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The main title of Lee McGuigan’s book, *Selling the American People: Advertising, Optimization, and the Origins of Adtech*, points to its focus with a missing word. The book doesn’t focus on selling to the American people, but rather on the shift to the institutional construction of audiences, or more specifically, what the political economist Dallas Smythe labeled the “audience commodity”: how people become monetized products that are sold to advertisers by media companies and advertising agencies.[1] Smythe’s work has had quite the comeback in the digital era with its predominant economic model: an emphasis on the feedback-based data points from online behavior to create and enact targeted advertising that digital media build in. The construction of audiences as datafied consumers is the focus of adtech, the massive and mostly hidden infrastructure in our commercialized digital media system that involves websites, platforms, advertising agencies, and an ever-morphing panoply of third-party data-collecting and -crunching services and organizations. But was this model only implemented in the internet era?

In fact, McGuigan assumes that history is a continuum, not a series of radical and discrete episteme breaks. For him, the digital era and the resulting characteristics of surveillance capitalism, target marketing, and programmatic advertising were ushered in by the post-World War II emphasis on computing and before that, mathematics (and with roots extending even farther back). The sentence “research departments in advertising agencies have taken the lead in developing algorithms that produce optimal solutions to media mix problems” was published not in the digital era, but by the *Journal of Marketing* in 1971 (quoted, p. 87).[2] The rhetoric of mathematical-based ad research in the 1960s was similar to that in the late 2000s.

Much of the book is therefore a detailed history of how earlier advertising research used systems theory and data collection and analysis to try to solve the big problems of advertising: the op-
timal media mix of ad placement, the seamless integration of ads with shopping affordances, the strategically timed targeting of individual consumers at their most-likely-to-buy moment, and linking money spent on marketing and advertising to the ultimate return-on-investment (ROI) bottom line: knowing which specific sales message directly resulted in purchases.

*Selling the American People* joins and contributes to work from a group of scholars studying the “prehistory” of digital promotional logics and their political-economic and ideological implications: Mark Andrejevic, Kyle Asquith, Nicole S. Cohen, Matthew Crain, Josh Lauer, Anthony Nadler, Safiya Umoja Noble, Richard K. Popp, and Inger L. Stole, among others.[3] McGuigan includes a special shout-out to two early scholars of ad-based differentiation and surveillance, Oscar H. Gandy Jr. and Joseph Turow.[4]

McGuigan situates many of his chapters in a specific marketing context to explore a longtime goal of marketing with the rich data offered by the documents of earlier eras. For example, the chapter on the precedents of programmatic buying—where algorithms calculate and determine digital ad placement based on website and consumer data profiles—examines attempts to solve the convoluted national TV spot buying process, where national brands would target specific TV markets for extra coverage. The shift in TV funding from the sponsorship model of early TV to the multiple-advertising spot ad model used later greatly complicated the placement of TV ads, especially in local markets, and required computer-assisted data market, ratings, and commercial-placement analysis. A later chapter grounds advances in targeted advertising (or “addressable” advertising that characterizes digital ads today) in the early audience specialization of local cable TV advertising media planning that was promised by the addressability offered by cable connections to individual households, given the need to differentiate channel bundles and premium paid outlets like HBO. In these chapters, the author cleverly uses turns of phrase to reframe our understanding of advertising history. The celebrated “Creative Revolution” of the 1950s and 1960s that embraced irony ran basically concurrent with a computer-enabled “Calculative Revolution.” He contrasts the “Mad Men” of the eponymous TV show (2007-15) with the “Math Men” of Operations Research. On the other hand, because advertising is in the business of rhetoric and hyperbole, this includes hype about advertising research and its calculative effectiveness. McGuigan emphasizes that many of these computer-based innovations didn’t quite deliver: “Household addressable TV advertising muddles on, still ‘the next big thing,’ as it has been for thirty years” (p. 190). He quotes one professor in the late 1960s noting that “much of so-called advertising research is itself merely advertising” (p. 84).

McGuigan’s histories and analyses are also embedded in structural critiques. He argues that the same logics, practices, goals, marketing imaginaries, and inequitable hierarchies of audience value we see today in digital adtech were around in mathematical and technological innovations in advertising for many decades as a result of that institution’s embeddedness in capitalism. He discusses in the last chapter the complications involved with forms of social-justice interventions “if we understand [adtech] not as aberrations but as the automation and extension of core capitalist tendencies via management technique” (p. 247).

The book’s formidable strengths lie in the careful historical detail that McGuigan mixes with frequent zoom-outs to the ideological implications of this detail. He problematizes the construction of people as monetization instruments; the implications for funding certain media over others; and the privacy, surveillance, and discriminatory implications of data-oriented target marketing. Chapter 1 is also a nicely detailed and clear primer about how modern digital advertising works, an explanation that would make for valu-
able reading in senior-level undergraduate courses or graduate-level courses in advertising studies. Selling the American People is an important contribution to the history of marketing, to understanding the role of advertising in legitimizing and concretizing our data-based and technocratic society, and to the subfield of critical advertising studies.

Notes


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