Lee McGuigan, **Selling the American People: Advertising, Optimization, and the Origins of Adtech**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023, 384 pp., $50.00 (paperback).

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Digital culture is entrenched in surveillance capitalism, structured by the array of technological systems that track and broker our data and program advertising for our eyes. In *Selling the American People*: *Advertising, Optimization, and the Origins of Adtech*, Lee McGuigan demonstrates that advertising's reliance on data optimization, and the larger political economic and social power dynamics that comprise surveillance capitalism more generally, are not inherent to the digital age but have evolved alongside computation technology since the late 1800s.

McGuigan sets out to hone existing conceptualizations of adtech. He uses the word adtech to describe the assemblage of not just machines but also math, corporations, and human labor that function to optimize and automate digital advertising. McGuigan describes adtech as "a collection of classification and decision systems running on proprietary data sets, algorithms, software platforms, and artificial intelligence products" (p. 27). He argues that the core operations of adtech revolve around its epistemological functions of prediction, correlation, and other knowledge claims, as well as its logistical functions of collecting, integrating, and using information on large scales.

What sets *Selling the American People* apart from other books on adtech is its rich historicization, which elucidates the long durée of advertising's computational turn. This rigorous historical context, in turn, enables McGuigan to illuminate the central affordances and truth claims of adtech that continue to structure the contemporary media ecosystem. McGuigan demonstrates that adtech has not newly emerged within the rise of digital media. Rather, adtech consists of a longer genealogy of optimization tools that shaped the calculative evolution of the advertising industry throughout the 20th century.

Central to this history is the influence of management science on the marketing industry. The influence of management science encouraged a turn toward rationalization and reason—toward a focus on attribution, making sure that every ad dollar is accounted for. In other words, management science, according to McGuigan, drove a pursuit toward optimization that shaped the evolution of the marketing industry and its intertwinement with datafication.

One of the most valuable aspects of *Selling the American People* is its focus on how the discursive imagination of optimization is as important as the technology itself in the evolution of audience datafication practices. The nuance of this point is captured by his use of the phrase "calculative evolution" (p. 13; as opposed to, for example, "an evolution in calculation"), which positions computation as an attribute rather
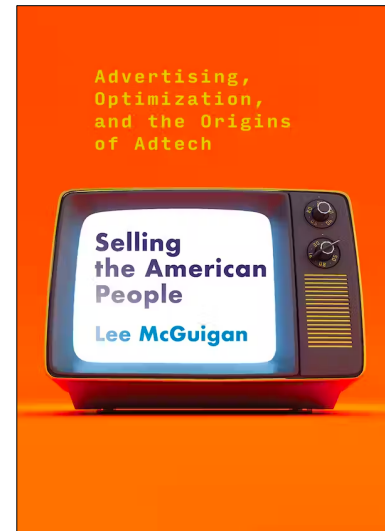
than a noun, highlighting how the *pursuit* of (more than the accomplishment of) rationality and computational reason drove the evolution of adtech and the advertising industry. This dream preempted the development of capable machinery, persisting even despite machines often falling short of the calculative hopes the industry had for them. McGuigan's decision to focus the latter half of the book on the "archaeology of affordances"—"programmability (automation), addressability (discrimination and personalization), shoppability (interactive commerce), and accountability (measurement and analytics)" (p. 132)—that have comprised the advertising industry's quest for optimization effectively underscores the relationship between "the discursive" and its relationship to the materiality of technological capacities and also to the logics of the consumer data industry.

There is also a lot of value in the way *Selling the American People* frames the social politics of adtech. The book's institutional approach largely precludes close analysis of the cultural implications of audience datafication, so it does not focus on the direct impact that the advertising industry's pursuit of optimization has had on marginalized populations. Instead, McGuigan characterizes the power implications of data optimization on a more fundamental level. Beyond the way the adtech industry misuses personal data, siphons money away from local journalism and independent creative workers, and is bad for the environment, the core function of data optimization is to further empower corporate entities who already have power. Since corporations can "deduct advertising from their tax bills" (p. 15) and "advertising transactions are structured in ways that let intermediaries collect fees from all sorts of services and events" (p. 15), adtech facilitates an upward transfer of wealth. Moreover, McGuigan refers to adtech as "difference engines" and succinctly proclaims that "discrimination is the point" (p. 15). Discrimination is not a side effect of data optimization, but an intentional feature. He explains, "The purpose of data-driven marketing is to identify and isolate difference" (p. 16). This is a helpful reframing of the issue and opposition against critics who seem to think that data optimization could be socially just if we could just train it with less discriminatory data or enhance the intersectionality of the person profiles that adtech produces.

For readers with expertise in advertising or who are novices to the topic, *Selling the American People* has something to offer. Chapter 1, which provides an overview of the contemporary adtech ecosystem, is a perfect introduction to the functions and stakes of adtech (ideal for inclusion in undergraduate media industries or advertising syllabi). The remaining chapters in Part 1 of the book, which focus on how management science restructured the institution of advertising and then on how advertising was taken hold by the pursuit of optimization by the midcentury, offer rigorous research to the appeal of those with existing knowledge or who appreciate a nuanced political economic history.

Part 2 of the book tracks the archaeology of affordances that have driven the evolution of adtech: programmability, addressability, shoppability, and accountability. Collectively, these chapters offer an apt overview of the evolution of adtech throughout the 20th century, and individually, they provide deep case studies of specific periods and techno-affordances. Among these latter chapters, chapter 5 stands out for its analysis of how the broadcasting industry's turn to spot advertising developed conterminously with the imagination of and earliest capacities for programmatic advertising. In this chapter, McGuigan also demonstrates how the incorporation of computers into ad agencies impacted their labor operations. He details how various professional groups within advertising (management, accountants, media salesmen, creatives, clients) experienced the opportunities and threats of computation, demonstrating that trust in

computers was not inherent but contested. Chapter 6 offers an invaluable analysis of how set-top boxes (cable boxes) changed the game of audience data optimization and household-level addressability during the postnetwork television era. Chapter 7 is also excellent for its discussion of the television industry's efforts to incorporate shoppability (the ability for viewers to buy their favorite television characters' clothing or other lifestyle products) into 1990s television as a precursor to social media's influencer markets and the logistics of data tracking and interactive consumption that inform them.

This book achieves everything it sets out to do and then some. However, one thing its political economic or institutional approach does not touch on is the lived experience of audiencehood under the domain of adtech. More historical research on this topic would afford further insight into the discursive limits of optimization. McGuigan points to Ien Ang's (1991) work, which characterizes the function of audience ratings within the television industry as "discursive framework" rather than an empirical reality, as one influence on his own decision to center of the discursive imagination of optimization (p. 108). The implication of Ang's thesis was a call for research on the empirical experiences of audiences, including how they interface with television content and technologies. Accordingly, while *Selling the American People* offers a rigorous and thorough history of the technological and institutional development of adtech, it also highlights the need for further research to illustrate how surveillance capitalism took shape at the experiential level of media audiencehood throughout the 20th century.

Selling the American People is essential artillery in the battle against digital age presentism and a must-read for anyone interested in the history and logistics of adtech. It will appeal to those interested in the history of computation, organizational studies, television history, digital media industries, the practicalities and cultural importance of advertising, engineering, and data science, among other fields. The book is chock-full of key concepts and aphoristic conceptual reframings of adtech's functions. Moreover, with this unearthing of adtech's origins and evolution, McGuigan exposes the limits of an optimization-focused, advertising-funded media landscape for democratic societies.

Reference

Ang, I. (1991). *Desperately seeking the audience*. London, UK: Routledge.