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What Does Microtargeting Say About Politics Today?

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Abstract:

Microtargeting in politics has been understood as a grave threat to the future of democracy since Cambridge Analytica illegally interfered with electoral procedure in 2016. Most recently, political analysts are optimistic about digital platforms acting to minimise damaging impacts, however, the presence of political microtargeting is significant beyond its electoral effects. Understanding microtargeting as one symptom of a larger movement of political disenchantment illustrates how voters are perceived as preoccupied and disinterested enough to be subject to subtle nudging processes. Using Hannah Arendt's theory of 'the rise of the social' to consider the roots of this disillusionment, this essay argues that the problem reflected by the presence of microtargeting in politics is one of public, political space having been lost to the modern mentalities of voters, rather than just one of social media disrupting democratic process.

Introduction:

Amidst an ever-more individualist global culture, microtargeting developed as an online marketing strategy that used consumer data to identify how likely it was that the interests and preferences of individuals aligned with the advertisement of a product. However, microtargeting began to gain attention, and to be understood as a political tool when Barack Obama used it as a campaign strategy in the 2012 US presidential election. In sending select messages to select voters based on what was understood of their values through demographic predictions and patterns of online engagement, his team began to change the meaning of microtargeting, and began to privatise experiences of public discourse.

Microtargeting in politics, as a process by which online actors attempt to influence the nature of an individual's political engagement, has since been analysed extensively with reference to its potentially detrimental impact on democratic elections. Most recently, it is unclear whether political microtargeting has any significant effect on electoral outcomes (Waterson, 2024), however, its existence is impossible to doubt considering reports of recent electoral campaigns (Wylie, 2019). So, while a lot has been said about the threat of microtargeting and how governments should be responding to it, the focus of this essay is instead on understanding microtargeting as one symptom of a larger movement of political disenchantment. Hannah Arendt's theories of the loss of the political in modernity provide a useful analytical framework for the relationship between mentalities of modernity and processes of microtargeting, which may better reveal the full implications of the presence of microtargeting in today's social and political context. Using Arendt's "rise of the social" (Arendt, 1958, page 38), in which previously private concerns of production and consumption have become public, I argue that political microtargeting reflects the perceived malleability of mass, conformist mindsets that Arendt predicted. Arendt suspected that this shift in priorities would divorce us from political life, constructing an atomised individual in a society of mass consumption whose decisions are ultimately vulnerable to subtle instruction – a vulnerability that microtargeting relies on.

Arendt's definitions of public space are often used to explore whether digital platforms are eroding political participation (Forestal, 2021; Dean, 2003), but her account of 'the social' may better uncover the depth of our distance from political action. This angle indeed presents public space for political participation as collapsing, but not because new (and often digital) spaces are inherently unfit for democratic purpose, but because we are limiting our own political freedom in our approach to public spaces. It seems that digital platforms may not have instantaneously destroyed democratic participation by facilitating

microtargeting, but rather that pre-existing movements towards 'social' mentalities and alienated existences have been intensified, and even accelerated, by the digital age. Through explaining how Arendt sees patterns of political disengagement as stemming from the rise of the social, and exploring how the existence of microtargeting relies on the same conditions that she describes, this essay demonstrates how the development and use of microtargeting in politics indicates that we are indeed perceived as preoccupied and disinterested enough for our contributions to democracy to be exploited. Microtargeting would not be feared as much as it is if our approaches to politics were better integrated into the public spaces around us, and therefore it cannot be understood in isolation as an issue with a legal or technological solution, but rather as an opportunity to reframe our political mentalities and resist the tendencies of alienated conformism that Arendt predicted.

The rise of the social, as described by Arendt, leaves us vulnerable to microtargeting:

Using Arendt as a theoretical framework does not champion her theories of public space but rather acknowledges that her predictions of modern political engagement create a compelling account of mass political disenchantment that can be used to explain the presence of microtargeting. To Arendt, the social, the public concern of private affairs, has attributed such value to the economic and emotional lives of individuals that space for political action has eroded as politics now cannot be properly engaged with.

Arendt's vision of politics is one that is underpinned by a strict division between public and private: the private is the space taken up by the maintenance of human life, including the acquisition of funds to do so, while the public is the space where people can be driven by something other than their basic needs, and therefore where action can happen. Political engagement is only fit for purpose in the public realm where action can reveal itself through organic contention between equal individuals whose motives are not tainted by social desire or necessity. If emotional wants and needs are not taken care of in private, people are not free to bring their full selves to this public deliberation. In this case, the inequality of resource distribution and the subjectivity of emotional life inevitably enter, and ruin, public, political space. In addition to this, it is not just public space for politics that disappears if the public and private are brought together by modernity: Arendt sees the value of the private realm as disappearing if it becomes public, because to live an entirely private life is to lose something human. Losing public space is to "be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others" (Arendt, 1958, page 58), it is to lose the 'objective' relationships that come from being related and separated by public spaces, which in turn weakens the role of the private. Therefore, losing the public to the private not only disrupts the equality and objectivity of political action, but it destroys the

space of refuge that exists in the grounding experience of being surrounded by others in public. When there is no space to exist with people 'objectively', outside of your own head and heart, the intimacy of the realm of necessity cannot feel reassuring, and instead becomes a force that takes over individual identities with primary wants and needs. These realms are clearly interdependent for Arendt and, in blurring the line between them, the rise of the social disrupts the psychological and economic conditions necessary for meaningful political engagement.

The economic implications of the social underpin the conformity that Arendt sees in modern behaviour, and thus are relevant to consider as a background for the predictability microtargeting relies on. She sees the rise of the social as having come about following the demands of early modern capitalism: as the development of the nation state demanded national economies that were functional for extraction, economic concern moved outside the household. Economics as a science revolves distinctly around predicting human behaviours of production and consumption accurately, meaning an interest in conformity is generated, and an expectation of behaviour created, with the reward of national profit. This effectively positions nations as giant versions of private households, as the means for the maintenance of human lives become of national interest. Not only are the funds for human labour publicly organised, but housework and personal care become areas of employment in a way that symbolises how the roles of individuals are now in maintenance of the economy rather than of themselves and their families. When the focus of society becomes national profit so whole-heartedly, the private realm has obviously infiltrated the public, and individuals seeking emotional and economic fulfilment become conditioned into a state of expected behaviour. In this state, political action in Arendt's terms becomes impossible as spontaneity and individuality are avoided, and outcomes appear to people as unavoidable and irresistible.

It is possible that this conformist mentality appears inevitably en masse. Arendt notes that the larger a subject size, the lesser the chance of deviation, and therefore the lesser the chance of excellence and action. The more people in a society, the easier it is to ascribe every behaviour to a particular group, and to minimise its significance, which gives way not only to conformist tendencies, but to action being entirely replaced with 'behaviour'. Without the contention and spontaneity of politics driven by action, Arendt feared we would end up at the mercy of bureaucracy, not with the rule of some authoritarian monster, but without the rule of any person at all, guided entirely by mass mentalities of consumption. It is understandable that mass societies are prone to this distance from political life, not just because private concerns have infiltrated but because we are further away from each other, and from what it is we share. Arendt notes that, as our understandings of the world we live in expand, our own communities shrink, and the more

behaviours we learn of, the less chance there is of seeing our own contributions as unique or powerful. This blindness makes us vulnerable: the loss of identity in accepting life in whatever form it appears in and abdicating political responsibility entirely can be exploited. This is because this conformism exists in double in a way, as buyers and sellers are conforming to different expectations, and the designs of certain spaces permit a subtle nudging of buyers from sellers that seeks to take advantage of their social brainwash. In the same way a casino is designed to subtly encourage higher gambles, and a supermarket higher spends, microtargeting aims to exploit our preoccupation, demonstrating how our unintentional actions can now be conducted (Forestal, 2021). This indicates that, because of the conditions that Arendt predicted, people do not now perceive their actions as part of a connected, common concern, and so they are perceived as malleable. Microtargeting is ultimately designed to take advantage of this by knowing what is most likely to influence an individual, but this is only perceived as possible because of our own approaches to political spaces and how these have been affected by modernity.

The design of political microtargeting proves that voters are perceived how Arendt expected they would be:

If microtargeting is understood as profiting from the mentality attached to the rise of the social, understanding its design in a political context is useful to further evidence how it both fuels, and is fuelled by, Arendt's social realm. Microtargeting was originally developed to improve sales by showing buyers products similar to those they have already shown interest in, but as a political tactic it has a distinctly emotional tone. The presence of political microtargeting indicates that political campaigns no longer seek to appeal through attractive public policy, but instead through presenting emotionally sensitive information to those who are predicted to be most sensitive to it. This shift directly reflects the infiltration of private concerns into public political space: emotional subjectivity cannot be held separately from public considerations and public actions are treated with the haste of a private chore.

After its appearance as a campaign strategy in the US, centrist political parties in the UK began to look into processes of microtargeting that are based on more than just demographic information. While Democrats and Republicans at the time were more easily separated by factors such as age, race, and class, other political parties had a voter base more alike in personality type than anything else, which led to an interest in pairing microtargeting with psychological profiling. In his account of how microtargeting was used in the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union, Christopher Wylie explains that Cambridge Analytica, a political consultant firm, was tasked with this transition and began by developing a personality test modelled on the 'Big Five' model of

personality that they paid people to take. To receive payment, participants had to log into their Facebook accounts through an app, which gave Cambridge Analytica access to their Facebook behaviour and that of their friends. This facilitated a predictive model of online influence that had matched detailed psychological insight of hundreds of thousands of people with their online engagement. However, although this correlation may have initially been identified so that political parties could target their campaigns at those most similar to people that already vote for them, it quickly becomes evident that the same database could be used to identify those most vulnerable to rash decision making and encourage them to change their vote: an algorithm programmed to identify those whose behaviour online is likely to align with values of progress and security could be programmed to find the highest likely levels of neuroticism and narcissism.

This emotional approach, that becomes possible when microtargeting is paired with psychological profiling, is useful for influencing political participation because of the psychological shortcuts that allow us to make rapid decisions. These shortcuts include the affect heuristic, which places more weight on information that triggers anger or fear, so, when it is known what exactly is likely to evoke anger or fear in an individual, it is easier to manipulate their decision. This explanation, of course, relies on political participation being informed by rapid decisions, but it seems fair to assume that many votes today are informed by an accumulation of split-second engagements with political information, or at least are perceived as such. Therefore, the design of political microtargeting, and the reason for which it is more effective when paired with psychological profiling, relies on people not having enough time to engage properly with political content in such a fast-paced society, and engaging in a way that allows emotional information on a single issue to sway a vote. This suggests that the basis for microtargeting directly aligns with the outcomes of Arendt's rise of the social: political participation does not have its own space free from the subjectivity and inequality of private, economic and emotional affairs, which now exist without limit. Ideally, voting in an election involves consideration of so many policy directions, so to develop a technology that targets votes by placing single-issue adverts on social media timelines suggests that voting processes are not perceived to involve such detailed consideration.

This explains why microtargeting is not only significant in its potential for successful voter manipulation, but as a symbol of the political engagement that Arendt predicted would be seen in modern societies. The growth of the social realm has dissolved the local spaces of political conflict that let action be free from, but underpinned by, the private realm of necessity, leaving individuals to be consumed by their contributions to the national economy and by their own emotional processes. With such little time to evaluate the individual spirit one would want to bring to a political realm, it is hard to notice its

inadequacy, and easy to follow those around you and focus on getting by. In addition to this, microtargeting taking place on social media platforms is important to consider for its interaction with Arendt's rise of the social as the presence of political adverts online frames social media as an appropriate space for political engagement. If people are already less inclined or able to engage fully with the decisions they are posed in a democracy, presenting online expression as political risks it being perceived as an appropriate replacement for registered political participation. This is not to say that political microtargeting inherently isolates political participation to social media, but rather to question whether planting political content online sets a political agenda for discussion that risks taking up the little time available for political engagement. This establishes how microtargeting actively contributes to the social mentalities that Arendt predicted by drawing voters further away from legitimate political engagement, further occupying already-preoccupied voters with aimless and misinformed disagreement. Debate in this form does not conform to Arendt's standards of agonistic democracy as people are not separated by their individual takes on the same information if everyone is receiving different, select messages. However, it does well to disguise online debate as democratically productive, further replacing the role of public spaces in community with isolated, subtle instruction as Arendt predicted would come with modernity.

Conclusion:

Understanding this interaction between Arendt's accounts of disenchantment and the presence of political microtargeting positions microtargeting as a symptom of broad voter disengagement. Addressing this movement will not necessarily begin with the prevention of microtargeting but, to ensure that microtargeting has no place in our political spaces, there must instead be an expansive approach to radicalising understandings of political space to deconstruct individual disillusionment. Although it may also point to how social media has exacerbated this problem, microtargeting would not be perceived as such a threat, and social media would not look the way it does, if we did not already have a mentality that could be influenced by marketing strategies and alienated from our communities. This further suggests that it is not with microtargeting, or with social media, in isolation that the crux of collapsing political space lies, but in the disorientation and alienation that is experienced by people on such a scale that the individuality of political engagement has been lost to preoccupation and conformism.

Although Arendt has provided a useful theoretical framework for considering the implications of the presence of microtargeting, her suggested solutions are not as appropriate. It is possible to critique Arendt's wider political philosophy as one that makes the rise of the social inevitable: when put in practice, the public/private divide that she

holds so highly makes politics a hugely exclusive practice. If Arendt cannot help but see the private realm of necessity as anti-political, it is unsurprising that the women and slaves who have historically upheld these sorts of spaces, and who likely made up a majority of populations, would lean into a social mentality that allows their own existence to give valid meaning to their own lives – rather than to the lives of a small group of men who could afford to leave emotional subjectivity and interpersonal dynamics behind them and 'act politically'. There is also the problem of believing in 'leaving emotional subjectivity and interpersonal dynamics behind', which any lens of social constructivism quickly uncovers as impossible. This suggests that an approach to politics that incapacitates microtargeting and similar methods of political nudging understands all space as political, and approaches all interactions with the personal fullness that Arendt sees as central to democracy. If individuals concentrated on developing a sense of political self that could not be broken down even by the information that they are most sensitive to, there would be a wholeness to political participation that would not leave room for intentions of voter manipulation. Therefore, the presence of political microtargeting does not just evidence the malicious capacities of social media, but reflects an inadequacy in our approaches to politics. It is part of a movement that cannot be resolved solely by legal restrictions or the reform of digital platforms, which invites us to rethink the nature of our own interactions with information. Understanding microtargeting in this way provides us with an opportunity to reflect on our mentalities, make ourselves more resilient, and ground ourselves in our own, meaningful contributions to the political communities that can be found all around us.

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