

Microtargeting as a new form of political claim-making

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1 Introduction

As a term, microtargeting emerged in the context of election campaigns. The practices it denotes, however, reflect the inventiveness of the marketing world, which regards the political realm as just another market for its services and products. The novelty of microtargeting is to make use of data analytics to address voters on an individual level instead of as members of larger groups. The literature either celebrates its methods as an increase in effectiveness or it condemns its manipulative potential. Yet, what affirmative and critical interpretations have in common is the assumption that innovative data analytics is able to produce objective and therefore powerful knowledge about citizens. Microtargeting is widely believed to be the "secret source" for identifying and influencing those voters that may determine a tight election outcome.

This article will explore a different perspective on microtargeting. The datafication of voter targeting will be examined as a technique of representation rather than one of campaigning. Such a change of perspective has implications for the properties associated with

microtargeting. Drawing on the "constructive turn in democratic representation" (Disch 2015), this approach will foreground the performative capacities of political data analytics.

If we cease taking its admired targeting powers for granted and focus instead on the issue of *how* microtargeting represents the people, two up to now dissociated research areas can be linked, the conceptual discussion on democratic representation and the empirically driven study of data analytics in political campaigning. Connecting these two research fields allows pursuing, from an empirical perspective, questions that seem directly relevant to democratic theory: What kind of political collectives does democratic representation give rise to, and how are specific techniques of representation shaping contemporary images of the people?

Political theory's notion of democratic representation used to be dominated by a rather formal understanding that equated it with the outcome of elections and confined it to the constitutional sphere of parliamentary institutions. Other approaches that problematised the relationship between representatives and the represented remained a niche phenomenon. This changed with Saward's seminal 2006 article that proposed reconceptualising representation as a creative form of "claim-making"; claims that are strategically produced and offered to voters who may identify with but also reject them. Interpreting representation as claim-making turns a state as yet perceived as fixed into a dynamic and uncertain practice of "making present". Moreover, it allows expanding the study of representation beyond the distinct world of parliaments. Representative claims can be produced, tested, watched and discussed in any situations where someone intends speaking on behalf of an absent third party or matter.

Studying microtargeting as a mode of claim-making directs attention to the material dimension of creating claims, an aspect, which has so far been somewhat underexposed. Although Saward (2006: 303) insists that claims are not the work of magicians but cultural artefacts, which, in order to be convincing, have to reflect familiar topics and experiences, he does not elaborate the art of claim development. To date, the constructive turn in representation research has primarily focused on theoretical questions. Yet, Saward's terminology and model offer very helpful conceptual tools for empirical studies of claim-making. As I hope to show, bridging the gap between theoretical contributions on representation and empirically driven studies on microtargeting will show that both talk about the same subject and that it may be analytically beneficial to take notice of each other's insights. For instance, theorists of claim-making may realise that claims do not only reflect cultural contexts but also the perceived dispositions of the voters, while microtargeting researchers would see their assumption about the objectivity of data analytics challenged.

The remains of this article will proceed in three steps. The next section provides a brief overview of the discussion on democratic representation as a constitutive or creative practice. Its central presupposition is that "we, the people" is a construction that only exists through representation. Hence, representation does not mirror a political collective that exists independent of it; it has to create what it wants to represent. The third section will illuminate this performative process by looking at recent developments in the field of microtargeting. Saward's concept of claim-making will serve as the leitmotif for studying what is called

"voter modeling" in the area of data analytics. The last section provides some thoughts about the political collectives created through microtargeting. In closing, it considers the democratic quality of this datafied technique of representation.

2 Representation as claim making

The most common definition of representation in political science goes back to Hanna Pitkin (1967) who conceptualised it as a form of 'acting for': "*Representation* means the *making present of something* that is nevertheless not present literally or in fact." Pitkin's definition focuses on the relationship between the political representative and the represented voter. She understood the act of "making present" as a unidirectional flow of information from the represented to the representative, with the latter being expected to be responsive to the information given. The problem for democracy in this relationship concerns the response of the representative. The actual practice of making present was taken as self-evident, as Saward (2006) pointed out in his critique of Pitkin's definition. Pitkin's concept of representation did not question the possibility of making present something that is absent and therefore missed what Saward regards as the central performative element of representation.

Representation has always been a problematic concept, because, as Brito Vieira (2015: 500) puts it so well, it is not possible for the 'we', to actually say 'we' and articulate its will. In order to express itself, the 'we' needs a mechanism to identify and act as itself. For the multitude of individuals to form a political collective, it needs to be assembled, demarcated and acted for. Political theorists have pointed out the systematic gap between the individualistic modern society on the one hand, and the unified will of the sovereign subject on the other. As a social reality, the collective is "amorphous, elusive and improbable", and thus "introuvable" (Rosanvallon 2000, quoted after Diehl 2016: 81). Democratic representation is unable to overcome this gap and thus has to accept as a "constitutive aporia" this discrepancy (Rosanvallon 2000, cited after Disch 2009: 50).

Political theory has portrayed the indeterminacy of the public and the resulting problem of its representation in terms of imaginaries, fabrications and fiction (Ezrahi 2012; Koschorke et al 2007). If the people as such do not exist, it has to be imagined (Anderson 1992) and brought to life through events, symbols and narratives, which may temporarily ease the tension between "fiction and reality" (Rosanvallon 2006: 83). Yet, the unclear relationship between the sovereign and the reality of social life is the source of a permanent uncertainty about how to adequately give form to and be representative of it. As Ezrahi (2012) observes, academic concepts and measurements have contributed a great deal to making this uncertainty manageable. Scientific statistics and standards in particular have helped to transform an "otherwise amorphous composite of people and attributes" into a collective that "holds together in the imaginations of politicians, government officials, and the general public" (Nelson Espland, Stevens 2008: 412). A history of practices of democratic representation could thus be written as a contested development of tools aiming to measure, make legible and predict the public will— with microtargeting as its most recent and somewhat creepy incarnation.

Saward's concept of claim-making echoes the social constructivist paradigm. For him, representation is a creative, aesthetic process that cannot be reduced to responding to information or mirroring a public will. The matter or collective to be represented does not exist independently from the process of making it present but is being created as part of the process of representation. Thus, we should understand the practice of representation as a constitutive or performative process of "reading in" rather than "reading off" an electorate (Saward 2006: 310). The concept of claim-making suggests that the act of making present itself becomes an interesting subject for research because different possibilities of making present with different generative effects for the subject of presentation have to be taken into account: the act of representation becomes sociologised!

While the idea that representation creates what it wants to make present is not exactly new (see, for example, Ankersmit 1996), Saward has recontextualised it and offered an analytic vocabulary to unpack the practices of making present for empirical analysis. His central proposition is to study the process of representation as a form of discursive "claim-making", which assigns meaning to the various people and matters involved without being able to control the outcome. Claim-making, according to Saward, is a two or even three way process, which involves the claim-maker, the referent of the claim and the audience, which is watching and commenting on the process. Thus, Pitkin's flow of information has become a dynamic negotiation process between various contributors and observers: the representative, the represented and the audience. Saward's (2006: 302) adds analytical depth to his model by introducing five heuristic elements of claim-making: "A maker of representations (M) puts forward a subject (S) which stands for an object (O) which is related to a referent (R) and is offered to an audience (A)". As Disch (2015: 492) explains, distinguishing between maker and subject suggests a correspondence but not a congruence between the person making the claims and the representative. The political persona rests on an image carefully constructed by the claim-maker, an image that is either accepted or disputed by the audience. Likewise, the distinction between the referent and the object assumes that the claim-maker offers an image to the constituency, which it can accept and identify with or reject.

As a source of claim-production, the claim-maker will typically resort to what Saward (2006: 311) refers to as "ready-mades". Claims should not be confused with empty or arbitrary gestures, they should be understood as carefully constructed artefacts that draw on and remanufacture shared experiences with the intent to shape new collective identities around political messages associated with the representative. Ready-mades consist of familiar phrases and images that are part of a collective's cultural memory and are meant to facilitate a sense of belonging and agreement. As I will show in the next section, claims make selective use of ready-mades taking into account the personality of the voters. Yet, no matter how they are created, the effects of claim-making are always uncertain; claims should therefore be understood as precarious and instable objects that will respond to the resonance they face. With the advance of big data, claims have become even more volatile. Claim-making is a partly public, partly hidden process. Claims are disseminated through the media or communicated at public venues for audiences that comprise advocates, third parties

such as the media but also political opponents and competitors. However, the datafication has created personalised channels for claim-making that are able to circumvent the public discourse and prevent the voter from "talking back", to use Saward's phrase.

Taken together, three aspects of the claim-making approach that are worth highlighting in this context. First, Saward's concept has turned political representation into a general practice of 'making something present' and released it from the narrow confines of parliamentary institutions, so that it can now be studied in contexts previously not associated with it. This includes election campaigns. If representation is no longer understood as the result of elections but as a professional practice of claim-making, which pervades the entirety of political discourse, then election campaigns should offer suitable empirical material to study its techniques and performativity. Second, the claim-making concept stresses the relational character of representational practices. Unlike Pitkin's unidirectional information flow as resource of representation, claims must be understood as collective artefacts whose creation involve, apart from claim-makers, various other actors, among them the represented. The credibility and performativity of claims are evaluated through open-ended iterative processes of experimentation. And third, the concept of claim-making offers a specific vocabulary for investigating its crucial theoretical point, namely that the collective to be represented does not exist independent and prior to the act of making it present, on the contrary, representation must be understood as a constitutive act (Disch 2015). This vocabulary provides a bridge between political theory and empirical social sciences allowing the performative effects of representation to be studied empirically.

So far, the literature on claim-making has primarily addressed the principal point, namely that representation creates political collectives. The next section will explore the material dimension of claim-making by focussing on specific techniques. Microtargeting, I argue, can be understood as a specific calculative means that produces political collectives as a side-effect of the goal to predict and control voting behaviour.

3. Datafication of claim-making

The ultimate goal of claim-making is to create images that allow "appearing as the people, picturing them to themselves", as Lisa Disch (2008: 54) put it. If we change perspective and look at this task from the view of the campaign staff, the main challenge is figuring how and which people can be convinced to identify themselves with an election candidate and her manifesto. The perennial problem of all election campaigns is determining as precisely as possible what kind of images are likely to encourage voters to align themselves with a candidate and to identify the voters who have not made up their mind yet.

While Saward (2006: 310) and others emphasise that claim-making consists in reading interests and believes *in* instead of *off* the constituency, election campaigners themselves are making great efforts to read as much as possible *off* the people. In order to offer "ready-mades" that encourage voters to recognise themselves in them, campaigners need to know which messages resonate with their potential voters. And while it is true that even Rembrandt

could only paint images of himself, as Saward (2006: 310) argues, Rembrandt did not create arbitrary images but visualised himself in evolving portraits that viewers could recognise and interpret as Rembrandt, the maturing and aging painter. Likewise, campaigners gaze at the people to expand their knowledge about them. What Saward leaves underexplored is that creating objects of the people also involves collecting and analysing information about the referent. To a large degree, recent techniques of claim-making focus on understanding the voters and predicting their voting behaviour. If this dimension of object-making is not taken into account, the evolution of claim-making and thus of creating political collectives as a professional practice cannot be adequately studied.

Microtargeting is a campaign technology that has been in use just a bit more than a decade. Like many if not all recent campaigning technologies, the approach goes back to commercial product marketing. Yet, the term itself was coined in the field of political communication (Agan 2007).¹ What distinguishes microtargeting from more traditional forms of voter targeting is its strong focus on and trust in data. Data are now regarded as a "political currency" able to reliably predict the behaviour of individuals (Issenberg 2012). Before the advent of social media and big data, the decision-making authority of election campaigns used to rest with personal experience. Although campaigns have always made use of available data and collected data themselves, it was the knowledge of "powerful campaign elites", their "intuition, political sense, and personal judgment", which was deemed the most important resource (Bimber 2014: 144). Yet, the avalanche of social media data and the advances in data analytics have brought about a new type of mathematical expertise and respect for empirical evidence. A data-driven culture competes against experience-based knowledge, and in data-rich political landscapes such as the US, at least for the time being, has managed sidelining it.² The gut feelings and rules of thumbs cultivated by traditional campaign managers are now increasingly subjected to empirical testing (Bimber 2014: 144).³ Even though the goal of election campaigns remains largely unchanged, the combination of big data and data analytics has introduced new logics into how election campaigns perceive and sort the people, how they create collectives and ultimately represent the voters. Driven by the promise of much higher precision and predictability, microtargeting foregrounds different aspects of political collectives. New techniques such as "unstructured listening" and "sentiment analysis" (Stark 2018) emphasise the emotional dimension of the people.

Creating collectives through microtargeting is an open-ended endeavour consisting of amassing as much data about people as possible. In the US, political parties have invested in

¹ Microtargeting is not the first technology that has migrated from commercial advertising into political communication. From a marketing perspective, a political election is but "a large-scale advertising campaign for a product" (Rothschild) <https://blogs.microsoft.com/ai/microsoft-using-prediction-polling-tools-forecast-election/>.

² The competing logics of data- and experience-based decision-making resurfaced in the discussion about the outcome of the US presidential elections in 2016. See articles about "Brooklyn ignoring "on the ground intel" (Dovere 2016: <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/michigan-hillary-clinton-trump-232547>).

³ Although data protection regulation prevents European election campaigns from using data analytics to the same degree as in the US, microtargeting is making headway here too (see Jungherr 2017; IPR special issue 2017).

big data centers that assemble data sources from various origins such as census data, data volunteered by supporters, datasets purchased from consumer data compilers but increasingly also social media data. Social networks including Twitter, Youtube and Facebook have established special marketing groups to help political parties making use of the data they have collected about the electorate (Kreiss, McGregor 2017). Pooling these heterogeneous data sets allows depicting each individual voter as a data record constantly "enriched" with additional data points, which can then be mined and turned into profiles (Bennett 2016). In contrast to the sampling methods common to statistics, big data seeks validity by collecting all accessible data: "n=all" (Kitchin, McArdle 2016: 1). With the advent of the mobile Internet and the proliferation of social media, capturing all available data has acquired an entire new meaning, however. As Amore and Piothuk (2015: 345) point out, datafication corresponds to a significant expansion of social processes and interactions that can be translated into data. The more digitalisation penetrates every corner of the social world, the more data can be swept up about each individual and her network of things and people (Chester, Montgomery 2017: 3).

The growth of data offers not just more of the same, as Tufekci (2014) argues, big data should rather be compared to the invention of the microscope, which "makes visible the previously existed unseen". Social media data cover not only the content that individuals deliberately upload but also their clicks, likes, their browser history, their movements and temporal structure, their online- and offline acquaintances including the (shrinking) number of non-users. Tufekci (2014) refers as "latent data" to the traces people leave behind as part of their digitally mediated everyday-life. Latent data is considered commercially and politically particularly valuable because it differs from the information that citizens deliberately communicate about themselves. Not being asked but invisibly monitored creates data that, according to Tufekci (2014), "lends itself to deeper and direct insight into a person's opinions, dispositions and behaviours"; insights that the people affected are not even aware of themselves. Reflecting the findings of behavioural economics, there is at present a growing interest in understanding human decision-making processes across economics, politics and marketing including political campaigning. Big data plus the optimistic assumptions underlying data analytics suggest that individual dispositions, subliminal habits and reactions can indeed be "read off" of social media data. Following the motto of "seeing the unseen... measuring the unconscious" (Kelshaw 2017), emotion tracking and analysis is establishing itself as a specialised expertise in decoding "unseen emotional information" to predict future behaviour.

Modeling the voters heart and mind

Data can be thought of as raw material for a new type of claim-making. While campaign strategies traditionally targeted demographic groups, the special feature of microtargeting consists in focusing on individual voters. As Issenberg (2012)⁴ notes with apparent enthusiasm, voters "were no longer trapped in old political geographies or tethered to traditional demographic categories, such as age or gender (...) Instead, the electorate could be

⁴ Issenberg 2012: <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/508836/how-obama-used-big-data-to-rally-voters-part-1/>

seen as a collection of individual citizens who could each be measured and assessed on their own terms". Instead of seeing people as "gross rating points, target demographics, or plain old constituency groups", microtargeting enables approaching voters as "ordinary people with their own specific interactions with the political process" (Alter, cited in Bimber 2014: 141). Claim-making from the perspective of data scientists consists in building 'models' of individual voters. These models are expected to provide reliable answers to a number of never changing and yet somewhat unanswerable questions that concern all campaign teams: Who are our voters, what are their political propensities, who is likely to vote and who can be mobilised to support us? (Nickerson, Rogers 2014: 53; Kreiss 2012).⁵

Modeling in the context of microtargeting can be described as building abstract representations of real world phenomena that allow asking questions and testing assumptions about the electorate that may escape established forms of data analysis. Models are strategic "objects" in the sense Saward uses the term; they aim to reduce the complexity of the referent or electorate to so that its behaviour can be calculated and predicted. Models in general and voter models in particular fulfil two closely related purposes. They serve as abstractions *of* something – the electorate - and, simultaneously, an abstraction *for* something; that is, for the prescriptive purpose of approaching the right audience with the right political messages (Mahr 2003: 16). Voter models are assumptions about real people; they evolve in the space between data scientists and the unrepresentable reality and function as the formal representatives of the latter. Notwithstanding the highly praised personalised voter models, these objects are less than a shadow of real human beings. Only the attributes or features regarded relevant for determining the political behaviour of the audience are incorporated into the models. Voter models thus remain theoretical artefacts (Muhle 2018: 157), which would be unrecognisable for the individuals whose behaviour they are meant to forecast (Hersh 2015).

Traditionally, voter modeling draws on data about past elections and update them with demographic and survey data. Micro-targeting zeros in on future voters by modeling their behaviour instead of their actions. The difference between action and behaviour may not always be obvious but is certainly not trivial. Schematically speaking, following Weber (1921), the former can be defined as intentional or planned acts implying a moment of reflection, while the latter designates affective or routine-based acts without deliberating their outcome. The shifting focus from modeling collective actions to individual behaviour enables the analysis of what Tufekci refers to as "latent data". This trend reflects the advent of big data as a new source for voter modeling but also the integration of behavioural economics and psychometrics into political campaigning (Bimber 2014: 145). The basic assumption of behavioural economics is that the concept of the "homo oeconomicus", which models economic actors as rational decision makers, is unable to explain the behaviour of people. Psychometrics provides the scientific tools to examine, on an experimental basis, modes and conditions of non-rational decision making. Of particular interest for both research areas are variables, such as personae and personality, emotions, attitudes and believes, that are

⁵ As Therriault (2016) observes, "decisions about what models to build are based on larger strategic assumptions. When developing their overall strategies, campaigns typically think about voters in two main dimensions: support for their candidate and likelihood of voting".

considered unobservable but crucial for understanding and predicting what people do. Political claim-making in the age of microtargeting thus sets out to conquer new territory, the individuals "heart and mind" (Experian, cited after Chester, Montgomery 2017: 3; see also Muhle 2018).

Emotion and attitude-oriented forms of claim-making are the speciality of data brokers and marketing firms. Companies such as Experian "weave(d) together demographic, psychographic and attitudinal attributes" to create voter models referred to as "political persona", which are composed of attributes found statistically significant for predicting future behaviour.⁶ Cambridge Analytica, another data broker that used to offer psychometrically generated voter models, became infamous for the way it managed to source and mine a gigantic data set of approximately 87 million Facebook user profiles. Because the case of Cambridge Analytica is so well researched by now, it offers a good example to illustrate in more detail the process of big-data based claim-making.⁷

In order to build reliable voter models, voting behaviour is translated into "target variables", which can then be algorithmically matched with psychometric profiles of individual data records. New forms of machine learning solve such probabilistic tasks by learning from previous examples. The first step of modeling the individual voter consists in assembling a set of "training data". To that end, Cambridge Analytica resorted to a well-known psychometric survey, which intends measuring "latent traits" of individuals (Kosinski et al 2013: 3) based on five generic traits: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (OCEAN).⁸

Training data provide the examples from which algorithms are supposed to be learning specific sorting and prediction rules. For instance, algorithms may detect co-occurrences between "Facebook Likes", personal traits and political preferences, with the latter constituting the actual "target variable". Such patterns are translated into association rules or algorithms, which are then tested and refined on other data sets until their predictions produce the preassigned accuracy.⁹ Data analytics erase differences in kind of the measured objects and reconstitute them as mathematical concepts such as degree, position, scales and scores (Amoore & Piothuk 2015: 354). Categorially different matters such as expressions on Facebook, answers to questionnaires and psychometric categories are stripped of their contexts to be translated into abstract variables, which render visible correlations that were

⁶ "Political affiliation along with ten political persona segments provide a detailed understanding of key voter and constituent groups (...) Understand those who are more or less environmentally conscious, or who are unbanked / under-banked, direct mail channel preferences and receptivity" (<https://www.experian.com/small-business/listdetails/consumerview-government.html>, seen on 8.8.2018). For a more narrow understanding of political persona that restricts the concept to political representatives, see Usher 2016.

⁷ I am drawing on the reports of the Guardian given by the whistleblower Christopher Wylie, see: (<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/may/06/cambridge-analytica-how-turn-clicks-into-votes-christopher-wylie>).

⁸ In order to collect these data, Cambridge Analytica paid people a small fee to participate in IPIP-Neo, a 120 question personality survey, which is freely available.

⁹ In machine learning, accuracy has to be defined. Algorithms do not produce true statements but probabilities (Schubert 2014, Poon 2016).

literally imperceptible for human beings and thus did not exist before the advent of big data.¹⁰ Out of all the 87 Million data records copied from Facebook, Cambridge Analytica extracted 253 algorithms, which, in turn, enabled extrapolating voter models from simple Facebook Likes.

Microtargeting represents the voter not only by exploring personalities but also by predicting future behaviour that might still be open to the people concerned. The confidence of probabilistic voter modeling is predicated on the assumption of robust correlations between political behaviours and personality traits, which are believed to be more stable than those between demographics and political preferences (Schoen, Weins 2014; Jungherr 2017). In times of disintegrating social milieus, multiple refracted identities and increasingly volatile ties to political parties, personality models such as the "big 5" provide new calculable anchors for professional claim-making. Microtargeting is thus not only big data driven, it also reflects the decreasing predictive power of demographics.

In order to test and fine-tune the accuracy of claim making, election campaigns have also adopted other behavioural marketing techniques such as A/B testing. This method is based on experiments that test the response to different forms or design of messages to identify the most effective version to address the voter (Stark 2018). An often mentioned example are the donation calls by the Obama campaign. As a result of intense A/B testing, the Obama campaign calculated the exact amount to ask from its supporters to yield a maximum output. The campaign team for Bernie Sanders also run A/B testing experiments to figure out the optimal amount of donation to ask for in emails to supporters.¹¹

As Christian (2012) argues, A/B testing is more than just a method, it is better understood as a way if thinking that pragmatically substitutes a laboratory approach for public debates and deliberation. Instead of seeking consensus or taking politically risky decisions, empirical data gained from A/B testing might provide the optimal solution: "Why debate when you can test?"¹² Such testing exercises typically take place without the tested subjects being aware of it. Indeed, the whole point of A/B testing is to circumvent deliberate responses and appeal to instinctive reactions instead. The technique of A/B testing enacts a "kind of popular referendum (...) but one in which we are never told that we are voting", as Geiger (2015) aptly observes. In fact, A/B testing resembles experimenting with a remedy whereby the patient functions as the passive respondent. For the crucial question is how the body reacts to the chemical stimulus, not whether the patient likes it.

¹⁰ As Hayles (2012: 21) notes, digital media operate "in significantly different cognitive modes, than human understanding". Data analytics turn objects that once were understood to be static entities into "constantly changing assemblages in which inequalities and inefficiencies in their operations drive them toward breakdown, disruption, innovation, and change". Psychometric images of the voters are an example for this cognitive sea change.

¹¹ As the company HaystaqDNA (2016) reports: "We found in a series of A/B tests conducted in early April that asking people who had not previously contributed to the campaign for \$2.70 (1/10 the campaign's oft-cited average contribution of \$27) consistently produced a higher expected return than the campaign's original practice of asking for \$3."

¹² Christian 2012: Test Everything: Notes on the A/B revolution, Wired.

Following the logic of psychometric thinking, voter models integrate personality types including assumed vulnerabilities and persuadabilities (Chester, Montgomery 2017: 7). Categorised as neurotics, voters may be offered messages about the secure future of family life while career opportunities might be emphasised vis a vis conscientious people (Hern 2018, Guardian). Microtargeting models the individual self of the voter through a "play of correspondences variously defined as causal or correlational" intending to measure "an internal reality from external clues" (Stark 2018: 212) such as Facebook Likes, browser histories or the frequency of specific words used on social networks. Given the source of these "external clues", it is important to note that they are themselves already resulting from specific contexts, which Andrejevic (2011) aptly describes as "ambient sentiment". Social networks are not just neutral data harvesters, they provide virtual environments designed to configure and co-produce sociability through affective means. Emotional states measured and classified through psychometric tools are artefacts in a double sense. First, they can only be observed within the context of strategically created digital architectures that appeal to people as social beings who define themselves by watching and comparing their own performance to that of others (Bucher 2012; Yeung 2017). Second, the classifications used for claim-making are performative in the sense that they affect future behaviour by pushing standards of normality against which people judge and categorise their own actions (Stark 2018: 214).

4 Psychometric collectives

The critical literature on microtargeting emphasises the intrusive nature of this technique and the imbalance of power it implies. If the campaign teams know more about the voters' likely future behaviour than the voters themselves, the political exchange among them does no longer take place at eye level. Hence, another criticism of microtargeting is that it is manipulative. It is understood to exploit the cognitive weaknesses of voters in order to influence their behaviour, particularly to not vote for the political competitor (Tufekci 2014; Singer 2018). Such criticisms are based on the unquestioned assumption that microtargeting techniques do not only produce objective information about the voters including their future behaviour but, furthermore, that these data allow influencing future behaviour. In order to exert manipulative power, microtargeting has to have superior knowledge about the people.

From a claim-making perspective, these assumptions are not only highly doubtful, they also miss as an important point the performative character of voter modeling. Against the background of a constructivist concept of representation, a critical reflection of microtargeting will direct attention to its modes and democratic effects: what kind of collective does microtargeting bring about and how should this practice be judged from a democratic point of view?

A striking aspect about microtargeting is the strong influence of modern marketing and behavioural economics on its modeling of the voters. Microtargeting represents voters predominantly as emotional human beings whose political positions and actions can be deduced from their algorithmically calculated personalities. The iconic figure of the angry white man whose sees his social status threatened by globalisation, symbolises the integration

of psychometric profiling into voter modeling. It also indicates a departure from demographic approaches, which perceived voters as members of larger and stable social groups such as classes, milieus or age groups, and which related political preferences to long-term social positions. The image of the voter rooted in demographic thinking is someone expected to interpret representative claims to her self-image and related social identity, and perhaps her aspirations. By contrast, the voter as constructed through microtargeting, is an algorithmically configured individual whose identity may change with the data available about her, and whose political attitude is governed by non-political, personality-related dispositions rooted partly in genes, partly in upbringing. Whether someone votes conservative or liberal or not at all, is not primarily a question of political considerations, family background or wealth, but of psychometrically determined personality types, the kind of moral foundations, emotional states and cognitive biases it represents or evokes (Graham, Haidt, Nosek 2009).

Representing the emotional voter suggests a different kind of knowledge, toolkit and rhetoric than her demographically derived cousin, which, absent of a better a contemporary database, used to appeal to the assumed self-interest of voters or their "vision of the good society" (Graham, Haidt, Nosek 2009). From a psychometric point of view, appeals to the rational mind, which strives for reasonable decisions, all but missed the mark. Today, the effectiveness of addressing voters is determined through A/B testing, which does not appeal to the intellectual faculties but evokes, and seeks to represent, the unconscious of the voter instead. Microtargeting aims to optimise claim-making by making use of perceived irrationality.

Such knowledge about the voter is gained through tracking, probabilistic modeling and A/B testing, through hidden observations behind the back of the electorate, not as part of public interaction. While contemporary political campaigns include TV spots, posters and public assemblies, it has reintroduced new forms of canvassing and what is nowadays referred to as "dark ads". These are individualised messages disseminated via social networks that, because only few people get to see them, evade public scrutiny.¹³ As a result, microtargeting techniques deprive the voter of talking back and it prevents public audiences to discuss and dismiss representative claims.

The political collectives resulting from microtargeting exhibit a significant shift from demographic to psychometric classifications (Cheney-Lippold 2011: 167). Legibility of the voters is produced by analysing individual behaviour, traits and sentiments rather than traditional collective opinion formation. Political behaviour is decoded as a matter of personality and moral foundation rather than as the outcome of political deliberation. Simultaneously, census-based groups have been replaced by new forms of segmentation. The mining of social media data enables producing a highly granular and dynamic image of the people, its relationships, habits and changing moods. Political orientation as the target of

¹³ During the past British election, journalists used the political instrument of data donation to get access to dark ads and report about them, see Waterson (2017) on BuzzFeed: https://www.buzzfeed.com/jimwaterson/conservative-election-adverts?utm_term=.jmemdKZMQ#.hqnY7wzP5

claim-making appears in this context as a derivative of psychometric factors that can be measured.

In contrast to Tufekci (2014) and others, who are lending credibility to the irrational voter model by describing it as "refined and realistic" and therefore dangerous, this paper argues that microtargeting offers a new mode of bringing the people into being. Understood as a constitutive process, microtargeting raises the question of performativity: How do claim-making techniques affect the people they purport to represent? Two issues are worth highlighting. The first refers to what Barocas (2012: 34) characterise as the "cultivation of single-issue politics". Segmenting the people according to their type of personalities and deduced voting behaviour encourages a granular tailoring of issues and messages, which, as Gandy notes "emphasizes the value of difference over the value of commonality" (cited after Barocas 2012: 34). Thus, microtargeting's ability to approach voters on an individual basis with messages that seem to address their personal concerns (Issenberg 2012; Kreiss 2012) may have the effect of disuniting political collectives. Granularity and secrecy of voter modeling increases the chances of fragmenting the public and in favour of identity politics (Singer 2018).

Similarly, microtargeting seems to support the emotionality and irrationality of voting behaviour its algorithms identify in the data records. As Tufekci (2014) notes, microtargeting privileges so-called "wedge issues". These are topics that are highly emotionally charged and provide political identification for specific groups of voters. Prominent recent examples would be the divisive issues of immigration and crime prevention that evoke passionate responses. Fear-mongering as strategy to mobilise specific voter personalities believed to respond positively to such topics has the potential to heat up the debate and reduce the chances for a thoughtful public discourse thereby confirming the assumption of irrational voter behaviour. Hence, microtargeting is performative in the sense that it strengthens the empirical evidence for its core beliefs. What is more, microtargeting may redefine in the long run the reservoir of representation practices that are considered effective. In times of A/B testing and other forms of quantified impact evaluation of campaigns, emotional claim-making may appear more successful than traditional appeals to the voters' reason.

Microtargeting as mimetic representation

Microtargeting is both celebrated and criticised for its effects on democratic organisation. The advocates stress the granularity of political representation. Instead of being submerged in large schematic groups of voters, microtargeting is able to bring individuals' political concerns to the fore. Critics point out, on the other hand, that microtargeting is a very intrusive form of claim-making that exploits the privacy of voters and therefore may create chilling effects (Barocas 2012). Moreover, the information asymmetry between voters and campaign teams opens the door to voter manipulation. Psychometric techniques may detect vulnerabilities of individuals and systematically exploit cognitive biases for the purpose of influencing their behaviour. The result may be an "anti-Habermasian public sphere" in which all people are becoming "known quantities" (Tufekci 2014). Such methods also violate the

"exercise of autonomous thought", a necessary condition of democratic self-organisation, as Beckman (2018: 25) observes. Another criticism concerns the hidden nature of microtargeting techniques. While claim-making used to be a public endeavour for everybody, including the political opponents, to watch, participate in and comment on, microtargeting prefers operating in the dark. The circumvention of the public sphere weakens the political discourse and thus an essential prerequisite not only for the deliberative concept of democracy.

However, a more radical critique of microtargeting could come from the theory of representation (which, ironically, seems not really to have taken notice yet of the practice of microtargeting). If, as Rosanvallon argues, democracy is about the contest between different ways of representing the people, microtargeting may in fact be working on eliminating it altogether or relocating the democratic contest between various ways of representing the unrepresentable people it from the public sphere to the small world of expert exchange among pollsters and other data analysts – and hence to the logic of true versus false modeling and prediction.

Another way to approach the effects of the datafication of claim-making on democracy is to revert to Ankersmit's (1996) beautiful distinction between mimetic and aesthetic representation. In Ankersmit's view, political representation can be compared to the painting of a landscape in that it offers a specific perspective of something that cannot be objectively depicted. On the contrary, the diversity of political representations is the actual source of democratic decision-making, whereas individual political preferences remain pre-democratic until they enter political negotiation. Following Ankersmit (1996: 39), representation necessarily implies an "element that is essential of its 'representationality' and which therefore escapes the binary distinction of true and false statements. It for this reason, Ankersmit (1996: 41) argues, that we must "resist the temptation to reduce political representation to fixed rules and matrices we associate with a 'correct measurement' of 'political reality'. The mimetic practice of measuring political preferences as a basis of decision-making essentially kills what "politics, political discussion, and political struggle" is about (op cit).

To conclude, assuming that correct statements about human behaviour in all its contingency are possible, social science research locates the danger of microtargeting to democracy in the improvement of the psychometric decoding of the human mind. Microtargeting, from this perspective endangers the autonomy of the voter. However, from a constructivist perspective of representation, which regards the futility of the mimetic ambitions as a given, the actual danger to democracy may lie in the negligence of microtargeting for the significance of aesthetic representation as prerequisite of democracy. Substituting A/B testing for political discourse, in this view, epitomises totalitarian dreams in the name of optimising democratic representation.

5 Conclusion

- Study of microtargeting shows that a histography of claim-making as modes of creating political collectives is possible and useful.

- Studying microtargeting also offers hints about the "analytical mileage" of Saward's model. For example, the distinction between reading interests in and off a constituency turns out to be unhelpful. Taking into account data analytics, data scientists are reading interests in by reading them off.
- Understanding the voter as a crucial facet of claim-making deserves more attention

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