Surveillance Advertising: Good for Consumers or the Ad Tech Industry?

Argument: Consumers like seeing targeted advertisements.
False – Consumers don’t want targeted ads when the trade-off is having their personal data collected. A 2021 survey found that 81 percent of Americans would rather keep their personal data private, even if it meant seeing less relevant ads.\(^1\) A 2019 survey by Pew Research Center found that 79 percent of Americans are concerned about how their data is collected and used by companies, and 81 percent feel that the potential risks of this data collection outweigh the benefits.\(^2\)

Argument: Publishers make more money selling targeted ads. Small publishers could not survive without surveillance advertising revenues.
False – Publishers – the businesses that operate the websites and apps where the ads appear—do not see revenue increase by much, if at all, by hosting targeted ads over non-targeted ones. A 2019 study found that publishers only see a 4 percent increase in revenue from targeted ads over non-targeted ones, or $0.00008 per ad.\(^3\) Both the New York Times\(^4\) and Dutch public broadcasting company NOP\(^5\) have seen ad revenues actually increase after they stopped accepting surveillance advertising.

Argument: Small businesses rely on surveillance ads to reach consumers effectively and cheaply.
False – Surveillance advertising is not as efficient at matching businesses with consumers as some claim. A 2019 study\(^6\) found that demographics and interest categories used to target ads are often inaccurate across leading data brokers, resulting in low gains for targeted ads over random ad placement. Another study\(^7\) found contextual ads to be more cost-effective than surveillance advertising.

Argument: Surveillance advertising enables and perpetuates discrimination.
True – Surveillance advertising can perpetuate discrimination in housing, credit, employment and other economic opportunities, and it allows for personalized pricing without consumers knowing that they are being charged a different amount than others.\(^9\) For example, some employment ads on Facebook were shown only to people of a certain gender\(^10\) or a certain age group.\(^11\)

---

1. Accountable Tech Frequency Questionnaire, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, 2021
2. Americans and Privacy: Concerned, Confused and Feeling Lack of Control Over Their Personal Information, Pew Research Center, 2019
5. Data from Dutch public broadcaster shows the value of ditching creepy ads, TechCrunch, 2020
7. Landmark Study Proves the Effectiveness of Contextual over Behavioral Targeting, Contextual Insider, 2021
8. Websites Vary Prices, Deals Based on Users’ Information, Wall Street Journal, 2012
9. Facebook Is Letting Job Advertisers Target Only Men, ProPublica, 2018
10. Dozens of Companies Are Using Facebook to Exclude Older Workers From Job Ads, ProPublica, 2017
Argument: Surveillance advertising enables government surveillance.

True – Surveillance advertising can lead to the erosion of individuals’ 4th Amendment rights, as government agencies can purchase data that would otherwise require a warrant to obtain.12

Argument: Surveillance advertising creates security risks.

True – The enormous stores of personal data collected for surveillance advertising put consumers at risk for exposure, identity theft, and more malicious tracking.13 Even “anonymized” data can be a security risk; reporters at the New York Times revealed in 2019 how they were able to track President Trump using a dataset of anonymized location pings.14

Argument: Consumers can easily “opt out” if they don’t want to be surveilled for advertising.

False – It is extremely difficult to avoid tracking and profiling.15 Consumers can clear cookies on their computers, but not all tracking involves cookies. Ad blockers allow consumers to stop seeing some ads and thus stop some tracking by default, but not all. Consumers can use global privacy controls on their internet browsers to send a signal communicating that they don’t want their data to be sold,16 but that says nothing about data collection. Plus, these signals can simply be ignored unless the law requires companies to honor them.

13. Data Brokers and Security, NATO Strategic Communications Center for Intelligence, 2020
14. How to Track President Trump, New York Times, 2019
15. California Consumer Privacy Act: Are People Protected?, Consumer Reports, 2020
16. globalprivacycontrol.org, 2021

See https://consumerfed.org/surveillance-advertising-factsheets/ for more information about surveillance advertising (August 2021).