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Increased Web Advertising and Its Effects

Almost everyone who has tried to stream anything online knows how annoying and invasive internet advertising can be. With cookies, and websites like Facebook saving and selling user data, these ads are often ads tailored to individuals. And this invasiveness is likely going to get worse. All this advertising leads to a rise in consumerism, and subsequently, unhappiness.

Many websites advertise, and sometimes offer premium services to hide those ads. Advertisements can also be tailored to the individual user. Facebook, for example, is well known for its advertisements and its tracking and sharing of user information. It was exposed in 2011 that Facebook had been deceiving its users on many different privacy issues. For example, they “passed on personally identifiable information to advertisers, even though it said it would not do so” (Business: Sorry, Friends; Facebook and Privacy, 79). Despite this breach of trust, and continuous subsequent scandals regarding Facebook and privacy, like the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Anderson), Facebook continues to be the most popular social network worldwide. (“Most Used Social Media 2020.”)

This is not the worst of it. Unless something changes, advertising will continue to be more and more invasive. On August 7th, 2009, Sony filed a patent called, “System for converting television commercials into interactive networked video games.” (Zalewski) There are several different methods patented, and many of them seem almost dystopian. In one instance, interacting with a commercial would provide the player with a reward, or the ability to end a commercial early.

One of the drawings included with the patent indicates the latter example. The advertisement on television tells the viewer to say “McDonalds” to end the commercial. When the viewer stands up, and says “McDonalds,” the commercial is skipped, and the viewer can continue watching. These are just a couple of examples of ways that corporations are exploring further invasive advertising though the internet.

In a 2008 study on people in India, it was found that television had a profound effect on the beliefs of individuals regarding consumerism (Varman and Russel, 227-52). While the participants of the study mainly disapproved of the television programming, and of consumerism in general, most of those who were part of lower social classes actively emulated those things they criticized. This encouragement of consumerism has a profound effect on all kinds of their relationships. “The rise in consumer culture in India […] has led to the weakening of the traditional bonds of kinship and community in the society.” (Varman and Russel, 245) The individualism, possessiveness, and greed brought on by an increase in materialism led to increasing inter-group problems on the participants.

The internet is a similar media source to the television. In a way, it is like an interactive television. Therefore, the clear demonstration of how television can affect the beliefs and values of individuals in the previously mentioned study can be assumed to be similar online as well. This is worrying when we couple it with the effects of these value systems encouraged by television and online advertising on an individual’s well-being.

Consumerism has clear negative effects on overall happiness. Those who value and hope to obtain financial success are associated with worse psychological adjustment. (Kasser, Tim, & Ryan 410-22) They also show lower levels of empathy (Sheldon, Kennon and Kasser 531-43). Think of a time when you or a loved one felt influenced by an advertisement. When has that ever had a positive effect for the individual? It only ever served the corporation.

Clearly, the increase of advertising will have a negative effect on our society. It will only get more frequent and invasive, and the internet gives corporations new ways to do just that. These advertisements lead to increased consumerism, which has a clear negative effect on individual and group well-being.

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