that suggests who might be likely customers.

The emerging new world is dramatically different. The distinction between reaching out to audiences via mass media and by direct-response methods is disappearing. Advertisers in the digital space expect all media firms to deliver to them particular types of individuals—and, increasingly, *particular* individuals—by leveraging a detailed knowledge about them and their behaviors that was unheard of even a few years ago. The new advertising strategy involves drawing as specific a picture as possible of a person based in large part on measurable physical acts such as clicks, swipes, mouseovers, and even voice commands. The strategy uses new digital tracking tools like cookies and beacons as well as new organizations with names like BlueKai, Rapleaf, Invidi, and eXelate. These companies track people on websites and across websites in an effort to learn what they do, what they care about, and who their friends are. Firms that exchange the information often do ensure that the targets' names and postal addresses remain anonymous—but not before they add specific demographic data and lifestyle information. For example:

- Rapleaf is a firm that claims on its website to help marketers “customize your customers’ experience.” To do that, it gleans data from individual users of blogs, internet forums, and social networks. It uses ad exchanges to sell the ability to reach those people. Rapleaf says it has “data on 900+ million records, 400+ million consumers, [and] 52+ billion friend connections.” Advertisers are particularly aware of the firm's ability to predict the reliability of individuals (for example, the likelihood they will pay their mortgage) based on Rapleaf's research on the trustworthiness of the people in those individuals' social networks.
- A company called Next Jump runs employee discount and reward programs for about one-third of U.S. corporate employees. It gets personal information about all of them from the human relations departments of the companies and supplements that information with transactional data from the manufacturers it deals with as well as from credit companies. Armed with this combination of information, Next Jump can predict what people want and what they will pay for. It also generates a “UserRank” score for every employee based on how many purchases a person has made and how much he or she has spent. That score plays an important role in determining which employee gets what product e-mail offers and at what price.
- A firm called The Daily Me already sells an ad and news personalization technology to online periodicals. If a *Boston Globe* reader who reads a lot of soccer sports news visits a *Dallas Morning News* site, the Daily Me's technology tells the *Dallas Morning News* to serve him soccer stories. Moreover, when an ad is served along with the story, its text and photos are instantly configured so as to include soccer

terms and photos as part of the advertising pitch. A basketball fan receiving an ad for the same product will get language and photos that call out to people with hoop interests.

These specific operations may not be in business a few years from now. In the new media-buying environment companies come and go amid furious competition. The logic propelling them and more established firms forward, though, is consistent: the future belongs to marketers and media firms—*publishers*, in current terminology—that learn how to find and keep the most valuable customers by surrounding them with the most persuasive media materials. Special online advertising exchanges, owned by Google, Yahoo!, Microsoft, Interpublic, and other major players, allow publishers to auction and media agencies to “buy” individuals with particular characteristics, often in real time. That is, it is now possible to buy the right to deliver an ad to a person with specific characteristics at the precise moment that that person loads a Web page. In fact, through an activity called cookie matching, which I discuss in detail later, an advertiser can actually bid for the right to reach an individual whom the advertiser knows from previous contacts and is now tracking around the Web. Moreover, the technology keeps changing. Because consumers delete Web cookies and marketers find cookies difficult to use with mobile devices, technology companies have developed methods to “fingerprint” devices permanently and allow for persistent personalization across many media platforms.

The significance of tailored commercial messages and offers goes far beyond whether or not the targeted persons buy the products. Advertisements and discounts are status signals: they alert people as to their social position. If you consistently get ads for low-priced cars, regional vacations, fast-food restaurants, and other products that reflect a lower-class status, your sense of the world's opportunities may be narrower than that of someone who is feted with ads for national or international trips and luxury products. Moreover, if like Larry and Rhonda you happen to know that your colleague is receiving more ads for the luxury products than you are, and more and better discounts to boot, you may worry that you are falling behind in society's estimation of your worth.

In fact, the ads may signal your opportunities actually *are* narrowed if marketers and publishers decide that the data points—profiles—about you across the internet position you in a segment of the population that is relatively less desirable to marketers because of income, age, past-purchase behavior, geographical location, or other reasons. Turning individual profiles into individual evaluations is what happens when a profile becomes a reputation. Today individual marketers still make most of the decisions about which particular persons matter to them, and about how much they matter. But that is beginning to change as certain publishers and data providers—Rapleaf and Next Jump, for example—allow their calculations of value to help advertisers make targeting decisions. In the future, these calculations of our marketing value, both broadly and for particular products, may become routine parts of the information exchanged about people throughout the media system.

The tailoring of news and entertainment is less advanced, but it is clearly under way. Technologies developed for personalized advertising and coupons point to possibilities for targeting individuals with personalized news and entertainment. Not only is this

already happening, the logic of doing that is becoming more urgent to advertisers and publishers. Advertisers operate on the assumption that, on the internet as in traditional media, commercial messages that parade as soft (or “human interest”) news and entertainment are more persuasive than straightforward ads. Publishers know this too, and in the heat of a terrible economic downturn even the most traditional ones have begun to compromise long-standing professional norms about the separation of advertising and editorial matter. And in fact many of the new online publishers—companies, such as Demand Media, that turn out thousands of text and video pieces a day—never really bought into the old-world ideas about editorial integrity anyway. What this means is that we are entering a world of intensively customized content, a world in which publishers and even marketers will package personalized advertisements with soft news or entertainment that is tailored to fit both the selling needs of the ads and the reputation of the particular individual.

The rise of digital profiling and personalization has spawned a new industrial jargon that reflects potentially grave social divisions and privacy issues. Marketers divide people into *targets* and *waste*. They also use words like *anonymous* and *personal* in unrecognizable ways that distort and drain them of their traditional meanings. If a company can follow your behavior in the digital environment—an environment that potentially includes your mobile phone and television set—its claim that you are “anonymous” is meaningless. That is particularly true when firms intermittently add off-line information such as shopping patterns and the value of your house to their online data and then simply strip the name and address to make it “anonymous.” It matters little if your name is John Smith, Yesh Mispar, or 3211466. The persistence of information about you will lead firms to act based on what they know, share, and care about you, whether you know it is happening or not.

All these developments may sound more than a little unsettling; *creeped out* is a phrase people often use when they learn about them. National surveys I have conducted over the past decade consistently suggest that although people know companies are using their data and do worry about it, their understanding of exactly how the data are being used is severely lacking. That of course shouldn't be surprising. People today lead busy, even harried, lives. Keeping up with the complex and changing particulars of data mining is simply not something most of us have the time or ability to do. There are many great things about the new media environment. But when companies track people without their knowledge, sell their data without letting them know what they are doing or securing their permission, and then use those data to decide which of those people are targets or waste, we have a serious social problem. The precise implications of this problem are not yet clear. If it's allowed to persist, and people begin to realize how the advertising industry segregates them from and pits them against others in the ads they get, the discounts they receive, the TV-viewing suggestions and news stories they confront, and even the offers they receive in the supermarket, they may begin to suffer the effects of discrimination. They will likely learn to distrust the companies that have put them in this situation, and they may well be incensed at the government that has not helped to prevent it. A comparison to the financial industry is apt. Here was an industry engaged in a whole spectrum of arcane practices that were not at all transparent to consumers or regulators but that had serious negative impact on our lives. It would be deeply unfortunate if the advertising

system followed the same trajectory.

Despite valiant efforts on the part of advocacy groups and some federal and state officials, neither government rulings nor industry self-regulation has set policies that will address these issues before they become major sources of widespread social distress. Part of the reason for the lack of action may be that neither citizens nor politicians recognize how deeply embedded in American life these privacy-breaching and social-profiling activities are. Few individuals outside advertising know about the power of the new media-buying system: its capacity to determine not only what media firms do but how we see ourselves and others. They don't know that that system is working to attach marketing labels to us based on the clicks we make, the conversations we have, and the friendships we enjoy on websites, mobile devices, iPads, supermarket carts, and even television sets. They don't know that the new system is forcing many media firms to sell their souls for ad money while they serve us commercial messages, discounts, and, increasingly, news and entertainment based on our marketing labels. They don't realize that the wide sharing of data suggests that in the future marketers and media firms may find it useful to place us into personalized “reputation silos” that surround us with worldviews and rewards based on labels marketers have created reflecting our value to them. Without this knowledge, it is hard to even begin to have broad-based serious discussions about what society and industry should do about this sobering new world: into the twenty-first century the media-buying system's strategy of social discrimination will increasingly define how we as individuals relate to society—not only how much we pay but what we see and when and how we see it.

Until now, the advertising industry's new media-buying processes have been virtually hidden to all but a relatively few practitioners in the field. No books have been written about the business, and while some excellent trade publications follow its developing story continuously, the particulars they present are more or less opaque to those outside the industry. A few experts in the media-buying field, in fact, told me that they don't try to explain the details of what they do to their clients, the advertisers, or their bosses in the upper reaches of their advertising agencies. They simply wouldn't grasp it. All the clients and the bosses care about, these media buying experts added, is whether they reach their targets with an appropriate return on investment. But from a consumer perspective, from the standpoint of a society aiming for transparency and fairness, this black-box approach is not acceptable. We need to understand the industrial forces that are defining our identities, our worth, and the media environments we inhabit so that we can decide what, if anything, to do about them. Academics, advocates, and government leaders must know enough about this business and its workings to be able to ask hard questions and formulate realistic policy suggestions when they are needed.

The aim of this book, then, is to describe the brave new world that is the media-buying system, especially as it relates to the internet and emerging digital technologies. The chapters that follow detail the media-buying system's tangled history, reveal its logic and operations, identify the problems it poses for individuals and society, and suggest solutions. [Chapter 1](#) starts by challenging the common assertion, made not only by marketers but by many academics, that the consumer is

king in the new media environment. This idea is most closely associated with Nicholas Negroponte's pioneering and still influential account of *The Daily Me*. In his 1995 best seller, *Being Digital*, Negroponte predicted that the power of digital media would give citizens an unprecedented degree of control over their media environments. He illustrated this new control with the hypothetical example of *The Daily Me*, an online newspaper whose content would be customized to suit the interests and beliefs of individual readers. Many years later, as I show here, the content customization that Negroponte predicted is taking off. The crucial difference, however, is that much of the content is not being customized and personalized by consumers themselves. Advertisements, discounts, information, and entertainment are increasingly customized by a largely invisible industry on the basis of a vast amount of information that we likely don't realize it is collecting as a result of social profiles and reputations it assigns us and never discloses, and about which we are likely ignorant.

This book attempts to address this knowledge and power imbalance. By looking under the hood of the internet and other digital media, we see that media buyers play key roles in whether, when, and how people's worth is constructed in that world. To recognize such immense power is not to deny the spaces and opportunities for freedom, participation, and creativity that several scholars identify in the new environment. But it does make clear that the ruthlessly commercial logic and obscure social profiling practices of the new media-buying system are what dominate the emerging digital world.

Why and how did the system develop? The first chapter finds answers in the rise of huge agency conglomerates in the United Kingdom, United States, and France during the 1980s and 1990s. They separated media planning and buying from their historical roles within the ad agency and made them stand-alone businesses. That led to new “media agencies” that competed with one another for clients by stressing their ability to evaluate and predict consumer responses with sophisticated statistics. When the internet came along, they saw its interactive environment as terrific terrain for expanding their numerical understanding of audiences—and for using the measures and labels directly to sell products.

[Chapter 2](#) describes how two technological innovations, “the click” and “the cookie,” became the key mechanisms around which media buyers, marketers, technology firms, and online publishers (that is, firms that create or distribute news, information, or entertainment) planned their digital future. They tried to develop mutual understandings of how to measure the number of people at particular online sites and evaluate the worth of the people and the sites to marketers. The click provided marketers with a way to directly track individuals’ actions with ads and other content. The cookie allowed publishers and marketers to recognize a computer—and sometimes a person—with which they had previous interactions. It also allowed them to store information about targets’ movements across thousands of websites. With the click and the cookie as a start, media buyers and their allies placed a key proposition at the heart of the new system: help marketers identify measureable ways to know, target, and consider the impact of commercial messages on audiences as never before, even in the face of vocal public worries about privacy invasion.

[Chapter 3](#) shows how the compulsion to learn increasing amounts of information about online individuals escalated as the near-manic desire by online publishers to

prove their utility to media buyers continued into the 2000s. This trend coincided particularly with the rise of Google's search engine. Unlike the approach of most publishers, which charged a fee for the display of an ad, Google charged advertisers only if an individual clicked on an ad adjacent to the search results. Media buyers agreed with Google's claim that consumers' keywords were insights into their direct interests. Moreover, Google's pitch that clicking on an ad was a significant indicator of individual consumers' interest fit exactly with advertisers' increasing insistence on direct measurability. The search engine quickly garnered more than half of the money advertisers spent online. As thousands of publishers worked furiously to attract advertisers in order to win some of the other 50 percent of the media buyers' spending with new forms of display advertising, they turned for help to new types of organizations—online ad networks, data providers, and data exchanges. These companies promised to help them boost revenues by presenting advertisers with yet more information about the individuals in their audiences. In the interest of raising publishers' rates with advertisers, publishers asked visitors to register, tracked them, bought information about them, shared much of it (often anonymously) with advertisers, and affiliated with networks of sites that claimed to help advertisers reach their targeted individuals wherever they went.

[Chapters 4, 5, and 6](#) describe how the contemporary business of profiles and valuations of individuals is escalating in unprecedented ways. [Chapter 4](#) shows how marketers increasingly use databases to predict which of the two classifications (target or waste) they should use to categorize particular Americans. Those considered waste are ignored or shunted to other products the marketers deem more relevant to their tastes or income. [Chapter 5](#) explores how media buyers' pressures are leading publishers to accept the idea of customizing news and information based on the characteristics of people that advertisers would want to see. The chapter suggests how consistently shared notions of profiled individuals will lead publishers and advertisers to place anonymous persons they reach into "reputation silos." The content that they will stream to these individuals will have different values based on marketers' evaluation of their lifestyles, offline and online activities, social relationships, and demographics.

These activities aren't tied to the Web. As [Chapter 6](#) shows, they are spreading quickly to other digital media. Although social-media and gaming sites such as Facebook and Pogo have their roots in the traditional Web, their use outdoors is exploding with the rapid spread of multimedia mobile devices. Not surprisingly, these devices are a particularly fertile arena for tracking in the interest of sales and services. The competition for digital dominance in a social-media world is even affecting the biggest medium of all, the home television set. This chapter discusses a mini-industry of companies that exist to analyze social relationships on the Web and elsewhere and to predict which individuals are worth pursuing for what products and with what incentives. The aim is to help marketers follow the targeted individuals across as many geographical locations and devices as possible. The ultimate goal is to pinpoint a consumer with a particular reputation, decide what offers to surround her or him with, and track the results. Call that tracking the *long click*. It means, for example, being able to follow a person's response from the initial presentations of a product in Web ads through a gauntlet of purposeful marketing encounters: an article sent to her that

integrates the product into the piece; a commercial extolling the product sent to that person on her home TV when she is watching; and discount offers for the product based on the individual's location as determined via her mobile phone. The target's ultimate purchase of the product with a swipe of a frequent-shopper card, credit card, or debit card identifies a marketing success—and gets the individual to offer up still more data for various parties to add to the person's profiles and reputations.

[Chapter 7](#) crystallizes the social and policy issues these and related activities raise. Social discrimination via reputation silos may well mean having sectors of your life labeled by companies you don't know, for reasons you don't understand, and with data that you did not give any permission to use. Do your eating habits suggest you will soon spend a lot on health care? What do your age, income, and lifestyle indicators suggest about the value of cultivating you as a cruise line customer—and what do they imply about the minimum discount that you would need to purchase a cruise? What does your household profile suggest about the kinds of commercials your children should receive? What does your Facebook page suggest about your reliability as an employee, or as a borrower? The questions will be as varied as advertisers' interests, and as detailed as the data they can garner about us.

National surveys I have conducted suggest that Americans firmly reject this direction of marketing and media when they are made aware of it. What, then, should be done? Is industry self-regulation sufficient to achieve the kind of information respect individuals suggest they want, or are national regulations necessary to ensure it? I address these questions in [Chapter 7](#). My argument is that a mixture of responsible industry initiatives and government laws is necessary if we are to develop a twenty-first century communication environment that reflects the openness of the democracy we would like our society to be.

Before getting to policy matters, though, the particulars that drive this important debate need to be laid out. How have we gotten to the point of worrying about how marketers shape our digital reputation? What exactly are the processes that ought to concern us, and how do they operate? The answers are part of a compelling story that begins with the academic, business, and public fascination with the internet's potential.

Chapter 1 The Power Under the Hood

During the early days of the Web the pattern was set for advertisers to turn profiles of Web visitors into decisions about their marketing value—in other words, their reputation. Nicholas Negroponte might have charted that potential in *Being Digital*, his best-selling 1995 guide to the new order, but he didn't. Neither did the public intellectuals who followed him. The result was that marketers' growing power remained hidden from public view—and it remains so to this day. At a time when concerns about privacy and the creepiness of Web tracking are making headlines, the under-the-hood forces that generate these effects remain largely unknown. It's crucial to recognize how a new advertising system arose to transform the media and our sense of self—and in the process how it has created our rising sense of unease about digital intrusiveness.

Being Digital came out only a few months after the release of Netscape Navigator, the Web browser that began to open gates to the internet for non-techies. Negroponte headed the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab, a hothouse for computer-based inventions supported by major corporations. His prognostications garnered wide respect in the mainstream media, and the fact that he overlooked advertisers' power hardly raised critical comments. He enthused instead about how communication technologies of the early twenty-first century would give us power to define ourselves; they would allow us to become the captains of our own attention, to focus our interests on what we value. "Your telephone won't ring indiscriminately," he wrote. "It will receive, sort, and perhaps respond to your incoming calls like a well-trained English butler."¹

Negroponte took for granted that creators of the new media technology would tilt it toward individuals' interests rather than toward those of the commercial or governmental spheres. It also made sense to him that users of the new media technology would revel in that individualism. His model for the individual's control of meaning was a virtual newspaper he foresaw called *The Daily Me*. A prototype in the Media Lab was a project (called "Fishwrap") that was available to MIT's population only. Fishwrap was actually not as individualistic as the phrase *daily me* implies. People did receive the kinds of stories that they said they wanted and that the Media Lab's computer inferred based on previous choices. In addition, they received news that others in the MIT community believed important. Still, Negroponte, his supporters, and his critics underscored the power of the users to decide the limits of their social attention, for good or bad. "The services are egocentric," noted the *American Journalism Review* in April 1997 about commercial versions of *The Daily Me* in the wake of Fishwrap. "A user chooses what he or she wants to read and can filter out other information." The developments seemed to displace the traditional attention-setting function of editors, a point that concerned traditional journalists, who worried people might ignore socially significant agendas. *AJR* put the concern this way: "Customized online news services allow readers to receive content tailored to their interests. But do readers risk missing important developments that don't fit their

profiles?”²

Pro or con, the idea that individuals would hold power over media destinies in the twenty-first century got a lot of traction. An important book to trumpet the idea positively from economic and legal standpoints was Yochai Benkler's *The Wealth of Networks*. A book jacket blurb by University of Virginia communication professor Siva Vaidhyanathan accurately described it as “a lucid, powerful, and optimistic account of a revolution in the making.” Underscore the word *optimistic*. As Benkler saw it, the technological openness and flexibility of the internet would allow individuals unprecedented opportunities to collaborate outside of traditional business frameworks toward the creation of an astonishing new world:

A series of changes in the technologies, economic organization, and social practices of production in this environment has created new opportunities for how we make and exchange information, knowledge, and culture. ... [N]ewly emerging practices have seen remarkable success in areas as diverse as software development and investigative reporting, avant-garde video and multiplayer online games. Together, they hint at the emergence of a new information environment, one in which individuals are free to take a more active role than was possible in the industrial information economy of the twentieth century. This new freedom holds great practical promise: as a dimension of individual freedom; as a platform for better democratic participation; as a medium to foster a more critical and self-reflective culture; and, in an increasingly information-dependent global economy, as a mechanism to achieve improvements in human development everywhere.³

Paralleling Benkler's bold claims for the collaborative efficiencies afforded by new information platforms were assertions that the new technologies provided people with previously unheard of levels of power to follow their individual interests. Some pointed to the bad side of that power, others to its positive implications. Cass Sunstein took a negative slant in his book [Republic.com](#) and in related writings. “The most striking power provided by emerging technologies is the growing power of consumers to ‘filter’ what they see,” he stated, in an often-cited line.⁴ To Sunstein, the ability to customize news sites by topic, to skip unpalatable topics, and to find comfort in like-minded ideological blogs meant that people can live in idea cocoons of their own making, or of their making in collaboration with people who agree with them—what Sunstein called “cyber-polarization.”

Henry Jenkins saw these same individual powers quite differently. In *Convergence Culture* and other works, his focus was on very active contemporary audiences who often push media companies to include them in their activities across multiple platforms, from television to magazines to fan conventions. It was a celebratory view that reveled in people's growing influence on their symbol-making environment.⁵ What concerned Jenkins was not ideological polarization but teenagers' awareness of what is appropriate when wielding the liberating technologies of the digital revolution. “The world has suddenly developed a printing press for every person on the planet,” he told Singapore's *Straits Times* in response to consternation in that nation about a young woman who posted nude photos of herself on her website, “but it has not prepared its culture to be responsible or imagine the consequences of suddenly becoming media makers.”⁶

Jenkins overreached in his assertion: there surely are places where not everyone has