

## The Ethics of Targeted Advertisements

Targeted advertisements are used when websites and apps track the online activity of an individual and tailor advertisements for products and services that the person may have an interest in. This data collection can be done by gathering a user's search history, web pages visited, location, and more. This now common form of advertising can be very effective in selling a product or promoting a brand. However, ethical debates surround issues such as how certain demographics will be targeted, potential privacy concerns, and the effects this practice may have on democracy.

While some may argue that targeted ads can be relatively harmless when people are seeing ads for products that interest them, the mere existence of this type of invasive ad placements can be seen by others as unethical in and of itself. For example, companies may use targeted ads to prey on vulnerable populations, such as marketing alcohol to people who have a search history that indicates they struggle with alcoholism. How companies store and sell data is also a growing area of concern. Listening devices such as Siri or Alexa might pose an invasion of privacy because they have the capability to store and/or share information that is spoken.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Do you feel that targeted advertisements are helpful or harmful? To your shopping? Your privacy? Why?
2. What are some ways this data might be used to negatively impact you? Positively?
3. What information, if any, would you *not* want companies to collect about you? Anything from your search history? Your purchase history? Your daily travel history?
4. How might companies utilize targeted advertising techniques to build trust with customers who are wary of being constantly tracked?
5. Could a company's tendency to target people of a specific age group, race, or gender cross the line and become discriminatory? If so, where is this line? If not, why not?

**Example:** Facebook has faced lawsuits for allowing advertisers to target specific demographics on their platform for employment or housing opportunities. It may seem harmless for a company to search for employees under a certain age, for example, but is there a point at which this become discriminatory? If so, what is that point?

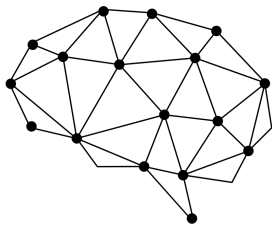
6. Consider the differences between traditional advertisement such as a television commercial or a billboard and targeted advertisements on a personal device? What are the advantages and disadvantages of both? What are the ethical differences between these approaches?
7. What are some of the potential problems that can come with targeting advertisements that do not happen with traditional advertising?
8. Targeted advertisements are not only used to sell a product, they can also be used by political campaigns. How might targeted advertisements affect the political process/democracy?

### For Further Thought

In addition to posing privacy issues, collecting user data in order to develop targeted advertisements can impact political campaigns. The effects of targeted advertisements on the 2016 election show the potential for these ads to drastically alter democracy as it exists today. Cambridge Analytica, a political consulting firm, was paid by both the Ted Cruz campaign and the Trump campaign in 2016 to analyze data points on Facebook users in specific states, catering advertisements to them. Cambridge Analytica is said to have had 5,000 data points on each American voter. They used this knowledge to target people in swing states who they deemed “persuadable” after conducting personality assessments. In addition to targeted online ads, Cambridge Analytica created targeted rhetorical messages based on issues important to voters that could be used by campaign volunteers going door-to-door during the campaign. This meant they could present a uniquely targeted pitch to each house.

#### Questions:

- 1) What ethical issues or frameworks could guide our thinking about the use of ads in this way?
- 2) How does your ethical analysis change depending on whether or not users know the ads and pitches are targeted?
- 3) Whether it occurs in person instead of online?
- 4) Or if Cambridge Analytica had gained their data through legitimate means that did not violate Facebook’s terms of service?



Cambridge  
Analytica



This one-sheet was created for the SOPHIA of Worcester County chapter by students in the Communication Law and Ethics course at Fitchburg State University. It was edited by Dr. J.J. Sylvia IV. Its creation was supported by SOPHIA and the Douglas and Isabelle Crocker Center for Civic Engagement. Students included Landon Callahan, Megan Ptak, Cameron Barry, Evan Hanson, Anthonio Garcia, Dylan Aquino, and Joey Bertolino.