Influence government: targeted advertising and the use of influence operations by the UK state for public policy

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Extended Abstract

The practices of private sector advertising and marketing have long existed in a mutual relationship with the practices of government - from wartime propaganda to public health messaging. Critical work and activism surrounding 'surveillance capitalism' and digital influence has generally focused on the use of online tracking and ad profiling for commercial advertising, for misinformation, or in political campaigning. However, our research has identified a novel area of critical enquiry - the use of targeted advertising by government departments and the police for 'influence campaigns' aimed at directly shaping behaviour.

Our research on this began in a criminal justice context - we were measuring the global incidence of Denial of Service attacks using the Cambridge Computer Lab's network of honeypots, and using this data to evaluate the effectiveness of different forms of law enforcement intervention. Strikingly, the most effective intervention appeared to be a six month campaign of adverts by the National Crime Agency targeted at UK users of Denial of Service attack providers. Investigating this further, we found that this was part of a sophisticated, multi-site 'influence operation' involving surveillance, direct intervention, focus groups, and iterative development of messaging - the techniques of a modern marketing consultancy, fused with the operational data and capacities of a public agency.

This was part of an expansion of the PREVENT programme and its approaches - initially focused on counter-radicalisation - to other areas of interest to law enforcement, including cybercrime and gun crime. Targeted adverts based on online behavioural profiles, the use of influencers and 'influence operations', and advanced marketing strategies are now being used as part of frontline law enforcement, in a complex and intertwined relationship with traditional operational duties and data. This serves three main functions - first, allowing agencies to reach increasingly specific groups and subgroups and tailor messaging accordingly, secondly, 'in the moment' shaping of behaviour in particular digital contexts (such as when people search for particular topics, use particular language on social media, or view particular content), and thirdly, the broader shaping of culture - in this case, the cultures of groups deemed 'at risk' of engaging in particular kinds of sanctioned or harmful behaviour.

Struck by what appeared to be a radical new set of practices within UK law enforcement, we dug deeper, thinking (at the time in the context of Dominic Cummings' appointment in

Westminster) that there would be an increasing interest on the part of government for using these approaches for policy work. Contrary to our expectations, we found that these approaches were in fact already well-established across government and in regional policing, a core component of the competency framework used by the Government Communication Service and well underway in every policy area we investigated, from health, to immigration, to welfare, and even wider. This is part of a wider rise to prominence of behavioural science expertise in government - often associated with the 'Nudge' unit - which is increasingly using the technologies and influence practices of the platform economy to drive behaviour change for social policy.

Although there are clear benefits (particularly in the context of the pandemic) to being able to target government communications, there are also some serious potential pitfalls which we believe have been insufficiently explored. These advanced marketing approaches are more than just 'communications' and go far beyond media management - they are frontline policy interventions and need to be seen as such, and subjected to the same public debate, scrutiny and accountability as other such policies. There is the potential for serious unforeseen consequences - stigmatising groups who face structural oppression through targeting and surveillance, causing anxiety or harm, and in some cases the potential to have the opposite effect from that intended, with the targeting serving to spread the very unwanted narratives and behaviours you're trying to counter.

There are also legal and ethical questions to answer - around the selection of particular groups and characteristics, the use of operational data to inform these campaigns, privacy and data rights concerns, and the algorithmic aspects of the targeting itself and the data which this generates and relies on. Conversely, there are potentially areas where it could be argued that the government has a duty to run some kind of targeted campaign - where the targeted advertising infrastructure is already being used to maliciously target vulnerable groups (such as the advertisement of harmful and illegal services, the spread of misinformation, the cultivation by far right groups of misogyny and racism among young men, or targeting online scams at the vulnerable).

Further, while much scholarship takes the claims of the surveillance capitalists rather at face value, in fact the accuracy of this targeting is rather disputed and so the broader efficacy of these approaches may be questionable. In the case of the NCA's cybercrime campaign, the targeting was fairly clear - people searching for particular illegal services - and so the campaign appears to have been very effective, but in other domains this may be a lot harder. Thus the broader efficacy and consequences (both positive and negative) of these approaches may be very difficult to measure. More generally, there is the question of the relationship of these practices to democratic values - whether they are enacted 'top-down' with messages and priorities set by centralised authorities or are actually developed and engaged with communities on the ground.

This research is still ongoing - we'd really welcome any comments, questions, critiques, alliances, or ideas. This research is being done in collaboration between the University of

Edinburgh, Strathclyde University, and the University of Cambridge - current project members are me (Ben Collier) and James Stewart from Edinburgh, and Daniel Thomas and Gemma Flynn from Strathclyde. We have a paper under submission covering all this in a lot more detail, and will update further as we continue to develop this research. For more information, you can read our previous publications on these practices - a [technical paper](#) looking at our measurement work, a [criminological paper](#) which discusses the 'influence policing' idea and compares it to other forms of online policing, and a [talk](#) which Daniel Thomas and I gave to the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice research.