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Big Sister is watching you: Facebook legally manipulates how we vote

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Voters are being manipulated legally much more than illegally. Yet our focus is on the misuse of data for manipulation — in Russiagate and Cambridgegate — rather than on manipulation itself. Put another way, even if all the rules were followed, people would still be manipulated and elections would still be stolen from them. Illegal manipulation is just the tip of the much larger manipulation iceberg. We must deal with the whole iceberg.

Facebook — or any site tracking behavior and displaying political messages in an individualized format — is undermining democracy with technology by manipulation.

The irony is that this is not limited to people being manipulated by propaganda in a dictatorship, nor illegally in a democracy — but legally in a democracy, in the comfort of our own homes.

I call this permitted online manipulation “Big Sister.” Big Brother is public sector. Big Sister is private sector (and very private about it). She doesn’t watch you like Big Brother. She watches you at home, listening attentively online, and then tells you what you want to hear in the voice you’re most attracted to. The Public Enemy No. 1 of democracy is this perfectly legal invisible hand at the disposal of dishonest politicians to manipulate the way people vote.

Being manipulated to buy something by being offered what you’ll statistically want, in a voice you’ll statistically listen to, is bad enough. But when it moves on to sliding politicians into the shopping cart, it’s another matter. You’ve enjoyed the benefits of socializing and shopping online without being told that your political objectivity was the price.

Big Sister is no longer just shopping for you. She draws on four powers to manipulate your voting decisions.

The first is she knows you so well. She knows your digital footprint. You’ve told her almost everything about yourself, most of it with permission, albeit without knowing that you did and without knowing the consequences. You can’t possibly remember everything you’ve clicked, but she can. Beyond computing memory and storage memory, she has the extra advantage of comparative knowledge — she knows about everyone else and can compare them within her algorithm. She can predict your likely next move — and on subjects you haven’t yet considered but others have. The algorithm knows you better than you know yourself.

The second power is her ability to communicate one-on-one en masse. She can say exactly what you want to hear in the way you like to hear it. This customization aspect of the Internet has changed the game dramatically. This is where her power to listen to you is made relevant by her power to speak back. Messages are customized to how you’re likely to behave. These are guided by the knowledge of how other people’s minds with similar views have already been changed by such messages. She not only knows you better than you know yourself — she knows how you’re going to react better than you do.

Her third power comes from the political context in which she operates — complexity and confusion, within which all manner of contradictions can be hidden. Voter issues have grown in complexity over the decades because the world, and governing it, has just become more detailed. Commerce is more elaborate. Scientific progress raises more dilemmas. Technology adds new dimensions, and the horizons of responsibility have evolved from a national economic and social perspective to a global one. While the issues on the table have mushroomed, the number of trade-offs we need to resolve has grown faster still. In this resulting jungle of choices, it’s almost impossible to nail a contradiction, and a politician has the latitude to give different messages to different people. Big Sister flourishes in this jungle.

Her fourth power comes from another feature of the new environment — that the more lies are told, the less people seem to care. It’s as though today’s moral spectrum ranges from a lie

to a white lie to the even milder “political lie.” Never before have politicians had this de facto license to deceive. In such an environment, contradictory messages displayed to different people by the same politician is an irrelevancy compared to the widely tolerated political lie.

Politicians use Big Sister to know you and feed you a customized spin, while the deception goes unnoticed — and if it is noticed, it’s diluted by the new moral order. All of these phenomena form a perfect storm that favors a new model of politician who naturally rises to the top.

Politicians in democracies have thus degenerated into a new breed — the “salespolitician” — who, thanks to the manipulative powers of Big Sister, can sell each person with a different story and steal their vote.

All of this is a dream come true for the dishonest person who previously had no chance to survive the scrutiny of public life with a free press. And we’ll keep on electing sales politicians till we take the sales out of the politician.

We need regulation to cut the link between our online behavior and any secondary use of it — so data can neither be resold nor used on the primary site to guide political advertising. Trading of data should be legislated — many cookies would be toast. This is the way to unplug Big Sister at the source. Clipping her wings will achieve nothing. The cost to Facebook would be the price of democracy.

We live in a world of wolves and sheep. Big Sister is the teeth of those wolves and the best way to defeat them is to defang them without delay.

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Mark Dixon founded and runs boutique mergers and acquisitions advisory firm [The1.com](#) and was a co-founder of [BreakingViews.com](#). His articles have been published on politics, society and finance. He also produces art under the pseudonym Mr. Twist.

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