

In-Class Activity: Online Advertising Profile Exploration

Objective:

In this activity, students learn about targeted advertising profiles that online companies like Google and Meta construct based on their online user activities. By exploring their own advertising profiles, students consider how these perceptions of their personalities are created as well as how well the profiles correspond to how the students understand their own identities. The goal of the activity is not to convince students to reject any platform that uses targeted advertising, but rather for them to understand more of the processes that are often hidden from the direct view of many users.

Unit/Topic:

This activity is appropriate in general media studies classes as well as in courses more specific to studying the internet. It can fit within a unit about advertising practices more generally, or within a unit about the business models of the contemporary internet.

Learning Outcomes:

- Identify and report how online platforms build profiles on them to serve targeted advertisements.
- Consider what user activities and browsing behaviors contribute to these profiles.
- Assess how targeted advertising practices compare to the benefits they receive online platforms.

Time Needed: 20 minutes

I originally planned this activity to be conducted during a synchronous online discussion section. It could easily be conducted as an activity for face-to-face instruction as well. The basic ideas will work for asynchronous class work, albeit with some modifications.

Materials/Preparation:

- Instructions for viewing ad personalization topics/profiles for multiple platforms. These can be provided as a link, or as a separate handout sheet. Be prepared to demonstrate this for students to view the process.
 - Examples:
 - Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/help/247395082112892>
 - Instagram: <https://www.newsweek.com/instagram-ad-interests-how-see-1442814>
 - Google: <https://adssettings.google.com>
- Screenshots of example ad profiles. These can be your own, or demos that you found online. It is useful to have extra examples for students who are unable or unwilling to look at their own profiles. Some examples are included at the end of this document.



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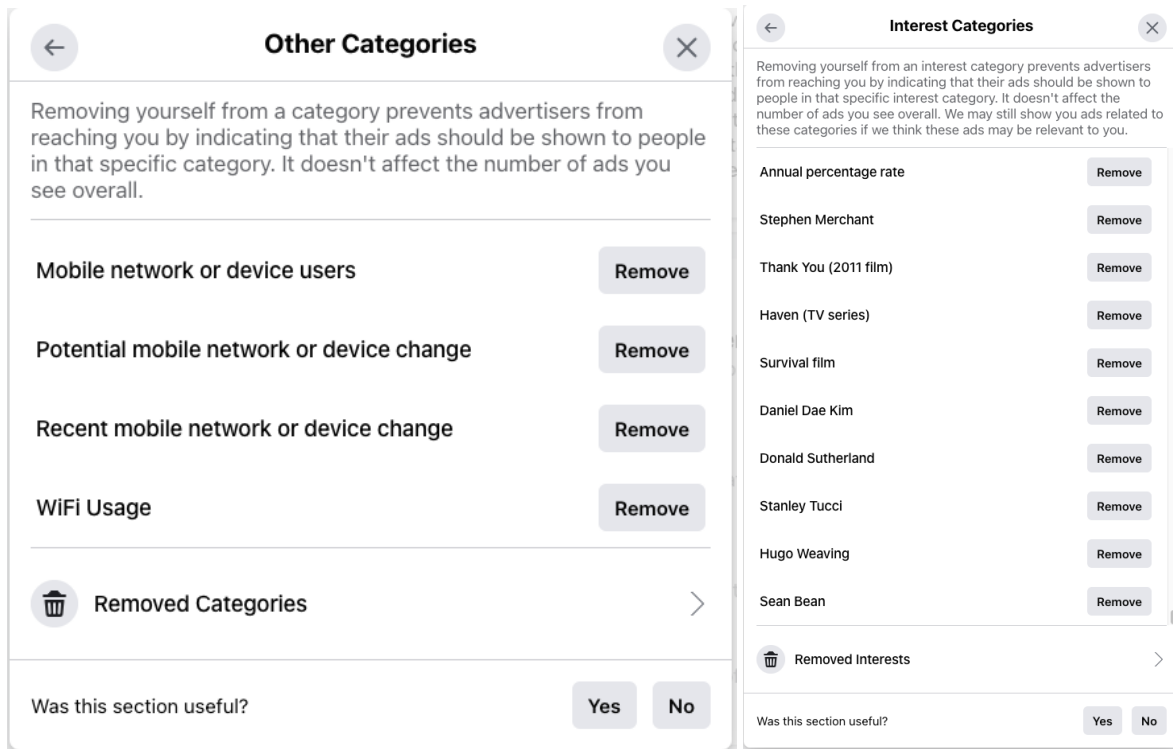
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Directions for Instructor:

1. Introduce the activity by explaining that we'll be looking at the "advertising profiles" that various companies have built based on how we use their platforms and websites. Depending on where this fits within the rest of your course, it may be appropriate to begin with a 3-5 minute discussion of digital surveillance and how advertising can be thought of in terms of an "audience commodity." Describe how "targeted advertising" is a different model than strategies that target broad demographics, such as only by age.
2. Demonstrate how to access the advertising profile for one of the platforms that you have instructions for. If you have access to AV technology, be sure that students can see your screen.
3. Distribute the instruction sheets or URLs that you have prepared and give students about 5 minutes individually to find and examine their own profiles. As a guiding question, ask students to note what characteristics in their profiles were surprising and unsurprising.
4. If time permits, have students share their findings with each other in small groups (2-3 people each). As a guiding question, ask them to speculate how they think the platform came to associate certain topics with their profiles.
5. Regroup the class to debrief. Ask for volunteers to share what they found in their profiles. After hearing 2-3 examples, ask students about how they think these ad profiles were developed. If students are having trouble with this, offer some suggestions:
 - Past search queries
 - "liked" pages and profiles
 - Time spent viewing certain posts
 - Time spent watching ads
 - Web browsing history
 - Information provided to platform (e.g. entering your age at signup)
6. To conclude the discussion, ask students to indicate (by a show of hands) whether this information is going to change the way that they use these platforms, or the internet more broadly. It is likely that most students will remain comfortable with using platforms that use targeted advertising strategies. However, you can summarize the activity and its learning outcomes by explaining that the goal is not to change their opinions of the practice, but to provide information about *how* it works so that they can make more fully informed decisions about how they use the internet in their own lives.

Example Screenshots:

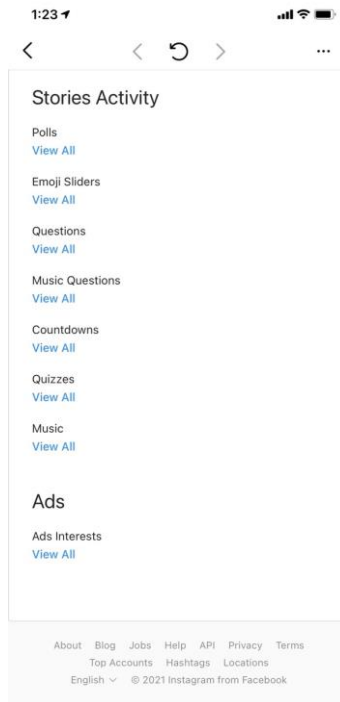
Facebook:



Instagram:

Ads Interests

Online shopping
Shopping
Beauty
Nature
Automobiles
Tourism
Association football (Soccer)
Travel
Sports
Basketball
Parenting
Camping
Baseball
Fishing
Luxury vehicle
Hunting
Parties
Outdoor recreation
Recreation
Ice hockey
Sports and outdoors
Team sport
Survival skills
Hockey Canada
National Collegiate Athletic Association
USA Baseball
Boston Bruins



Google:



- Vodafone
- Amazon.com
- GearBest
- Namecheap
- Action & Platform Games
- Air Travel
- Athletic Apparel
- Audio Equipment
- Samsung Electronics
- OnePlus
- Albion Online
- Action & Adventure Films
- Adventure Games
- Android OS
- Athletics Shoes
- Autos & Vehicles