



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

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

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.

3. Online Tracking and Publishers' Revenues: Empirical Analysis, WEIS, 2019
4. After GDPR, The New York Times cut off ad exchanges in Europe — and kept growing ad revenue, Digiday, 2019
5. Data from Dutch public broadcaster shows the value of ditching creepy ads, TechCrunch, 2020

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.

6. How Effective Is Third-Party Consumer Profiling? Evidence from Field Studies, INFORMS, 2019
7. Landmark Study Proves the Effectiveness of Contextual over Behavioral Targeting, Contextual Insider, 2021

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

9. Websites Vary Prices, Deals Based on Users' Information, Wall Street Journal, 2012
10. Facebook Is Letting Job Advertisers Target Only Men, ProPublica, 2018
11. Dozens of Companies Are Using Facebook to Exclude Older Workers From Job Ads, ProPublica, 2017

Argument: Surveillance advertising enables government surveillance.

12. Federal Agencies Use Cellphone Location Data for Immigration Enforcement, Wall Street Journal, 2020

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.

13. Data Brokers and Security, NATO Strategic Communications Center for Intelligence, 2020

True – The enormous stores of personal data collected for surveillance advertising put consumers at [risk](#) for exposure, identity theft, and more malicious tracking.¹³

14. How to Track President Trump, New York Times, 2019

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.

15. California Consumer Privacy Act: Are People Protected?, Consumer Reports, 2020

16. globalprivacycontrol.org, 2021

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.