

PART V. ALERTS AND PROVOCATIONS

Media In Our Image

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Most people do not realize that women outnumber men in every age group on social networking sites around the world and they spend significantly more time on these sites than men do. Social media is having a transformative effect on traditional business models in every media industry, including publishing, TV, radio, film, music, and games. I am convinced that the growing influence of social media will help dismantle some of the silly and demeaning stereotypes that characterize media and advertising globally. In particular, I think that social media may help free us from the absurd assumptions we, as a society, have about gender.

Traditional media—which makes its living giving audiences what they seem to desire—has provided us with a surprisingly distorted mirror of our lives, and especially our gender. Most media businesses today use rigid segmentation methods in order to understand their audience. These methods are driven by classic demographics, which sum up human beings with a handful of restrictive labels based on how much money we make, the color of our skin, and our age and gender.

When marketers use demographics, they assume that certain demographics predict certain interests, which can predict a certain kind of purchasing behavior. Demographic-based marketing rose to dominance because it was too expensive to figure out people's *actual* interests, which is the marketer's holy grail because interests are much more closely aligned with purchasing behavior than any demographic model ever could be. But, because marketers, advertisers, and media companies could not reliably track the specific interests of individual members of very large audiences, these companies made a lot of assumptions about what people in certain demographic categories enjoy and want to buy.

The consequences of this business model are quite profound. Most of our popular culture is based upon assumptions about the interests of certain high-value demographic categories. The content that we hear on the radio, read in magazines, and see on screens large and small has been carefully crafted to deliver certain demographics to advertisers. The presumptions made about demographic preferences—what women want, what Hispanics like, what poor people prefer—comprise the underlying DNA of global popular culture.

I have studied the impact of demographics on advertising and media for several years. After focusing my attention on social media, I discovered the outsized role that women play in what many industry analysts acknowledge to be the most revolutionary technological development since the invention of the printing press. Digital media, and especially social media, allows audience members to talk among themselves, to critique, remix, and redistribute content on an unprecedented scale. Of course participants in social networks belong to the same old demographic categories that media companies and advertisers have used to understand them, but now those categories mean even less than they did before. Geography and national boundaries are easily surmounted obstacles in our quest to network and converse with people who share our interests. And demographic categories often play no part in those conversations. In short, digital networks allow us to *opt out* of our demographic categories, which are often virtually invisible online . . . and easily fudged as we go about constructing our own unique online identities.

Traditional media companies are desperate to understand these online communities because they realize that the future mass audience will be online and networked. That is the future. But one reason that the music, TV, and film industries are having a hard time understanding and monetizing these audiences is because they are still looking at them (that is, us) through the lens of demographics. Why? Because that is how ad rates are still determined.

But this will soon change. If you look at how people aggregate online, you do not find people clustering around age, gender, and income categories. What you find instead are “taste communities,” heterogeneous groups of people who coalesce around the things they care about, which can range from serious political causes to pet toys. These audiences are ad hoc; they shift among sites, across link trails, they enter various walled gardens and then report back on their adventures on sites like Tumblr. Their meander-

ing journeys across platforms and channels are driven by their effort to find compelling content that resonates with their taste, their beliefs, and their curiosity. I call them “transnational taste communities” (Blakley and Kaplan 2009, 37).

As media scholar Henry Jenkins observes, place and culture still matter, but fans who participate in these online communities are released from the constraints of geography to interact in real-time with fans around the world—many of whom have widely divergent understandings of the content that has brought them together, whether it’s a Bollywood film, *Twilight*, *Harry Potter* books, or memes like Feminist Ryan Gosling (Jenkins 2006).

Shared values and interests are a far more powerful aggregator of people than age, gender, or income ever were. Those demographic categories are best understood as proxies, clues about what it is a potential customer *might* be interested in reading, watching, and buying. But any rational media company or advertiser would prefer to know what their potential customers have already indicated that they like, enjoy, and desire, which is one reason that online surveillance technologies such as cookies and web bugs are being used to capture the click streams and data trails of online audiences. While online citizens have every right to be alarmed by this new surveillance culture, they should also realize that there is something to be gained from being watched—from having their taste *respected* rather than *presumed*.

The fact that these transnational taste communities are being shaped primarily by women is nothing short of a game changer for global media industries. Although there are more adult men in the global Internet population, women not only outnumber men on social networking sites, they also spend significantly more time on these sites than men do. This is true in every region in the world, (Abraham, Mörn, and Vollman 2010) despite the digital divide between men and women in many traditional countries (Gill, Brooks, McDougall, Patel, and Kes 2010, 3).

Academic studies from a wide variety of disciplines have demonstrated that women do seem to have a much stronger drive to socialize than men. The fact that women, once online, gravitate toward social networks should not surprise us. But this dominance is not just in first world countries, but even in places where women have far less access to Internet-connected computers and smart phones. We do not tend to think about women as early adopters of new technology (Gill, Brooks, McDougall, Patel, and Kes

2010, 7), but all reports indicate that once women are online, they seek out social media sites far more passionately than men.

So what are the ramifications of women's demographic dominance of social media networks? We know that social media is transforming old media business models as companies try to figure out how to make money from online audiences. What might this mean for women, both inside the media industries and out? And what impact will it have on our media-saturated culture?

I believe that the content that makes up our current media environment is going to experience a profound shift. And one reason for this is that women are redefining what audiences are and what they actually want. But I do not believe we will simply trade demographic submission for demographic dominance. I think women will play a key role in planting a stake in the heart of the chick flick and all media content that is based on shallow demographic stereotypes about what men or Asians or young people really want. Instead, media and advertising will be a lot more data-driven and far less determined by demographic stereotypes and hunches about the appetites of eighteen to twenty-four year old men. They will be tailored to the taste of networked online communities where women happen to be the driving force.

But while women have taken over the online social media conversation, women are currently not in a position to dictate the development of those platforms nor the way they will be used by the media companies whose content is increasingly consumed there (Nielsen 2012). In Fortune 500 "technical" companies, women hold 10 percent of corporate officer positions and 11 percent of board of director positions (NCWIT 2010, 7). In the TV industry, only 16 percent of high-powered positions such as writing, directing and editing are held by women—down from a peak in 1998 (Lauzen 2011). Only four women have ever run a major film studio and on screen, the numbers are grim: the Screen Actors Guild reports that 62 percent of roles go to men (Masters, 2011) and a study found that less than 30 percent of all speaking characters in mainstream films were female (Smith 2010, 5).

Women have a tremendous opportunity, right here and now, to permanently adjust this picture. Social media has precipitated the emergence of audiences that were, as Xiaochang Li puts it, "unimaginable" in previous media distribution systems (2009, 77). Women's dominance of social media is a crucial development for feminist activists and scholars, who



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have doggedly documented the appalling way in which women have been represented in media, and the bizarre and destructive tactics that media industries have used to court (and exploit) female consumers. Global media companies and advertisers must learn to live without the primitive methods of audience segmentation that have produced debilitating stereotypes about women and every other demographic group that has been targeted with ad-supported content. Women now occupy the ground floor of the new media revolution: we need to make sure that we build the new media system in our own image, to our own specifications, customized for us.

The Portraits: Media In Our Image

These portraits meld together Renaissance conventions of portrait painting with contemporary visual-data mining. The goal was to create augmented portraits of ourselves that tell people more about our taste, values, and beliefs than about our demographic coordinates. We used word clouds, which reflect the relative frequency of words within a data set, to summarize social media preferences and profile data from each of the portrait subjects. Inspired by the concept of lace veils that both reveal and obscure the subjects, we projected each sitter's own metadata on their physical bodies, creating a veil of revealing data.

The *Media In Our Image* portrait project was conceived by Johanna Blakley, Veronica Jauriqui, Sarah Ledesma, and photographer Jasmine Lord. Thanks to Kate Garner and Krystal Garber for revealing themselves to us. You can find more of these portraits, and more information about what inspired them, here:

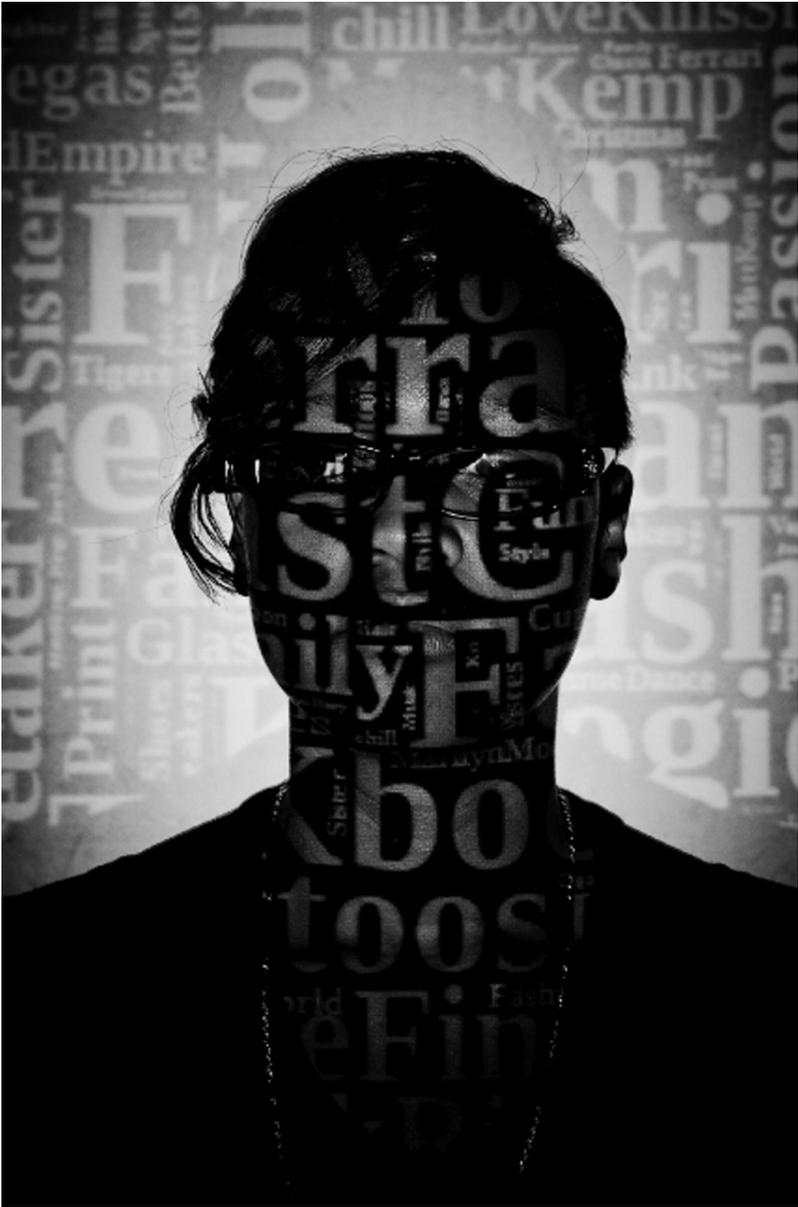
<http://mediainourimage.tumblr.com/>

<http://pinterest.com/sarahledesma/media-in-our-image/>

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