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Influence Government: Practices and power in the surveillance influence infrastructure

Abstract

There is a well-established body of social theory which discusses how infrastructure and technology are involved in attempts to shape, govern, and control society. In addition to 'hard' technologies of power, such as prison architecture or the design of computer systems, states shape society through communication. Historically, this would have been achieved through non-digital communications infrastructures such as television and the press, however the establishment of digital infrastructures has created novel arenas in which these forms of communication and cultural power can be exerted (Castells, 2013). The incorporation of communication and culture into theories of technopower serves to complicate some of the theoretical approaches which are most well-established in this area, which tend to focus on topologies of network power and 'code as law' (De Nardis, 2012; Lessig, 2000). Who controls the information and communication infrastructure and how they are designed is clearly important, but the messages themselves play out in the domain of culture – and the recipients and users have far more agency to modulate, subvert, and repurpose these media than is often assumed in deterministic scholarship on 'algorithmic' or 'design' power (Hall, 1980). Through empirical research into these established digital communications technologies, we outline the links between classic theories in which power is 'hard coded' into technology through default values and control structures, and the interpretive, communicative aspects of power in political and governance projects. This yields a more complex picture than a simple network model of control or one in which constraints on action are hard-coded into systems, exploring instead the links between 'hard' and 'soft' forms of technopower.

We have identified an emerging tool being used by the UK government across a range of public bodies in the service of public policy: the online targeted advertising infrastructure and the practices, consultancy firms, and forms of expertise which have grown up around it (Collier et al. 2021). Our initial explorations involved the use of these tools by the National Crime Agency in 'influence operations', however our empirical mapping suggests much broader use is becoming common across government. This reflects an intensification and adaptation of a broader 'behavioural turn' in the governmentality of the UK state and the increasing sophistication of everyday government communications, which is becoming bound up with the increasingly extensive ad targeting infrastructure. Contemporary UK public policy is fusing with the powerful tools for behaviour change created by the platform economy. Operational data and associated systems of classification and profiling from public bodies are being hybridised with traditional consumer marketing profiles and then 'projected' onto the classification systems of the targeted advertising infrastructures. Despite the claims to scientific rigour and theoretical grounding in their design (Halpern and Sanders, 2016) the everyday design and implementation has prompted criticism around a number of themes: The general value and ethics of communication-based influence, compared with more concrete design of choice architectures; the effectiveness of intervention in meeting their aims; the intended impacts, including counter-productive outcomes, and serious harms.

This is not simply a case of algorithms being used for sorting, surveillance, and scoring; rather this suggests that targeted interventions in the cultural and behavioural life of communities are now a core part of governmental power which is being algorithmically-driven, in combination with influencer networks, traditional forms of messaging, and frontline operational practices. We map the uses, effects, and practices of what we describe as the 'Surveillance Influence Infrastructure', identifying key ethical issues and implications which we believe have yet to be fully investigated or considered. What we find particularly striking is the coming-together of two separate structures of power – the governmental turn to behaviourism and prevention on one hand, and the infrastructures of targeting and influence (and their complex tertiary markets) on the other. We theorise this as a move beyond 'nudge' or 'behavioural science' approaches, towards a programme which we term 'influence government'. Although this might not always work as planned – it still represents an important transformation of the business of communicative power.

Bio

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