Matthew Crain, **Profit Over Privacy: How Surveillance Advertising Conquered the Internet**, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021, 216 pp., $100.00 (hardcover), $25.00 (paperback).

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Matthew Crain makes it quite clear from the very beginning of ***Profit Over Privacy: How Surveillance Advertising Conquered the Internet*** that his mission is about presenting a critical history of the advertising industry that is focused primarily on the success of the industry in commercializing the Internet. His writing skills, including his ability to make the sociopolitical complexities of political economy accessible and engaging for a broad audience, from undergraduates to business executives, are most impressive. To make sure that readers understand what he makes of this development, he suggests that for nearly everyone except the executives and major stockholders of the small number of companies that dominate this global industry, "advertising's good fortunes have meant the erosion of privacy, autonomy, and security, as well as a weakening of the collective means to hold power accountable" (p. 1).
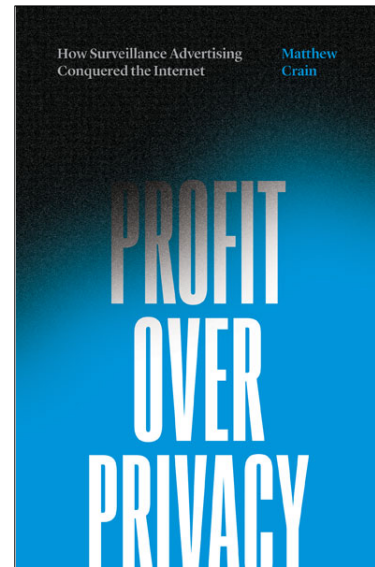
The underlying dynamics of this process are characterized as "surveillance advertising," a process that he seeks to uncover in his own distinctive manner. He goes on to cite Shoshana Zuboff (2019) as a source of insight into the business objective of all this data collection and profiling—selling "the capacity to influence people's actions and attitudes" through the "means of behavioral modification" (p. 5). The author then introduces a second focus of concern: the impact of the rise of digital platform dominance of the digital advertising market on the traditional news organizations in the United States. Because Facebook and Google dominate this market, he suggests that "news organizations must compete with every other ad-supported internet service for the scraps" (p. 6).

In the 1980s, computer databases were being used to "target specific audience demographics through tactical ad placement across media channels" (p. 13). These emergent strategies included the development of "Consumer relationship marketing" strategies "such as loyalty programs" through which the use of data aided in the retention of high-value consumers and facilitating the sidelining or exclusion of those considered to be "deemed undesirable" (p. 13).

At the end of this extended introduction, he reminds those among his readers "who are interested in changing course, it is important to know how we got here in the first place" (p. 18), and that is what he sets out to do throughout the rest of the book.

In chapter 1, he provides numerous examples that underscore the influential role being played by what he refers to as the "neoliberal consensus presided over by Clinton and Gore" (p. 24), as well as some fairly

significant shifts toward a neoliberal policy orientation within the Democratic Party. The so-called Atari Democrats, who were developing primarily within more affluent communities and apparently "wanted to shift from a politics of redistribution to a 'politics of growth'" (p. 24), were seen to have been quite influential through the 1980s.

In chapter 2, Crain shifts his attention to the manner in which President Clinton pursued a variety of strategies, referred to as the *Framework,* which was designed to increase the commercialization of the Internet. He used the archived papers managed by Ira Magaziner, that he accessed through the Clinton Presidential Library, to present his detailed and insightful examination of this process. He characterized it as "a near total victory for the private sector, including those elements interested in advertising and consumer surveillance" (p. 48). His explicit criticism of the *Framework* case exemplified the development of partnerships between governmental and private-sector entities, which were replacing the minimalist state interventions of the past.

In chapter 3, he focuses his investigation on the early development of online advertising, focusing primarily on the role played by DoubleClick. He emphasizes the importance of digital tracking technologies, such as the HTTP cookie, as an important development that he associated with the quite popular Netscape Web browser. Unlike the *Framework* example, which was based primarily on a quite detailed archival source, the history he unfolds from this point forward relies primarily on items published in the press and scholarly publications. His skill in weaving these bits and pieces together from such a variety of sources is quite impressive.

In chapter 4, Crain turns his attention to the "dot-com bubble," which substantially transformed advertising, especially concerning the impact of online marketing. The initial public offerings being made by dot-coms were being swallowed up by billions of dollars introduced by investors seeking to get in on the expected growth in marketing communication. Crain notes the rate at which online advertising surpassed incomes received by outdoor media and trade publications, all of which had been growing at an impressive rate during this period.

In chapter 5, Crain concentrates on how this rapidly growing industry actually came together to attend a conference referred to as the Future of Advertising Stakeholders Summit, to finally address their need to make advertising more efficient while increasing their focus on their returns on investment (ROIs). Although Crain engages in a bit of unnecessary noun creation like "protoplatformization," his description of this process in development is, again, clear and informative. Once again, DoubleClick was credited with developing a way of facilitating a way for Web publishers and their clients to realize the efficiencies and ROIs that microtargeting could help to produce.

As Crain sees it, these "increasingly invasive, manipulative, and discriminatory practices of behavioral profiling," combined with "early attempts to build platform monopolies" (p. 98), shaped the path through which surveillance advertising would become the dominant force that it is today. He cites *The Panoptic Sort* (Gandy, 1993) as providing an early look at what surveillance advertising might look like, including its impact on the nature of discrimination. He saw the development of these dominant platforms as being a fundamental component of the process through which consumer surveillance would become the way to maximize the economic returns being realized through digital ad networks.

And in chapter 6, Crain concentrates on what he refers to as "the privacy challenge." It is here that his emphasis shifts a bit from a focus on firms within the industry to the efforts by privacy activists to shape developments in the public policy arena related to data collection, disclosure, and consent. This was a period in which the corporate push to commit the government to a policy of "self-regulation" for this industry, and attempts at more formal and centralized privacy regulation, were almost entirely rejected, except those dealing with marketing aimed at children. This chapter describes the rather unsuccessful attempts by the Federal Trade Commission to limit the nation's reliance on self-regulation. The passage of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act in 1998 was characterized as having actually been limited by the bill's "vague language and poorly designed enforcement mechanisms" (p. 122). He later suggests that by 2001, essentially all branches of the U.S. federal government had largely turned away from consideration of Internet privacy.

In the final chapter, Crain turns his attention to the nature of the Internet advertising revival that developed not long after its temporary collapse early in 2000. While DoubleClick was such a dominant force among those focused on those within the data-driven ad network targeting publishers, Google was increasing its influence among marketers who were discovering some of the advantages of what was referred to as "contextual advertising."

Its targeted ads were based on the context implied by the Web page in which the ads would be placed. However, when Google later acquired DoubleClick, its "Don't be evil" mantra was cast aside. Soon, as Crain reports, the five major actors within the U.S. Internet advertising combine were delivering a version of profile-based targeted advertising, shaped in part by the massive amounts of consumer data that they were capturing through their Web-based subsidiaries.

Crain suggests that the only way to avoid the sociopolitical harms associated with surveillance advertising would be a political program oriented and mobilized toward altering its dominance within the marketplace. And while he sees some benefits in the approach taken within the European Union's data protection directive, he suggests that we cannot allow the private sector to lead the policy process. Unfortunately, neither he, nor others writing about this quite serious challenge, have moved much beyond identifying the obstacles we face. However, because his writing is so clear, I believe and truly hope that it attracts a broad audience that may help us move closer to the policy goals that he has identified for us.

References

Gandy, O. H., Jr. (1993). *The panoptic sort: A political economy of personal information*. New York, NY: Westview.

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. New York, NY: Public Affairs.