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Engineering the public: Big data, surveillance and computational politics

Zeynep Tufekci

Abstract

Digital technologies have given rise to a new combination of big data and computational practices which allow for massive, latent data collection and sophisticated computational modeling, increasing the capacity of those with resources and access to use these tools to carry out highly effective, opaque and unaccountable campaigns of persuasion and social engineering in political, civic and commercial spheres. I examine six intertwined dynamics that pertain to the rise of computational politics: the rise of big data, the shift away from demographics to individualized targeting, the opacity and power of computational modeling, the use of persuasive behavioral science, digital media enabling dynamic real-time experimentation, and the growth of new power brokers who own the data or social media environments. I then examine the consequences of these new mechanisms on the public sphere and political campaigns.

Keywords

Big Data; Surveillance; Public Sphere; Political Campaigns; Persuasive Communication

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zeynep Tufekci
http://www.technosociology.org

University of North Carolina United States

Assistant Professor in School of Information and Library Science with affiliate appointment in Department of Sociology