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# **Selling the American People**

## **Advertising, Optimization, and the Origins of Adtech**

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*Selling the American People: Advertising, Optimization, and the Origins of Adtech*

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# INTERLUDE

Business leaders, like leaders in other areas, are influenced by an “image of the future.” Their ideas about where they are going may be clear or vague, but in any event they have a subtle and far-reaching impact on administrative thinking and decisions.

—Jay W. Forrester

Affordances are the possibilities certain actors perceive as being offered by an environment or resource.<sup>1</sup> With respect to technology, affordances exist in a relation between the material properties of an artifact or system and actors’ recognition of what that technology allows them to do.<sup>2</sup> Peter Nagy and Gina Neff usefully emphasize that users and designers of technology often imagine possibilities that do not exist yet.<sup>3</sup> For our purposes, we can define affordances as the *situated recognition of potential*. Affordances therefore reflect and mediate the priorities, ambitions, expectations, and wherewithal of users trying to discern and activate a technology’s capabilities—including “power users” and intermediaries with enough leverage or visibility to influence authoritative definitions of a technology. Institutional logics, power roles, and modes of accumulation organize these perceptions and the strategies for realizing them in action.<sup>4</sup> Affordances are materially grounded but socially shaped resources that actors use to structure conditions of possibility. They are a view of the future—of what *could* be—filtered through relations and dynamics at a certain place and time.<sup>5</sup>

This is a cultural and political-economic way of thinking about affordances. Rather than focusing on the psychology of how individuals

experience objects, I emphasize how affordances are intertwined with strategic imaginaries and assertions of power related to what a technology means, what it could and should do, and who controls and benefits from it. Storytelling and politics are part and parcel of how industries and professional groups perceive a technology's potential to make or remake the world. Some of the most important things new technologies offer are narrative resources and opportunities to legitimize certain possibilities. Their existence affords an "image of the future," to use Forrester's terms. In this case, computers and other information technologies provided the advertising industry with magnetic and versatile characters for particular stories of progress. Advertising exercised a vivid imagination whenever even the prospect of technoscientific change made it look like the future was up for grabs.

The chapters in part II examine four interrelated affordances that advertisers, attention merchants, and marketing service providers have attached to information technologies and techniques: *programmability* (automation), *addressability* (discrimination and personalization), *shoppability* (interactive commerce), and *accountability* (measurement and analytics). These affordances are the building blocks of adtech. Their histories show that designs to optimize advertising were not side effects of the internet—they were actively cultivated across the second half of the twentieth century. Surveillance capitalism thrives online in part because companies have repeatedly hammered new technologies into the cracks in their marketing and management systems. Not only have they failed to plug the holes; because of all the hammering, the cracks have multiplied and spread.

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