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# **IDENTITY & TECHNO-UTOPIANISM**

**A Critical Discourse Analysis of Marketing  
Material and their Sociotechnical  
Imaginarities**

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# Abstract

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This research paper sets out to investigate the messaging present in a corpus of texts gathered from Acxiom's, an American data-analysis and 'Identity Solutions'-company, website. The paper applies a framework of Critical Discourse Analysis informed by Theo van Leeuwen's theory of 'legitimations' and analyses the findings through the theoretical framework of 'Sociotechnical Imaginaries'. Greater emphasis is placed on the theoretical framework, in the hopes of allowing a greater insight into the ideological underpinnings of the corpus. The paper looks at five broad categories of inductively identified discourses in the texts; the neo-liberal market economy, privacy, identity structure, techno-utopianism, and the naming conventions/usage of biological terms carried out by Acxiom.

This is undertaken with the aim of answering the question: 'What discourses are present in the texts, and to what extent do they extol the virtues of techno-utopianism?' After the empirical analysis, the project will pivot to focus especially on the underlying techno-utopian elements and discursive positions which Acxiom assume in the texts. The analysis will be focusing on the techno-utopian elements, and Acxiom's own conception of identity, as it exists both inside and outside of its system, to show how the texts analysed contain a great starting point for attempting to trace an outline of the imaginary disseminated through Acxiom's system.

Additionally, through engaging in a legitimation-based critical discourse analysis, this study aims to examine the power structures implicit in the texts. It diagnoses how Acxiom

constructs not only their own position, but also that of their clients, and the consumers which are categorised in said system. Through doing so, the project looks at the role of a data-analysis company working largely unseen in today's data-driven landscape of marketing and communication in order to ensure that corporate communications remain targeted and relevant at the potential cost of reifying and maintain prior power relations in society. Additionally, the project looks at the imaginary, the vision of a preferable future, constructed by Acxiom and critically analyses how it contains elements that misinterprets the role and function of 'identity' and reshapes it into an algorithmic abstraction, away from its roots in individuals' 'real' lived lives. Through activating the idea of said 'imaginary' the project shows how futures that are envisioned run the risk of being subsumed into the technology of those that control it.

Therefore, the project will through an empirical element, draw out the theoretical and ideological underpinnings of a major actor in the sphere of data-analysis and identity solutions.

*Till Romrom*

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## Introduction

The role of data has changed drastically over the course of the last decades. It has become an integral part of almost every avenue of society, influencing everything from hospitals to fast food. One industry that has seen a drastic change when it comes to, not only the use of, but also the availability, of data is the advertising industry. Having changed from traditional billboard marketing to hyper specialised individualised ads, the industry has undergone a seismic shift. However, the data used is not always in the hands of the marketers themselves. Instead, a whole industry of companies has sprung up that collect, collate, and utilise data gathered from a multiplicity of data-streams. This new technology runs the risk of creating new, or reifying old, power structures that has the potential to cause harm to both society and the individual. Owing to these risks, the need to analyse and investigate new technologies as they develop is of great importance to make sure no such power structures remain unchecked.

This paper will engage in one such analysis through engaging with texts from an American data-analysis and marketing technology company named Acxiom. The case study will aim to answer the question: 'What discourses are present in the texts, and to what extent do they extol the virtues of techno-utopianism?'. This question, while simple at a glance, will serve as a useful guide throughout the paper, as most discourses found in some way interact with the very same technological system from which the discourse itself stems. The techno-utopian ideals which will be investigated in this paper are those pertaining to how technology, in this case focusing on digital technologies, contain not only the potential, but also the promise to change society for the better (Dickel & Schrape, 2017, 47). Looking especially at techno-utopianism, allows the research to investigate the promise which influences the technology itself, on the premises which influence the technology from the viewpoint of its own creation and purpose, thus enabling a look at the ideological and idealist underpinnings of the system.

Additionally, the paper will examine the idea of 'identity' and how it exists in Acxiom's system as both a starting point for their business model, but also as a value carrying final product. The need to carry out research like this is founded in the aforementioned problems inherent to all new technology, but also because the datafication of society has permeated

almost every aspect of daily life, and thus warrants an even closer look. This project is meant to constitute a look at the interplay between the social and technical as it is portrayed by Acxiom in their marketing material. The discourses examined may not be created or maintained knowingly by Acxiom, yet they perpetuate their existence through their engagement and activation of them in the texts. The reasoning behind focusing on the especially interesting interplay between the social/technical stems from the space in which Acxiom's system exists. As creators and purveyors of a technical solution aimed at influencing individual customers' behaviour, the data they rely on (collected from the consumers' individual, social, lives) is worked on in their technological system, only to be fed back to the social life of the individuals to influence said social lives. Seeing how the system exists and is active in the borderland between social and technical, owing to its purpose and place the need to investigate how the system is discursively constructed to fulfil this role is an avenue that may produce significantly interesting results.

The project will, through a critical discourse analysis, a corpus of texts centred around Acxiom's RealIdentity project in order to examine which themes Acxiom discursively construct in said texts and how they use these to legitimate themselves as an actor. This project will look at a small corpus of texts relating to Acxiom's 'RealIdentity' concept through the theoretical lens of Sociotechnical Imaginaries (Jasanoff, 2015a). The framework of sociotechnical imaginaries is one which emphasises how technology and technological systems exist in society not as merely physical things, but as discursively embedded in society (Mager & Katzenbach, 2020, 4). From the nature of the argument that technology fulfils a social role, the want to look at what said 'embedding' amounts to arises. This is the imaginary, it looks at how futures are formed, worked with, and influenced by a plethora of factors (Jasanoff, 2015b, 5). This project will focus on the role of technology, through techno-utopianism as outlined above, and how it helps form a view of the world and its future. This is undertaken to be able to engage with the texts and look at the discursive construction of 'identity' as it pertains to Acxiom's project on the neoliberal marketplace and how their techno-utopian ideals flourish in all the discourses identified. The final reading will be analysed with the help of van Leeuwen's framework of legitimations (2007) and how they operate within texts in order to help identify and categorise discourses and power



relations present.

The structure of the project will be as follows; first, a literature review will be carried out, overseeing the trends and themes in the wider field of research. Following on from that, a section outlining the theoretical models will be undertaken, engaging both with van Leeuwen's theory of legitimations, as well as the idea of sociotechnical imaginaries. Having done so the method section is next, outlining how the different reading phases were structured and explanations and justifications for the choice of research method. After that is the empirical element following the structure of the discourses identified. They will be in order: 1. Neo-liberal market ideology, 2. Privacy, 3. Identity structure, 4. Techno-Utopianism, 5. Naming/Biological terminology. Lastly, a discussion of the findings of the project is undertaken and the importance of the techno-utopian ideals coursing through the texts is discussed. Additionally, how said techno-utopianism interacts with the concept of identity as it exists within and outside of Acxiom's project follows. Lastly, a conclusion and recommendations for future research are given.

## Literature Review

As a starting point, this chapter briefly discuss the roots of the Critical Discourse Analysis Methodology. Further, it will discuss critical media studies. Following on from that it will examine two other approaches to data analysis and its role in society. And lastly it will discuss some commercial and non-critical approaches to data analysis and what its role in society should be. This is done in order to map out some of the major fields in data analysis of this sort. And to show how it is a multi-faceted research area, which allows for a plethora of different approaches and problems to be dealt with and discussed.

### Critical Discourse Analysis

Ruth Wodak, Norman Fairclough, and Theo van Leeuwen, alongside Gunther Kress and Teun van Dijk put down the foundational work to create the basis for a hermeneutic research methodology to investigate discourse and its underlying practices and power relations (Wodak, 2001, 4). It was founded on the shared idea that there was need for a type of linguistic research method that divorced the reader from the text, and instead focused on the text and its context was the foci of the research (Wodak, 2001). Thus, critical discourse analysis instead set out to analyse how texts interact between themselves, how discourse carries itself in a setting in which it is enabled, or how practices may be present in text that do not rely on the reader's linguistic ability, but instead how texts could exist outside of 'specific instances of language use' (Wodak, 2001, 5).

Today, discourse analysis has spread beyond analysis of physical texts, digital mediums are also well covered and enshrined in the research practice. For example, Nam has shown that critical discourse analysis can be gainfully applied to analyse 'IPO registration statements'. These papers are the public documents published when private companies choose to register for trading on the stock market (Nam, 2020). Through reading a subset of these documents, Nam shows the role "financial communication plays in serving the interests of capital accumulation via social media" (2020, 443). Additionally, the study, shows how communications carried out by social media companies listing for public offerings conceal the intent of their business model behind co-opting terminology based

around soft values to instead further the exploitation on data on their services (Nam, 2020).

Alternatively, Hoffman, Proferes and Zimmer show how CDA can be employed to help interrogate an individual's official statements. As opposed to Nam's study above, the authors of the paper used critical discourse analysis to examine official utterances by Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook CEO, with the explicit goal to show how critical discourse analysis is "is concerned with the relationship between language and power; consequently, CDA is politically involved and emancipatory in its aims" (Hoffman, Proferes & Zimmer, 2018, 203). Here, one can again see how critical discourse analysis aims to lay bare underlying structure and power relations. Through a lexical analysis of Zuckerberg's public statements, the authors show how there exist an implicit politicisation of communication, and how it is possible to discursively 'construct' a persona that exudes certain values or powers through certain speech-acts and semiotics (Hoffman, Proferes & Zimmer, 2018).

## Critical Media Studies

The school of critical media studies have long been pre-occupied with the workings of the internet and the inherent power imbalances therein. Critical media studies draw upon Marxist strands of thought in forming a critique and analysis of the internet, social media and data collection (Andrejevic, 2011). A lot of the thinking concerning critical media studies is centred around the concept of online, or free labour. Without getting into a deep analysis of Marxian analysis of economics, 'free labour' is such labour that an individual carries out that is non-waged, i.e., there is no form of employment that garners the individual recompense for the work carried out (Terranova, 2004). Such labour, along the critical media studies line, may be moderating a forum, editing Wikipedia posts or posting on Facebook. The reason as to why this is referred to as labour, as opposed to something an individual does for their own enjoyment is that there is some value being created by these acts. Namely, the data created, and collected by the companies running these services. Said data is then used to create curated data-sets that allow companies to attempt to extract further value from the individual through targeted ads (Beverungen, Böhmen & Land, 2015). Through this approach to data collection as a form of exploitation of the individual, the main intersect

between critical media studies and this project start to become apparent. Both this project and critical media studies are at best wary, at worst outright condemning of these forms of data collection for the sake of profit. Especially when there exist studies proving that individuals, *prima facie* disagree with these forms of data collection, and are in general apprehensive of data being collected about their online doings (Fuchs & Sevignani, 2013).

Interestingly, while this study does not delve into it as a particular point of view, critical media studies argue that any analysis that is to be carried out of internet, data or social media, needs to begin with an analysis of the aforementioned free labour, as all data that is created are the results of these labour acts (Fuchs, 2010). Owing to this base assumption of labour, any effect that targeted ads may have on the individual run the risk of further influencing the individual in accordance with the whims of the companies running services and gathering data (Hermann, 2009). Thus, as the name would imply, there is an inherent critical element to 'critical media studies'. Building on the Marxist school of thought, it enables a look at the internet as a set of property relations, between haves and have-nots. To conduct studies on online communications, one must not only look at *who* but also *how*, who is enabled to what, and through which means (Rey, 2012). While this particular study will not lean on critical media studies in any real extent, it is still a school of thought which has made a large imprint on critical approaches to online communications and thus is worthwhile to mention as a constitutive part of the academia surrounding data and online interactions. In essence, critical media studies focus on the *creation* of data and data analysis.

In the same vein as the aforementioned authors, Shoshanna Zuboff is another highly influential author when it comes to critical views of social media companies and data collection and mining. In particular, Zuboff argues in her book 'The Age of Surveillance Capitalism' for the current datafied society essentially being equivalent to a new age of capitalism. Having moved on from industrial capitalism to an economic system driven by the collection and analysis of data, Zuboff sees the current economic system as one controlled from above by those with the capabilities to handle and steer data (2019). Similar to what Turow argues, the dangers of the types of surveillance techniques made possible by the type of data that companies like Acxiom are gathering and handling. It is essentially a radical departure from the pre-existing economic conditions, as this new data-driven

surveillance enables companies and actors to gain undiluted access to individuals, whether they want to or not. Zuboff states:

“surveillance capitalism is profoundly antidemocratic, but its remarkable power does not originate in the state, as has historically been the case. Its effects cannot be reduced to or explained by technology or the bad intentions of bad people; they are the consistent and predictable consequences of an internally consistent and successful logic of accumulation.” (2019, 372)

This is the departure; Zuboff sees the rise of surveillance capitalism as a new market economy in which the power of surveillance is divorced from the state. It sees the individual, not as the root of *productivity*, but as the root *product*. This is the danger, under surveillance capitalism, the individual is no longer the productive force of society, but the material from which the productive forces of data extraction acquire their raw material. It is in essence a form of control that extends to the very deepest recesses of an individual’s life. As this form of capital logic has enshrined itself into the very fabric of society, Zuboff argues, as per the quote above, that such a market logic with such control must at its core be antidemocratic. This is the main takeaway from this highly influential work, ‘surveillance capitalism’ is not only a new phenomenon, but also a new way of life, an antidemocratic way of life that presents currently existing society with risks hitherto unthinkable.

## Users/Usage of Data – Production Thereof

Another influential author on the topic of data mining, and the effects thereof, and in particular in regard to Acxiom, is Joseph Turow. An American scholar and author who has mainly focused on the effects of data mining on the individual in a retail and purchasing context. Turow argues data mining runs the risk of being discriminatory and exclusory, as those capable of controlling data, through said data possesses the ability to sort and exclude, or include, individuals from their chosen categories at will (Turow, 2011). Additionally, Turow emphasises that Acxiom, prides itself on offering individual’s real identities, as opposed to anonymised data sets provided by many other data analysis companies (Turow, 2011, 209). While Turow’s latter focus has been with retail companies and how datafication

informs and changes retail businesses, he still makes salient and valid points about how data analysis functions as a means to an end. Turow also makes an argument for the intentional obfuscation of data. While they retain all data, and manage the tools to analyse it, Acxiom essentially makes it unintelligible to anyone that wants to sift through it. All this to maintain compliance with privacy law while stretching the limits to the greatest extent possible (2017, 284-285). It is this powerlessness that becomes the theme of Turow's 'The Aisles have Eyes', it is how the automatization of analysis, the outsourcing of choice and the chronic erosion of privacy that lends Turow's argumentation such weight as he shows how even individual choice is easily swayed and influenced by companies like Acxiom and the like (Turow, 2017).

Similar to Turow, Detlev Zwick has been active in the academic space critiquing marketing practices in online spaces, and the data-driven developments thereof. His latest paper, co-authored with Aron Darmody deals with the contradictory problem faced by marketing as it gains greater ability to influence customers, yet remain committed to 'empowering customers' (Darmody & Zwick, 2020, 6). Furthermore he has studied the topic of the biopolitical body and its role in online marketing with Alan Bradshaw (2020). Between Zwick and Turow, they summarise the field of academia that is predominantly preoccupied with what the data does when it has been created, and instead what the data can be put to use to *do*.

Another aspect of the academia regarding marketing and data analysis is the vast field of empirically grounded research, papers and books which focus on the empirical, mainly qualitative, elements of the industry and its theoretical underpinnings. An excellent example of such a book is Helen Kennedy's 'Post, Mine, Repeat: Social Media Data Mining Becomes Ordinary' from 2016 which aims to examine what social data analysis companies *do*, the focus of her project is different. While this study aims to understand the messaging (what they *say* they do) put out by the companies, Kennedy's book aims to examine the individuals working for said companies and the attitudes they hold in regard to their practices. She leans heavily on the critical influences of Andrejevic (above) amongst other critical scholars to inform her view of social media data mining, and in that critical vein, sets out to diagnose social data mining, as opposed to the labour practices 'creating' said data that the critical media studies to a large extent are pre-occupied with (Kennedy, 2016). Additionally,

Kennedy is particularly concerned with the 'reduction in privacy and the expansion of surveillance that increasingly pervasive data mining brings with it' (2016, 64). Thus, the analytic focus of Kennedy's text builds upon those raised against social data mining by the critical media studies<sup>1</sup>. Kennedy also discusses the multitude of actors that are currently engaging with data analysis, and considers the 'datafication' of society, as the practices of data analysis become more and more ingrained within various branches of society, from public sector agencies, to app developers, private companies, and supermarkets (Kennedy, 2016). Ultimately, Kennedy, through an interview study with actors within data analysis companies, attempts to shine a light on the concept of data mining as a whole, and the potential ramifications for society at large. Loosely therefore, one could argue that Kennedy looks at data and data analysis from *within*.

In the same vein, Mark Coté discusses the discursive construction of the 'digital human' as an entity existing both in online, and offline, spheres. This is grounded in research investigating the materiality of the cloud, the interfaces through which individuals interface with the internet. This in turn is anchored in a Foucauldian framework of the *dispositif*, the physical and administrative areas in which power exerts power over individuals. In this case Coté is especially interested in how the *dispositif* of data can track and trace individuals in their daily lives and how it impacts the 'digital human' (2014, 143).

In addition, regarding the emotions and feelings that individuals hold regarding data, and especially data management, was the starting point for the '*Pan-European Survey of Practices, Attitudes and Policy Preferences as regards Personal Identity Data Management*', funded and commissioned by the European Commission. The study found that while most individuals in the EU use and participate in online data-driven activities. Most of the users were in favour of not only the current data protection schemes put in place by the EU, but were also in favour of harder more 'institution centred-remedies' (Lusoli, et al., 2012, 15) (i.e., a call for stronger laws forcing the hand of data driven and creating companies). This shows how data

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that critical media studies are not concerned with the potential dangers of reduced privacy posed by data mining. Only that for the purposes of this text, their concerns with the labour aspect of the production of said data are more pertinent. For critical accounts of reductions in privacy, see: Fisher, 2012, for a critique of the loss of control of data, or Andrejevic 2015 for a critique of the valuations of 'data troves'.

management is a matter that is known to the individual, yet not well enough protected, or intuitive for the individual to actively engage with.

## Data Analysis and Commercial Approaches to Data

As an opposite to most of the authors mentioned above who all are critical, although to varying amounts, regarding the datafication of marketing and online practices, it is important to remember that this datafication did not spring from nothing. It was created, it is sustained, and it nourishes entire fields of research into algorithms, marketing, data collection. Amado, et al., have carried out a text analysis overview study in which they investigated the role of big data in marketing research. Analysing research texts published between 2010-2015, they found that marketing research pertaining to big data “has seen an increasing interest over the years, with each year doubling the previous one in publication output numbers” (Amado, et al., 2017, 6). Following on, Jan Lies in his research into the spaces in which big data may impact marketing research, argues that this technology is on the cusp of creating a paradigm shift, which he refers to as ‘marketing 5.0’, or ‘marketing techniques’ (Lies, 2019, 137). A term which he argues is broad enough to encapsulate what is to come for the marketing industry as it stands on the verge of a massive technological change. Further, there exist more specific examples of applying big data to marketing and consumer research.

For example, Zuccaro discusses the ‘scoring’ and ‘grading’ of customers for the sake of improving classifications and the precision of said classifications in large systems (Zuccaro, 2010). Such language that is entirely devoid of adding value to the data point as an existing individual is not uncommon in data science or business research. Lin, et al. for example in their study on statistical analysis with ‘fuzzy data’<sup>2</sup>(Lin, et al., 2016). While they are mainly pre-occupied with experimental precision, the approach to the data is one entirely separate from the social sciences. In this type of data science, the data is just that, data. And the

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<sup>2</sup> Fuzzy data refers to data with imprecise measurements or an inbuilt vagueness, i.e. social data or “human language, thought, and decisionmaking” (Lin, Et al., 2016, 2176).



system with which one sorts and categorises it needs to be as precise as possible, for it is a tool, and tools need to do their job properly.

However, it is not only in data science that non-critical approaches to data analysis and data gathering exist. Within marketing, attempting to get as many data points from an individual's visit to a shop for example, may be seen as a positive, to increase sales, or the likelihood of future sales (Zhang, et al., 2014). This is the antithesis to Turow's argumentation in his writings, where this personalisation and struggle for data extraction from individuals in shops is harmful (Turow, 2017). Zhang, et al. however, are not concerned with this, as, rightfully so, their research interests lie elsewhere. Further, Hofacker, Malthouse & Sultan pose the question, whether big data incorporation into customer behaviour research may yield positive results on customer recognition, retention and experience, finding that that may well be the case, with only paying lip service to the potential harms that such integration could bring, with only a brief reference to 'privacy concerns/ethical issues' (Hofacker, Malthouse & Sultan, 2016, 95). Their study is far more concerned with the potential benefits or problems standing in the way for said benefits, that big data integration into customer behaviour research may yield.

This is not meant to disparage the research carried out in these fields, it is only meant to highlight how the body of academia concerning data analysis and social data is not a monolithic body, any one author must just choose in which water to dive in, for there are many streams to bathe in.

## Summary

This chapter set out to provide a literature review of some of the major fields in data analysis, as well as provide a brief overview of the history of critical discourse analysis. This was done firstly through mentioning the critical discourse analysis. After that, the chapter covered critical media studies, and looked at what problems data-analysis, and especially data *creation* may pose from a critical theoretical standpoint. Following on from that the chapter discussed what problems might arise with what a company or entity can *do* with data, through looking at some key texts discussing problems that are rooted in the usage of

data. Having done so, the paper touched upon how another critical angle from which one can view data analysis is seeing what problems arise, if one looks at data analysis from *within*. And lastly, the chapter covered some more non-critical, and commercial approaches to data analysis and big data, as a lot of the actual functioning of the industry itself is sprung from perspectives that may not always be the most self-critical. Following on now is the theory chapter, in which not only the section on critical discourse analysis, above, will be expanded on, but the main theoretical framework of sociotechnical imaginaries will be introduced.

## Theory: Critical Discourse Analysis and Sociotechnical Imaginaries

Following on from the literature review, this chapter will deal with the theoretical framework of the chapter. The chapter will follow a structure, introducing one theory at a time, and building on it with the introduction of the next. Firstly, the chapter will provide a brief overview of Foucauldian discourse analysis, as it is largely the foundation on which critical discourse analysis is built upon. Following that, critical discourse analysis as a development of Foucault's ideas will follow. Having done so, the chapter will turn to sociotechnical imaginaries as the main theoretical framework for the paper, before introducing Matthew Fuller's theory of 'flecks of identity', used in the discussion and analytical part of the project is introduced. All of this is to build a robust framework for engaging with questions pertaining to identity and how Acxiom's 'RealIdentity' project constructs identity, both within, and outside of its system.

### Discourse, as Foucault Conceived it

Although the idea of discourse predates Michel Foucault, his theoretical conceptualisation thereof became the starting point for a new way of looking at discursive behaviour and the meaning-making contained within it. Foucault's theory, to a large extent, hinges on the idea that discourses exist on a deeper plane than the colloquial usage of the term. This is to say that Foucault deepened the concept to include more than speech-acts. Although Foucault still considers the 'statement' the "atom of discourse", he did so in a way that does not rely entirely on it as a linguistic unit, but instead as "a function" (Graham, 2011, 668).

Foucault's new definition encompassed not only such communicative exchanges that had previously been an established part of discourse (i.e., discussions, debates and talk, etc.). He also included more forms through which society transfers ideas and knowledge, through for example structures, practices, power and knowledge itself.

This is a rather radical departure from the prior understanding thereof, in a sense, Foucault helped de-couple discourse from its written and spoken origin, without jettisoning its communicative functions. As Seumas Miller argues, Foucault's discourse theory is "more

directly concerned with the real institutions of social life” (1990, 116). It is within these ‘real institutions of social life’ that the focus of Foucault’s theory of discourse is grounded. He argued that discourse and discursive practices help shape, influence, control social life. Thus, discourse, while still mainly encapsulated by communicative practices is now broadened to also encompass such discursive practices stemming from institutions or other non-individual actors. Summed up, discourse, in Foucault, refers to “institutionalized patterns of knowledge that govern the formation of subjectivity” (Arribas-Ayllon, 2008, 110).

Here, the second aspect of the discursive practices of Foucault are brought to light, the ‘formation of subjectivity’. According to Foucault, existing outside of discourse, is an outright impossibility, in fact, discourse are the constitutive parts of the individual as a subject. It helps shape and create what the individual knows and *is*. The individual is not so much a *participant* of discourse as the *object* of discourse and discursive practices (Graham, 2011). These discourses not only convey information, but give meaning to information, signs, and behaviour. This may be referred to as discursive practice, the information (or knowledge) implicit in these practices are the constitutive parts of society as totality of a plethora of discourses. Miller sums it up very succinctly with an analogy considering chess when he states that: “the subject is constituted by the rules of discourse in the same way in which the pawn is constituted by the rules of chess” (1990, 116). The subject, existing and being constituted by discourse, is still able to move freely within the constraints of discourse but is unable to move outside of them. This is a telling metaphor, as opposed to some Marxist accounts which prescribe a negative value to the currently existing systems and discursive practices. The Foucauldian equivalents are not necessarily existing in order to hamper the individual. Instead, the Foucauldian account of discourse is a more permeating kind, discourse as the *means* for society to function and exist (Miller, 1990). The knowledge and power which these discourses disperse through society “is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1983, 93).

This above quote from Foucault encapsulates the paradigm shift that his writings and lectures invited into theorisations regarding discourse. It became a tool used to diagnose and examine systems and structures, to lay bare the dimensions of power and creation that were present in the way society is structured. It is not by necessity a coercive power, it is

constructive, the individual in society is made by discourse, in the same way that the individual partakes in discursive practices and thus shapes discourse itself (Miller, 1990). This turns society into an ever-evolving project with discourse as its motor, the heart of human interaction. Although the speech-acts from prior approaches still remain key to Foucauldian discourse theory, what is important to keep in mind is the inclusion of systemic and structural influences and actions in discourse.

## Critical Discourse Analysis

Having delineated Foucault's definition of discourse, it will become clear how Critical Discourse Analysis' (henceforth abbreviated CDA) progenitors included parts of Foucault's theory to build their own research methodology. The founders of CDA as a research school were Ruth Wodak, Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen in the 1990's (Wodak, 2001). This group of scholars argued that, while Foucault's approach to power and knowledge as embedded phenomenon of discourse, the theory paid too little attention to the issue of ideology and power as a coercive, rather than constructive force (Wodak, 2001). Thus, this part of the literature review will concern itself with firstly, investigating the differences between Foucauldian discourse theory and CDA, and secondly, how the semiotic aspects of a text can help serve the ideological purposes outlined above, and lastly, an overview of van Leeuwen's theory of legitimation and how it will serve this project.

## Differences between Foucault and CDA

As an interpretative research method, CDA makes no outright claims of objectivity. While this is a characteristic of many forms of interpretive approaches, for CDA subjectivity is its very core. CDA necessitates a subjective standpoint because the researcher can never exist outside of the discourse that is being investigated; to research is to take an explicit stance in choice of theory and corpora, positioning of the researcher, method and analysis. (Wodak, 2001). Thus, research carried out through CDA by virtue of the method, assumes an 'insider'

perspective. It allows the researcher to investigate phenomenon or discourse from the perspective of an individual participating in the discourse (Fairclough, 2001). This allows for an analysis that instead of simply trying to identify discursive practices, also is able to critique and dissect the discursive practices in order to get to the inequalities and injustices that are embedded within. This approach stems from the view that ideology is a tool that mainly serves to establish and maintain unequal power relations (Wodak, 2001). Thus, an ideology present within discourse must be investigated in order to try and right the wrongs inflicted on the subjects involved within such practices. As Fairclough states, CDA positions itself as:

“a form of critical social science, which is envisaged as social science geared to illuminating the problems which people are confronted with by particular forms of social life” (2001, 125)

This approach to, not only, the researcher but also the role of research itself, highlights how CDA as an interpretive research methodology differs from many more quantitative or qualitative research methodologies. It functions in the borderline between method and theory, pulling from both in order to tease out the benefits of either.

While CDA positions itself as a form of research that exists in between method and theory, it does rely on empirical research for its ideological investigations. The most common type of this form of CDA is through studying semiosis, or the investigation of semiotic systems. Semiosis is the sign-process, or the construction of meaning (Fairclough, 2001), this production of meaning, harking back to the Foucauldian argument about the impossibility of existing outside of discourse, is rooted in practices. These practices are “practices of production - they are the arenas within which social life is produced” (Fairclough, 2001, 122). CDA is essentially based around the principle that all sign-making, or sign-making is inherently based in practices of domination or coercion, and it falls to the researcher to unravel these semiotic structures to be able to trace from where, and why these structures and practices have taken hold. Fairclough defines CDA as the “analysis of the dialectical relationships between semiosis (including language) and other elements of social practices” (2001, 123). Therefore, there is an explicit dialectical process which CDA attempts to trace

and follow developments of semiotic and discursive power, in texts, and to try and see what effects said power has had on the formation of the subject (Mullet, 2018). According to Mullet, most empirical studies employing a CDA-based approach share a few criteria, they are:

“(a) problem-oriented focus; (b) analysis of semiotic data; (c) the view that power relations are discursive to some extent; (d) the view that discourses are situated in time and place; (e) the idea that expressions of language are never neutral; (f) analysis that is systematic, interpretive, descriptive, and explanatory; and (g) interdisciplinary and eclectic methodologies” (Mullet, 2018, 118)

Of particular interest for this study are (c)-(e). They show how discourse is not only a vessel for power relations, but also how discourse is bound to specific places and times, i.e., material reality (thus exerting influence over the actual lived lives of individuals). And that any form of sign-making within this discourse is influenced by language itself and is influenced by the power being exerted. Once again, Miller’s chess metaphor is pertinent, as in CDA, it shows how the very rules of the game of chess itself have been structured and designed in such a way that they benefit those already in power. Through this, ‘neutrality’ of research becomes an impossibility in CDA, as its starting point is one that is based around the inequality of discursive power being a pre-existing condition of society (van Dijk, 2007).

Therefore, it falls to the researcher within CDA to try and unravel such speech-acts and semiotic events that are coded with ideological and power-laden language. This is a process in which the role of the researcher must approach texts with the assumptions from Mullet’s list above in mind, and inductively look at the material chosen and what displays of power and coercion that might be present in the text (Mullet, 2018). The researcher thus selects texts representative of the phenomenon to be studied and hermeneutically dissects the material in order to establish what discursive practices are present (Wodak, 2001).

## Van Leeuwen's four types of Legitimations

It is within this hermeneutic process that van Leeuwen establishes his framework for legitimation. A legitimation is a semiotic event that relies on establishing an actor, event, or practice with legitimacy, be that discursive, practical or otherwise (van Leeuwen, 2003). For this particular study, van Leeuwen's framework is helpful, as it focuses on establishing legitimacy as a core aspect of discursive action. As the material used in this study is aimed at either prospective clients, or already established industry professionals, establishing legitimacy is a pre-requisite for the content of the material to have meaning. Unravelling these legitimisations will therefore help elucidate the underlying structures and discursive practices present in the texts. According to van Leeuwen's model, there are four main types of legitimations, being:

1. *Authorisation*: that is, legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom institutional authority of some kind is vested.
2. *Moral evaluation*: that is, legitimation by (often very oblique) reference to value systems.
3. *Rationalization*: that is, legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and to the knowledge society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity.
4. *Mythopoesis*: that is, legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions. (van Leeuwen, 2003, 92)

These legitimations will be clarified next, to better understand how these they function as tools in critical discourse analysis.

### **Authorisations**

First, authorisations, are such legitimations which attempt to legitimate their semiotic acts through referring to an authoritative position as a legitimate actor, i.e. they "need not invoke any justification for what they require others to do other than a mere 'because I say so' (van Leeuwen, 2003, 94)". These types of legitimations rely on preconceived notions of authority,



such as parents scolding a child, or a police officer stopping someone in the street. The authority vested in their person grants them semiotic power to command and legitimate on the basis of them being 'authoritative'. The second aspect, the institutional authority also includes what van Leeuwen refers to as 'expert authority'. This type of authority stems instead from expertise within a field or set of circumstances, a market leader in their field may refer to such figures to make this type of authority evident when communicating with a customer, or a doctor at a hospital are both examples of expert authority (van Leeuwen, 2003, 94-95).

### **Moral Evaluations**

The second out of the four types of legitimations, those of a moral kind, are less bound to outright authoritative assertions, and more tied up in the specifics of time and place, as per point (d) in Mullet's list of defining characteristics of CDA research above. The moral legitimations are such that reference more vague, but no less discursively power laden ideas such as 'right' or 'wrong' (van Leeuwen, 2003). Additionally, such semiotic evaluations of 'right' and 'wrong', are further entrenched within discourse through the use of other evaluative adjectives. Moral evaluations are often hidden within normative language, as referring to a habit as 'healthy' or 'useful'. While such terms can be construed as neutral, they inevitably reference the dominant discursive climate in any socio-cultural context (van Leeuwen, 2003). Such referential practices invoke discursive power through their usage being so permeated throughout the social practices of any given social structure. These moral legitimations thus help shape the subject within society as these discursive practices often remain unseen and subjects constantly engage with them unknowingly (Wodak, 2001).

### **Rational Legitimations**

Third in van Leeuwen's model, are the rational legitimations. Rational legitimations often build upon moral evaluations. If the moral legitimations are built on socio-culturally located discourses, the rational legitimations engage in a referential project (I.e., such legitimisations which rely on referring to 'the natural order', or 'common sense') enabling and furthering

the moral underpinnings of discursive practices (van Leeuwen, 2003). If the moral legitimations infuse right and wrong with semiotic understanding, rational legitimations give them direction and structure. Rational legitimations serve to encourage and guide subjects towards such behaviour which is in line with the current discursive practices. In a sense, rational legitimations are teleological by nature, relying on speech-acts and practices which encourage motion, such as 'build', 'advance', 'teach' (van Leeuwen, 2003, 103). Rational legitimations therefore are discursive tools which, through relying on the idea of 'advancement', help further moral legitimations in the attempt to structure subjects. Additionally, rational legitimations aid in predicting and defining direction. Through the reliance on semiotic undertakings which refer to improvement, or change, rational legitimations are very apt for introducing and entrenching new forms of discursive subjectivity as they naturalise events or changes as a part of the 'natural order'. Socio-cultural change thus becomes at one with the discursive pre-existing paradigm through rationalisations subsuming it into the 'natural order of things' (van Leeuwen, 2003, 103). Therefore, rational legitimations can be seen as dialectically engaged with the moral legitimations. The moral legitimations assume the position of ascribing communicative acts with moral character. The rational legitimations then engage with the moral claims and naturalise them under the guise of progress, thus furthering the privileged position granted discursive acts enabling further moral legitimations (Wodak & van Leeuwen, 1999). Through this process, the knowledge created in social contexts is imbued with both moral and rational characteristics, which enables dominant discourses to further develop and become ever more ingrained into future socio-cultural developments (Wodak & van Leeuwen, 1999, 92).

### **Mythopoesis**

The fourth and final form of legitimation in van Leeuwen's theory, is that of mythopoesis which, in a sense, is a culmination of the prior three types. Mythopoesis, being a form of story-telling which is either encouraging or discouraging of certain behaviours is a way for knowledge to take on a more colloquial form, one in which encouraged or discouraged behaviours are put on display through a narrative structure which end up either rewarding or punishing the actors in the story for engaging in types of behaviours and actions

according to the dominant discursive climate (van Leeuwen, 2003). Such stories serve to let the morality of actions, or rationality of institutions to permeate into the actions of subjects, through a coherent structure. It lets individuals engage in discursive practices through the telling and-retelling of such discourses, without danger of reprisal. A story in the news of criminals breaking the law and getting caught on the evening news lets individuals grapple with the rule of law and the punishment of transgression without having to engage in any social practice that may put them in harm's way. Additionally, such stories help enforce the institutionalised knowledge, as it becomes a way for the discursively dominant to show how prior successes or failures are punished or rewarded (van Leeuwen, 2003).

## Sociotechnical Imaginaries

Keeping with the same dialectical relationship that CDA sees between social practice and discourse, so does the theory of Sociotechnical Imaginaries see a dialectical relationship between technology and a vision of the future. Sociotechnical imaginaries, a theory spearheaded by Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, looks at how technology and its development has impacted, and keeps having an impact on the development of society. It is a theory of a shared idea and how it is influenced by objects, how societal change is dialectically driven by the technology it produces and the ideations of the individuals that engage with it (Jasanoff, 2015a). In the same way that CDA sees no direct distinction between method and theory and instead see the two as different sides of the same coin (Fairclough, 2001), so does sociotechnical imaginaries hinge on the elimination of a distinction. Theory and method are two sides of the same coin for CDA, for sociotechnical imaginaries, the sides of the coin are technology as an enabler of human development, and the social structures which society adhere to, with its practices and norms. Technology and social structure exist in a dialectical relationship, mutually reinventing and restructuring itself. Jasanoff and Kim argue that to see technology as merely a by-product of societal change and progress, is to underestimate the influence technological advancement have on individuals, and especially, the way individuals see the world and imagine the world that is to come (Jasanoff, 2015a).

This theoretical standpoint is essentially twofold, there are two concepts that, as implied

by the name, work in tandem to dialectically tease out a theory that serves to help diagnose societal development and the aspirations and direction of a society or group of individuals.

### **Technology**

The first of these two concepts is 'technology'. To view technology as a static object, as inventions or tools, does a great disservice to the potential change that technology, by its nature possesses. Technology must be viewed as a result of human ideas and inventiveness, and they are socio-culturally grounded in whatever time and space they exist. As Jasanoff and Kim define it: "Technological objects, in other words, are thoroughly enmeshed in society, as integral components of social order" (2015, 2). There is no technology that can exist outside of social order, and social order exists, in part, through technology. Once again, one can start to see the outline of a view of the world as a sum total of its constitutive parts, social order, is not a total concept, it is instead the result of a plethora of forces and movements, one of which is technology. I.e., technology as a constituent part of society, is always 'sociotechnical', there is always some human need, problem, or want that is solved, improved or eased by it. To view technology merely as an object ignores its social aspect.

### **Imaginarities**

The second part of Jasanoff and Kim's theory, imaginaries, is more akin to the discourse of CDA, they are the visions of a possible future, informed by individuals' lived realities, they are the possibilities of a tomorrow different from today. However, as opposed to ideology, imaginaries are not unitary, "multiple imaginaries can coexist within a society in tension or in a productive dialectical relationship" (Jasanoff, 2015a, 4). This quote highlights the similarities between imaginaries and discourse, the multitude of discourse and imaginaries present in a society are socio-culturally bound. They are structures that individuals engage with, form, change, and abide by. It is a part of social order as they serve to unite a social group under a common idea, be it on a nation level, a local level or even smaller units. It is the imagined creation of a shared future, with goals, ends and problems to overcome (Jasanoff, 2015a). Additionally, individuals engage with and influence and partake in said

imaginaries much in the same way they do with discursive practices, through semiosis, meaning between individuals is shared and technology and social practice is given meaning and importance. Imaginaries as conceived of here “occupy a hybrid zone between the mental and the material” (Jasanoff, 2015), much like discourse, it is dialectically engaged with semiotic acts, influenced by material reality, furthering the entanglement and development of both the mental, and material. But the multiplicity of these imaginaries helps elucidate how the construction of a ‘shared’ imaginary is a process which may be fraught with struggle and opposition. They function as “infrastructures of imagining and planning futures” (Sismondo, 2020, 505). Such infrastructure is constantly contested and developed, only when it becomes fully ingrained and adopted by a wider group than its originators does it become an ‘imaginary’ as opposed to an idea. Ergo, there is a collective and social co-productive aspect built into the very foundation of the imaginary.

### **Sociotechnical Imaginaries**

Finally, the idea of sociotechnical imaginaries becomes fully developed when these two concepts are seen as one: a group of individuals creating and maintaining a shared vision of the future with technology a constitutive part of aforementioned social relations. It allows for an analysis that looks at social relations as discursively constructed. But not only that, sociotechnical imaginaries also afford one the ability to look at underlying structural factors, and how they influence and dialectically evolve alongside social structure. As outlined above, technology, as defined here, stems from trying to solve or ease some problem anchored in reality, the solutions to such problems are resolved through technological advancements. This in turn influences the future imaginaries, as technology is socially enmeshed, it cannot possibly exist outside of the social, and so the dialectical relationship continues (Bazerman, 1998). Thus, this dialectical relationship constitutes a sociotechnical imaginary. It is a vision of the future that is so structurally grounded in the language of change, that any future must be based on technological development which in turn, as previously argued, is unable to occupy a neutral role. It is a combination between the ‘instability of social arrangements’ (Jasanoff, 2015a, 22) and the ‘structured hardness of

technological systems' (Jasanoff, 2015a, 24). Sociotechnical imaginaries are both, they are instable as they are influenced by individuals' social arrangements. Yet, they remain hard owing to its technological rigidity. Therefore, they exist on both sides of the hard/soft divide, owing to its social/technical roots.

This is where the critical aspect of the sociotechnical imaginaries comes to light, for while technology is always socio-culturally grounded, it is not the case that it is created on the same grounds that imaginaries are. If an imaginary is an incorporeal shared vision, technology is always still singularly created (Brown, Rappert & Webster, 2000) by an actor or inventor. The social aspect of technology is not based on its creation. Therefore, values and power imbalances can be become structurally ingrained into new technologies before they become socially 'enmeshed'. This may become problematic, as society's "visions of the future are dominated by new technologies" (Brown, Rappert & Webster, 2000, 4). If there are agency and power discrepancies pre-existing within new technologies, the ramifications on future imaginaries and visions of the future constantly run the risk of exacerbating the inequality of agency that such technologies enable. The view of sociotechnical imaginaries as a 'network' of individuals co-creating a shared vision of the future may still hold in principle. However, taking on the constitutive view of society as a network, without safeguarding it against the potential problems of technologically induced power imbalances can easily lead to said problems taking structural hold of the production and maintenance of future imaginaries (Mager & Katzenbach, 2020).

This is the point of sociotechnical imaginaries. The theory allows for an analysis and critique of currently existing social relations, through analysing what the current socio-cultural visions of the future entail. It accomplishes this through viewing social structure through a lens of technological change and advancement. In short, to carry out an analysis based in sociotechnical imaginaries is to critically analyse the "scientifically and culturally conditioned perceptions of reality" (Jasanoff, 2015a, 14). To engage with sociotechnical imaginaries, is to allow technology and the production of perceived reality to become one united view of social reality as a holistic entity. The sum total of many futures contested and intermingled, as they strive to become the dominant vision thereof, grounded in this dialectical relationship, interwoven with power relations and negotiation, aligns with the

usage of CDA to explicate on these unseen structures and futures (Jasanoff, 2015a). To attempt to see how structure and agency function in sociotechnically laden settings is to attempt to get closer to a project unveiling of how power functions and is disseminated throughout social practices.

## The Two Theories Combined

The two theories explained above may not at first seem directly linked, however, critical discourse analysis is an excellent tool for engaging with sociotechnical imaginaries present in texts. This stems from the sociotechnical imaginaries not always being present on a surface level and therefore research needs some way to get inside texts to get at a core message within. CDA is specifically well suited to allow such incursions into a text owing to its large focus on subtext and underlying power relations. As sociotechnical imaginaries often exist on a hidden level, being influenced by actors wanting to alter what imaginaries are the major ones in any given group or society, these same levels, are the discursive constructs which CDA attempts to reveal and analyse.

To exemplify this, some fictitious examples of van Leeuwen's legitimations as seen through the lens of sociotechnical imaginaries may be helpful:

- **Authorisation:** A statement in a text or media allowing a founder of a media company speak freely about the importance of their technology may very well contain a legitimation of authorisation, as the founder is allowed to freely position themselves as an authority in the discursive construction of said technology.
- **Moral evaluation:** A text that contains information about how to stay healthy through exercise, may contain non-surface level references to adopting a smart watch to help with keeping track of diets and exercise. This may equate staying healthy as a 'good' with adopting technology, thus incorporating adoption of technology into a vague definition of 'good' as equalled to 'healthy'.
- **Rationalisations:** On a company website, the company's product may be presented as the 'natural thing' for a consumer to do, as it 'solves' a problem in the individual

consumer's life. This type of legitimation equating usage of technology with the natural order is a type of rational legitimation.

- **Mythopoesis:** In a news segment, a spokesperson for a company is interviewed, and throughout said interview the spokesperson narrates the events of an accident that was averted thanks to a technology. In so doing, the spokesperson engages in a mythopoetic legitimation of constructing the technology as an embodiment of safety, and the development of said technology as the culmination of a rational and moral process.

## Identity Theory

Lastly, as this project will focus on Acxiom's RealIdentity project, a note on the usage of identity theory is required. While the aim of this project is to mainly work with the inductive approach to theory as it presents itself in the texts analysed, a framework for analysing it is still required for any fruitful outcome of the study to be possible. As this project builds on the fundament of sociotechnical imaginaries, any theory of identity applied will need to be compliant with Jasanoff's theory of the imaginary. Thus, this theory will in its analytical stage, use Matthew Fuller's concept of 'flecks of identity' to help analyse the way Acxiom construct 'identity' in its sociotechnical imaginary. Fuller's theory of 'flecks of identity' is a theory that sees identity, as it exists in online systems, as a composite of information that is stored said systems. This information is used by algorithms to create profiles for individuals which then further 'scale' the individual to the purposes as deigned by the companies controlling the databases in which the profiles exist (Fuller, 2005, 148). Said scales help turn these flecks of identity (i.e., incomplete and varied sets of data from a person) into 'standard objects' which are the 'primary compositional element' (Fuller, 2005, 148) of identity in the system of surveillance that these data systems constitute (Fuller, 2005, 151).

The flecks of identity themselves are any piece of data that can be tied to an individual, such as an:

"Informational token of conformity or infraction. An element, cluster, or concatenation of data, flecks of identity—a number, a sample, a document,



racial categorization — are features that identify the bearer as belonging to particular scalar positions and relations” (Fuller, 2005, 148)

The ‘scalar’ sets that Fuller discusses, are essentially a way to position a piece of data, within a set. Its a perspective which sees the identity of an individual as a composite of partial data, made whole by the algorithms and biases of the system through which said data are collected, stored and manipulated (Fuller, 2005, 149). Thus, this particular theory of identity will be useful in the analysis part of this project as Fuller’s view of identity is apt at teasing out definitions of identity from only known scales or ‘flecks’ without having access to a complete set of identifiers. Seeing how that approach is the basis of Acxiom’s RealIdentity project, having a theoretical framework suited for analysing it is a given need, a need which ‘flecks of identity’ helps sate.

## Summary

This chapter aimed to delineate the theoretical framework used in the study. Starting with a description of the Foucauldian roots of discourse theory, the chapter moved on to discuss the beginnings and theoretical roots of Critical Discourse Analysis. Having done so, the chapter further narrowed the scope and useability of CDA to the specificity of van Leeuwen’s theory of legitimations and how the different types thereof may become visible in texts. Following on, the chapter turned to the theory that will be applied throughout, sociotechnical imaginaries. The chapter discussed how sociotechnical imaginaries are structured, the roots thereof, and how the theory can be gainfully applied in order to examine and critique power relations implicit in structures in society. Lastly, the chapter introduced Matthew Fuller’s theory of ‘flecks of identity’ in order to facilitate the analysis of the findings from the study.

## Methodology: CDA, Acxiom & Corpus

This chapter will discuss the methodological aspects of the study. This discussion starts with justifying the choice of critical discourse analysis as this study's research method. This will be followed by a discussion on the subject of research, Acxiom. Furthermore, the chapter will deal with how the material was prepared and what preliminary analyses were carried out in order to facilitate the discourse analysis that is the basis of the project. Finally, the chapter will discuss the issue of research ethics, and how this study has dealt with its research material.

### Why Critical Discourse Analysis?

The choice of research method comes down to what the researcher/author is attempting to explicate, and in which ways, such information may in the best way be teased out from the material available. In the case of this particular study, the choice to settle on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) came, in part, down to how the author positions themselves concerning the research. As the research method always involves the researcher as a 'participant-observer' (Meyer, 2001, 30). This participant-observer status is what allows the researcher to attempt to involve themselves with the texts to understand and lay bare the power structures that are present in the material (Fairclough, 2001). As this particular project is one that attempts to interrogate the discursive methods of a data analysis company, CDA affords the project the ability to engage with the texts in a way no other research method would allow. All this without the researcher needing expertise with, or access to, the technology behind the system, or to employees of the company. This type of project focusing on the power relations present in the texts thus lends itself to a methodology focusing on inductive themes to begin with.

However, as the nature of the company and the research material available delimited the research from a natural insider vantage point, the research was naturally one in which the role of the researcher changed from mere observer to participant-observer. Even if the researcher had had access to the technological systems that the company has built its success on, that would be a study with a very different focus. Instead, as this project is explicitly

interested in identity and how the company discursively constructs it, the focus on subtext, and especially implicit power relations is the core of the research. Therefore, for a study that focuses on power relations and discursive positioning, no other qualitative research method lends itself better to the purpose than critical discourse analysis. This allows the research to engage with themes pertaining to issues that might not become entirely evident through other research methodologies.

Additionally, Critical Discourse Analysis is well suited for analysing corpora that contain incomplete sets of information, as it affords the researcher a closer relation to the material, as the traditional objectivity of empirical research becomes in part an impossibility owing to the position of the researcher (Meyer, 2001, 30).

As this study is one that aims to investigate power and structures present in texts without having access to the above mentioned 'full picture', the outcome of such research will never be perfectly 'neutral' as:

'Neutral ('objective') observations are those observations made by the researcher for which some level of reliability (multiple observations would produce the same 'facts') and validity (the observations represent an objective 'truth') are claimed' (Scollon, 154, 2001)

Seeing how in this project, the material chosen, such neutral observations are not possible. Instead, CDA allows for a greater incursion in the texts through applying a critical lens which affords the researcher the opportunity to instead engage with the material in ways that research methods aiming for 'neutral' observations may not tolerate. CDA thus presents a way for projects to approach topics and areas of research, in which complete sets of research material may not be present and from such material gainfully extract worthwhile research.

As above mentioned, not only is the material available for this particular project 'incomplete' by nature, but the material is also a step divorced from the reality of its content matter. The texts and the discursive themes and practices present in them only *refer* to the data analysis and identity management they are about. None of the texts engage in *actual* identity management and data analysis. Thus, the texts are a step divorced from the actuality

of their content. This is a further argument for having chosen CDA. For while the texts discuss the technologies the Acxiom employs, the texts are still engaged in a discursive construction of said technologies.

Thus, while the texts exist as entirely divorced from the *actual* technology, they remain related and engaged with the technology in question owing to how no technology can exist outside of society, it is always embedded therein (Jasanoff, 2015a, 2). Therefore, the most apt way to inquire into such embedded technologies, and their related power structures, is best done through “the methods of interpretive research and analysis that probe the nature of structure-agency relationships through inquiries into meaning making” (Jasanoff, 2015a, 24), i.e., looking at wider societal discourse, and attempting to glean more specific knowledge from looking at a narrow part of it. This is where CDA allows the research to interrogate the material, as the method allows for an investigation of any underlying power structures and ideologies intrinsic to the technology (Jäger, 2001, 56). This operates under the same premise as stated above, no technology exists outside of society, and thus must necessarily contain some form of ideology and power structures, attempting to understand the discursive construction of said ideologies and power structures is thus imperative if one is to understand the role of the technology itself. Thus, CDA provides a way for this research to engage with the underlying power relations of the technology of the texts, without having access to the actual technology itself. As Acxiom has complete control of the material and functioning of the technological system, they construct the hierarchy in which potential clients engage. Acxiom is giving clients the ability to influence consumers while not ceding any control of the system itself to the client in question. This status quo is one of the key elements that will be interrogated in this study, and CDA enables an analysis thereof very elegantly. Having discussed *why* CDA makes for a good fit of research method for this project, the chapter will now turn to the selection of company to be analysed, and which texts were used for this project’s empirical element.

## Which Company Why?

Why Acxiom? Acxiom is an American company founded in Arkansas in 1969 for focusing on mail-advertising. It has since both changed name and focus to Acxiom and now dealing almost exclusively with online services for advertising and cloud solutions. They currently employ over 2100+ staff with offices in both the US, Shanghai and Europe, and their revenue in 2018 was in the excess of \$917 million. They are one of, if not the biggest actor on the Identity Management and advertising market. Therefore, when it came to choosing a company for the empirical element of the study, there exist several companies that would be suitable for this study; Meltwater, Oracle, Salesforce, and LiveRamp to name a few. What sets Acxiom apart is that it is firstly one of, if not the largest, identity management company on the market, they have also been active in the identity management field for over 50 years. Additionally, there is plenty of academic research that has engaged with Acxiom prior to this study, both in a critical fashion (Turow, 2011; Turow, 2017), and in more evaluative approaches (Olberding, 1997; Denish, et al., 2014). Additionally, owing to its place as one of the leading companies within the field, it has also been mentioned in non-academic papers (Leetaru, 2018; Singer, 2012). Thus, choosing to focus on a company that is already established in both academic journals, but also in non-academic writings helps with both real-world, and theoretical relevance of the research.

## Case Texts and Text Selection

As soon as the choice of company was settled, a selection of texts to be analysed needed to be carried out. While Acxiom's website contains a plethora of articles and multimodal pieces, many of the texts share a common purpose or content, and thus selecting texts that all contribute something particular to the study was deemed a problem. However, Acxiom themselves divide their stated purpose (under the 'What We Do' tab on the landing page of their website) into six categories: Data, Customer Intelligence Platforms, Identity Resolution, Digital Marketing Solutions, Analytics and Strategy, and Data Privacy. Having settled on the theoretical framework of the sociotechnical imaginaries, and van Leeuwen's legitimations, the six categories were looked through in order to identify which one would, theoretically,

yield the most interesting and critically useful findings. Of the topics, of interest to the theoretical framework chosen, identity resolution stood out. Partially because it engages with the individual 'consumer' on a more granular level than Acxiom's services relating to data privacy or analytics for example. Additionally, identity resolution stands out because it is at the core of Acxiom's business model. Therefore, out of the six possible categories, 'Identity Resolution' was chosen as the focus of this study.

Having narrowed it down to one of six categories however, the possible corpora of texts were too large to be gainfully analysed. A further narrowing was therefore necessary before the empirical analysis could commence. On Acxiom's website site, there exist a wide gamut of types of texts. Acxiom produces video, podcasts, e-books, numerous blogs, and general fact sheets. Therefore, the selection of texts was carried out in such a way that the study tried to mimic the composition of the website. All types of texts were looked at, however, for the sake of analysing meaningful content, landing pages, and link-tree pages<sup>3</sup> were excluded. Thus, narrowing down the type of texts to be analysed to: blog posts, e-books, podcasts, fact sheets and video. Most of the pages on the web page are blog posts, or pages akin to blog posts (i.e., texts with a single specified author conveying information regarding a specific topic from the perspective of the author themselves), thus they were the only type of text which has a repeat showing in the material for the study with two instances chosen for analysis. Other than that, one e-book, one fact sheet, one video clip and one podcast were chosen for the corpora, ending up with six texts in total. While the texts chosen are multimodal, the analysis of relevance for this project focuses on the underlying power structures and legitimations employed by the actors in the text. This is opposed to a more lexical or multimodal analysis, therefore, during the empirical element, little attention will be paid to visual elements of the texts. The reason as to why visual/tonal elements of the texts will not be subject to analysis is owing to the scope of the corpus. To ensure as a high a level of validity as possible, the texts will only be analysed on the aspects which they share, i.e., the explicitly stated content. For the written texts, this will be just the text itself, with no

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<sup>3</sup> Link-tree pages are here defined as pages whose primary purpose is to serve links to other parts of the website and as such contain little new information that cannot be found in one of the links present on the page

relevance being assigned to the visual elements. For the video and the podcast, this will be limited to the spoken words alone, with no relevance being assigned to visual cues in the video or tonal/turn-taking elements in the podcast. As the corpus for this study is so small, all findings need to possess internal coherence in order to translate into external validity for the study.

In the table below, the texts are shown, along with their type. While this study is committed to a small corpus, after having conducted an overview of the sum total of texts available for potential analysis, a smaller representative corpus, was settled on. The focus of the corpus was on mimicking the structure of the total texts present, instead of analysing all texts present. The size of the corpus was so delimited in order to facilitate a more granular and narrow analysis of the discourses and themes present in the texts.

Type	Title
Blog Post	'Building an Identity Graph – Pain Tolerance'
Blog Post	'What is an Identity Graph and Why is it Important?'
Video	'Solving the Identity Resolution Challenge'
Podcast	'Identity at the Intersection of Marketing and Advertising'
Fact Sheet	'Identity Builder: Powering Optimal Customer Experiences'
E-book	'What is Identity Resolution?'

*Table 1: Type of text and title thereof*

Having settled on the texts to be analysed, a preliminary analysis was carried out in order to help guide the beginnings of the project, both identifying the main discursive elements of the texts, but also to facilitate a preliminary identification of the major legitimations present in the texts. This will follow in the upcoming section of this chapter.

## Delineation of Discursive Strategies and Preliminary Analysis

As the above section outlined the selection of company to be analysed, and what texts from the article were to be used for the sake of this study, after having done so, it is time to carry out a set of thematic readings of the texts in order to help guide the full-fledged close reading on which the empirical element is predicated. These preliminary readings were divided into two elements, with increasing granularity. First the texts were read in an inductive way, focusing on surface level themes, to identify the major discourses present in the text. Following on from that, a second reading, placing deductive focus on the themes identified in the prior stage was carried out to facilitate a deepening of the themes to help establish initial discursive strategies and discursive perspectives. This latter reading made use of the dividing lines stemming from van Leeuwen's legitimations.

While the six texts all differ in tone and scope, owing to the strict demarcation of theme carried out before settling on Identity Resolution as the topic of the study, the texts all share a few elements. This first reading was done to sort the texts into rough clusters, as some of the texts leaned heavier into certain discourses, whilst barely touching on others. Thus, before the discourse analysis could commence proper, a rough map of where the study was heading needed to be carried out.



Discourse	Key Texts	Discursive Strategies
Neo-liberal Market Ideology	Podcast, Video & Fact Sheet	Rationality, Market Logic, Efficiency,
Privacy	E-book, Blog Posts, Podcast	'Privacy by Design', Law as Avoidance
Identity Structure	E-book, Fact Sheet	Identity as Composite, 'Real'/Created Identity
Techno-Utopianism	E-book, Fact Sheet, Podcast	Technological Advancement as Uncontested Good, Expertise as Agenda Setting
Biological/Naming	Blog Posts	Pain, Hygiene, Multiplicity of Meaning of Words

Table 2: Initial discourses, key texts and strategies thereof identified after initial reading of texts.

As the table above shows, five main discourses were identified during the initial reading of the texts, they were identified as being meaningfully different and evident through an inductive approach to the texts. While at this stage, no close reading involving van Leeuwen's legitimations, i.e., paying special attention to specific formulations word choices, was undertaken, the discourses identified at this stage were those deemed sufficiently analytically fruitful at *prima facie*. The key element of this initial reading was attempting to identify discourses that in some way or another positioned Acxiom in a power structure in relation to either their own clients, or the consumers from which the client would want to draw data. While a plethora of other discourse could have been, and gainfully so, identified and analysed, this first reading served only to delineate exactly which power structures were to be looked at, and hone in on which texts were the most relevant for which discourses (Janks, 1997, 331).

Following from the first pass in which the initial discourses were identified, a second pass was carried out, this time with the focus being on the legitimations from van Leeuwen's theoretical framework. If the first reading helped separate the analytically useful discourses

from those falling outside the scope of this study, then the second pass served to help identify the point of origin of the close reading. Van Leeuwen's legitimations spans a wide gamut of possible outcomes regarding close readings of texts. Therefore, the second reading became a necessity to help guide the close readings to ensure that the scope of the study remained focused and would yield findings that were critically useful. Having identified the five discourses that will become the backbone of the study, the findings from the second reading helped guide the more precise analyses of the texts that were to come. Thus, each discourse identified in table 2, was bolstered with a few key themes that correlated to each of the legitimations present in van Leeuwen's model. The 2<sup>nd</sup> table defined the 1<sup>st</sup> level analysis, the table below outlines each of the dimensions present in those 2<sup>nd</sup> level discourses. Ergo, table 3 defines the 2<sup>nd</sup> level analysis of the study, the discursive space in which the analytical element of the study takes place.

<i>Legitimation</i>	Neo-Liberal Market Ideology	Privacy	Identity Structure	Techno-Utopianism	Biological/ Naming
<i>Rationalisation</i>	Market-logic, Competition	Privacy law compliance as RoI improving	Identity management as core to business in 21 <sup>st</sup> century	Technological change as natural	Equating technological system with physical body
<i>Authorisation</i>	Expertise, Market-leading	Referral to legalisation, superiority of law	Market leading in identity, Expertise	Market-leading, authority on technological advancement	Power of naming, discursive control
<i>Moral Evaluation</i>	Profit as a moral good, Loss-avoidance as ethically sound	Legal compliance as equated with being law-abiding	Gives clients 'control' of identity in marketplace, control = 'good'	Keeping up with technological change as 'good', beneficial for client	Involves physical concepts of 'good' and 'bad' into technological discourse
<i>Mythopoesis</i>	RoI maximising through identity management	Using legal argument to strengthen use-case for RoI increasing measures	N/A	Teleological aspect of technology, constant improvements	Metaphors of the body, 'humanisation' of technological system

Table 3: Outlining the different legitimations established in the discourses from 1st reading.

In the above table, some initial guidelines for each type of the legitimations per discourse are given to help the final close reading to stay as focused as possible. While these legitimations were not grounded in any direct quotes or close readings, this inductive approach to the texts allowed the themes present to crystallise and become clearer, to ensure that the results of the study maintain a high level of internal validity. When employing a research methodology like CDA, it is of utmost importance to critically assess each step of

the research process to make sure that no grave misinterpretations or misrepresentations of the texts take place, as the surrounding methodological framework is very flexible to the needs of each and every particular study using it. However, through taking the proper precautions, and carrying out the correct steps, as done above, this study will be able to produce valid results of critical usefulness.

This section has dealt with the selection of material for the study, and the preliminary analyses that was carried out before the actual close reading of it. This step was two-fold, first the material was read to identify the main discourses present in the texts. After that they were read through again to identify preliminary cases of van Leeuwen's legitimations to help guide the discourse analysis that is to come.

A note on generalisability contra validity, while a study like this one aim mainly a high degree of validity, as generalisability is hard to achieve with such a narrow focus and small corpus, this is not to argue that there is no generalisability possible. This particular study focuses on Acxiom and Acxiom's discursive themes alone. Yet, the study may very well be carried out with the discourse present in Meltwater or LiveRamp's published texts as the object of study. So, while the findings of the study may not possess any worthwhile degree of generalisability, the methodology of the study in question, and the topics herein discussed may very well do so.

Additionally, as one of this project's main aim is to show how the theoretical foundation of the paper serve to inform the analysis. Owing to this, a greater onus than might be expected is placed on the functioning of the sociotechnical imaginaries as a theoretical driving force, as opposed to as complement to the empirical element of the paper. The reasoning as to why, ties into the theme of the low generalisability. Putting greater emphasis on the theoretical underpinnings allows the critical discourse analysis carried out to gain greater internal validity owing to the strengthening of the model as is. This furthers the point of generalisability made in the prior paragraph. This initial study enables a type of critical discourse analysis which focuses mainly on the texts seen as units of analysis carrying information as a whole. This is opposed to specific lexical choices or more language-related structural analysis with a greater linguistic focus, the hope is that further studies may be able to apply the same theoretical model, without having to apply the same rigorous theoretical

approach. The hope therefore is instead that future studies can apply such lexical, or more linguistically informed, types of critical discourse analysis.

The next section of this chapter will briefly touch on research ethics and how this study has dealt with its research material to ensure the study remains ethically sound.

## Ethical Considerations

As a research project of this scope demands, a brief discussion on the ethical implications of the study must be conducted. Partly in relation to the empirical element, but also concerning general research ethics.

Regarding the empirical element of the project, all texts were collected from Acxiom's own website. Although the paper never mentions any of the authors by name, they are quoted in the bibliography and could thus be identified through that. Two of the texts are blog posts, written from the perspective of the authors, as employees at Acxiom. While the texts contain no discernible personal information from either, it may still be worthwhile to mention that they are the sole authors of said texts, and any analysis must be made sure to remain detached from the authors as private individuals, as opposed to their role as professional employees. The same can be said about the video analysed, while it only has a single author, the text itself contains no discernible private information, and thus, the author is never referred to by name, in order to maintain the same separation. While the podcast carries a more informal tone, it is clear that the three participants (all three are employed by Acxiom) are joining the podcast in the role of them as professionals, as opposed to joining to share their private thoughts regarding Acxiom and its role in the data analysis and identity management business. Thus, once again, if the members of the podcast are ever mentioned specifically, they are only referred to as by their title, again, to maintain the separation between private/profession. The last two texts analysed are an E-book, anonymously published by Acxiom and thus can be seen to represent the company as a whole and has no author mentioned, only Acxiom as publisher. This text can therefore be said to contain no potentially harmful information for the individual. The last text is a fact sheet, this text is also published by Acxiom as a company, with no mentioned author, and like the e-book contains no mention of any private individuals.

Furthermore, none of the texts analysed contain any contact information to the individuals, the only contact information available is to the general 'info@acxiom.com' e-mail address. All texts used in this study are accessible through Acxiom's website, without the user having to sign up for any newsletter or account, thus any researcher wanting to examine the materials should be able to do so without any issue.

## Summary

This chapter has dealt with the research method of the study. The chapter begun with an outline of why CDA was chosen as the research method for this particular project, because it allows the researcher to get closer to the material, while still maintaining an approach to the texts which allow them to be critically and constructively engaged with their subject matter. Having done so, the chapter moved on to discuss which company was chosen for what reasons, and how the selection of texts for the study took place in order to mimic the structure of Acxiom's website. Following on from that the chapter showed how the preliminary research stages took place, how the discourses for the study were identified, and how van Leeuwen's legitimations became apparent in the texts. Finally, the chapter briefly touched upon research ethics and how the study has dealt with its research material.

## Neoliberal Market-Ideology & the Rationality of the Consumer

As a first port of call, this analysis will delve into how Acxiom positions itself, and its clients, in relation to the neoliberal market ideology. It will look at how forms of legitimation, in order; rationalisations, authorisations and moral evaluations function to embed not only Acxiom but also its clients as participants in the neoliberal marketplace. It will achieve this through first looking at how Acxiom makes engaging with its services seem to be the rational course of action for any client. Secondly it will look at how Acxiom positions itself as an authority in data and identity management. And lastly it will investigate how Acxiom discursively reconstructs 'efficiency' as a moral good for its clients.

### Rational Legitimations and Market Participation

In the podcast, senior employees at Acxiom discuss the importance of marketing, especially, the importance of distributing a company's marketing dollars so that it maximises the benefit for the company:

"The technology associated with marketing has really two primary purposes. First, you know, being, what insights can I gain from what I've done in the past. So, what are my campaigns, the advertisements I've run, and to understand where to spend my next marketing dollar. The second being the management activation of, really owned media (Hollaway, et al., 2020).

Here one can see how Acxiom positions itself in relation to the client. Talking from the perspective of a customer, through a case of instrumental rationalisation, the speaker makes it seem like the only rational thing to look after each 'marketing dollar', to make sure that the client can extricate the maximum amount of value from it. This is a clear example of a theoretical rational legitimation as through the speaker's stance of a 'marketer-in-potentia', he shows how engaging with technology is the rational solution to solving issues with marketing budgets. Additionally, his statement posits that technology also helps with 'managing', i.e., technology here, is positioned as the rational choice for controlling, thus positioning Acxiom (a company that deals with technology solutions for these type of

problems) as an outcome that can help marketers spend their ‘next marketing dollar’ (Hollaway, et al., 2020) in such a way that it abates the worries of the marketers in question. Through this example, the speaker positions Acxiom and its services as a rational solution to ‘real’ problems, that are best solved by the engagement of technology. This is an example of how the discourse of the neo-liberal market ideology is constructed. Through engaging with a company’s external services on the marketplace of varying MarTech solutions, Acxiom’s clients:

“can achieve real-time, pinpoint effectiveness in their people-based marketing and advertising, resulting in a more effective use of budget and greater ROI” (Acxiom, 2020b).

Thus, through a use of instrumental legitimation, equating Acxiom with the rationality and purported effectiveness of the marketplace. At face value, it may seem like their language empowers the client. However, what this achieves is infusing the power that the client is after (the power to control its media, spend its ‘next marketing dollar’ wisely, and achieve pinpoint effectiveness) into Acxiom as an actor, thus transferring the semiotic meaning of the ‘actor’ to Acxiom from the client. Acxiom’s technology is the one achieving ‘pinpoint effectiveness’ (Acxiom, 2020b), not the client. The client is entirely reliant on Acxiom to achieve harmony with the market. Thus, one can here see the first traces of the sociotechnical imaginary that Acxiom are attempting to seed. As a company active in the capitalist marketplace, it is imperative, that any conceptualisation of either Acxiom, Acxiom’s relationship to the client, Acxiom’s relationship to the consumer, and all permutations thereof, are seen through the lens of the market.

This necessity of the market can be seen in an even starker light, is if one positions the role of ‘data’ in relative to the core business idea of Acxiom. Throughout the text, examples abound<sup>4</sup> of the inevitability of datafication, there is no conceivable end to the amount of data

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<sup>4</sup> Balogh, 2020 referring to data as ‘noisy and low-quality’, both qualities being examples of data being abundant enough to cause noise, or interference. Hollaway, 2020 argues that ‘It is often cost-prohibitive and technologically infeasible to capture every touchpoint and signal for every consumer on the market’ showing how the market is over-saturated with data. And lastly, Acxiom’s own identity builder fact sheet refers to the explosion of data generated by the Internet of Things as a reason as to why having the capability to sort through this data is essential (Acxiom, 202a)



an individual can generate. A participant on the podcast casually mentions how he is constantly generating data, as he is sat participating in “this call, with our phones sitting, on our respective computers connected to the internet, my Nest<sup>5</sup> thermostat” (Hollaway et al., 2020). This naturalisation of constant data creation becomes likened to a by-product of just existing, and thus, as with any natural event, businesses must adapt, or be overcome.

## Authoritative Legitimisations and the Expertise Required

Following on from this, the rationalisation legitimations in the above paragraphs help position data creation as an authoritative event. It is unavoidable, it is inevitable, and the only thing Acxiom’s clients can do to cope, is to engage with the technological system as it is “necessary to ensure you get higher ROI from your marketing spend” (Acxiom, 2020b). Notice here how this authorisation is legitimised, it is ‘necessary’, to ensure you get a higher ROI. Any deviation from this is a deviation from the rational course of action (following the market-logic) and goes against, as by Acxiom defined, the authoritative, and by nature unavoidable, nature of data creation (as it is constructed as a ‘natural’ event). Acxiom positions their own suite of data analysis tools and their capability as: ‘best-in-class solution [which] also go far beyond the data itself, facilitating data quality and hygiene services for an accurate, enhanced data insight’ (Acxiom, 2020b). Through this, Acxiom employs an authoritative legitimisation of expertise. Only Acxiom is able to ‘tame’ and control the nature of this data produced, therefore positioning themselves in line with the ‘natural’ aspects of data creation. Thus van Leeuwen’s legitimations can here be seen as building upon each other (2007), the rationality of complying with the logic of the market is underpinned by the voice of expertise and authority, that Acxiom and its employees, by virtue of being the voice of expertise and authority encompass. Thus, as is argued, in a developing field “marketers must be able to amalgamate disparate, fragmented data points across a rapidly growing number of platforms and touch points” (Acxiom, 2020b). Acxiom, through this, in retrospect

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<sup>5</sup> Nest is a brand of smart thermostats owned by Alphabet which is the parent company owning Google and its subsidiary companies.

obvious tautology<sup>6</sup>, positions themselves as not only the rational choice for a prospective client, but they infuse their position with the role of an authority. Previously, it was ‘necessary’ (Hollaway, et al., 2020) to get higher RoI, now, clients ‘must’ be able to amalgamate the disparate fragmented data. These are wordings that do not imply, but outright state, what a client must do in order to be successful. And this success stems from the ability to engage with Acxiom’s technology as they state in their promotional material:

“Only Acxiom delivers global identity solutions at scale across multiple use cases and platforms to ensure clients have and keep a competitive edge in all people-based activities” (Acxiom, 2020a)

This argument show how their expert authority is the ‘only one’ (Acxiom, 2020a) on the market that gives clients the option to cut across markets and lets them keep their competitive edge, summarising the role they play in the neoliberal market.

Here, the sociotechnical imaginary again comes to the fore. As will be explicated on towards the end of this analysis, the sociotechnical imaginary that is starting to take form, is one that attempts to incorporate technology, not as a superfluous benefit to marketers, but at the very core of marketing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The theoretical lens of sociotechnical imaginaries are essentially trying to bring to light how this type of datafication is shifting the goal posts for what meaningful participation on the market entails. Acxiom is arguing for how this new technology which is ‘emergent in the world’ (Bazerman, 1998, 385) is not a constitutive part of what participation in the market is. It is a prerequisite for participating in the market.

## The Moral Construction of the Good Market Participant

Having discussed how participating in the neo-liberal market ideology is legitimised as both an authoritative and rational good for any client looking to partner with Acxiom, it is further entrenched as a virtue in the discourse contained in the corpus of this study . Acxiom, as a

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<sup>6</sup> A tautology: a statement that is true by necessity or by virtue of its logical form. In this case: We are the identity and data experts, because we are the identity and data experts.

company specialising in data analysis and identity resolution, are not only concerned with their customers coming to them for expertise, if they can also convey that coming to them is morally justified, then their hold over the discursive construction of what is 'right' will only become more controlled. This is a deeper type of power discrepancy than merely being an expert or not, as 'right' and 'wrong' are qualities that should hold outside of any special examples. Acxiom therefore engages in the discursive creation of 'right' and 'wrong' in a relatively roundabout fashion. They position their systems solution as the way for marketers to become 'first-in-class' and lets marketers 'fuel [a] better spend of marketing dollars' (Acxiom, 2020a). This goes beyond a legitimization of expertise, Acxiom's reference to the superiority of their system, and its ability to make a marketers nimbler are examples of Acxiom engaging in analogical moral legitimation. They are equating the efficiency of the 'fuel' spent on their services furthering to the 'goodness' of the efficiency of any marketing being undertaken. If the authoritative construction of Acxiom itself rested on the company's expertise and tautologically self-evident authority, then this construction rests with a faux empowerment of the client.

If, for the client, participation and competition in the market is rationally sound, an unavoidable, then doing so in the most cost-effective way possible is construed as being 'successful' in said participation. Core to neoliberalism is the efficiency of enterprise and the market, and that such efficiency should yield as great results as possible. Acxiom is able to discursively co-opt this efficiency to mean 'good' through equating the usage of their services with being an efficient participant in the marketplace. This is shown as Acxiom in the material analysed often involves the speed related to their services as a heuristic for efficiency, although this is by no means the only definition of efficiency. They state that Acxiom can:

"Deliver 'always on' support for real-time, interactive and core batch processing" (Acxiom, 2020a)

And that:

"It [Acxiom] empowers brands to maintain consumer identity over time" (Acxiom, 2020a)

Thus, the incorporation of time becomes a quality that allows clients to be 'good' in the marketplace, efficiency as lauded in the marketplace, becomes an inherent 'good' quality of their enterprise, all done through the usage of an abstraction as legitimation. The 'good' of being fast is abstracted into being 'good' as a participant on the marketplace. Should they choose to engage with Acxiom's services. This allows not only Acxiom to position themselves as compliant with the moral standards of the marketplace, but it enables Acxiom through their sociotechnical imaginary to "to reconfigure actors' sense of the possible spaces of action but also their sense of the rightness of action" (Jasanoff, 2015a, 23).

If the first two types (authoritative & rational) of legitimations concerning the discursive construction of the neoliberal market ideology, this third moral type of legitimation situates the client as a co-producer in the production of this sociotechnical imaginary. However, here one of the built-in power discrepancies of this discourse becomes apparent. Acxiom has already laid claim to the role of authority in this discourse, so while the attempts at moral legitimation *prima facie* seem to empower the client, what it is actually achieving is quite the opposite. It subsumes the client into a role of dependency. All these positive qualities exist not as embedded qualities of the client, but as positive qualities of Acxiom's technological system. The outset of Acxiom's project is to help the client know its consumers, and to help identify them. But through this, they construct a discourse surrounding the incorporation of neoliberal markets into the very fabric of its practices.

## Summary

Fundamental to Acxiom's project, as has been shown in the above text, is the need for Acxiom to position themselves as an authority on data and identity, the rationality of clients to engage with Acxiom's product, and how this engagement results in the client being discursively rewarded with being a 'good' participant in the marketplace. Carrying on from here, the paper will turn to another discursive aspect of Acxiom's project concerning data and identity, namely, the rise of privacy legislation and how they impact, compound, and deepen the sociotechnical imaginary as constructed by Acxiom.

## Privacy – Why Is It? Who Needs It? And Who Dictates It?

Privacy in the texts examined inhabits an interesting dual role. As was looked at in the prior section on neoliberalism, the role Acxiom plays is one of enabler. Acxiom positions itself in such a way that it proves to be the only way for its clients to be able to proficiently compete and partake in the market. Privacy on the other hand is portrayed rather differently. As they exist in the marketplace, the neoliberal agenda is pervasive, but any market logic, has to bend to the letter of the law. Whether an actor agrees or not, the law stands above and dictates the markets. It is authority defining the boundaries of the market, defining what is and is not allowed, what is a trespass, and what is passable. In recent years, privacy legislation has been on the rise, especially with both GDPR and CCPA<sup>7</sup> being rolled out (Paul, 2019), increasing privacy measurements needing to be taken by companies and suppliers of online services or data storage. This of course forces Acxiom to follow these laws, and in the texts analysed, a pattern starts to emerge how Acxiom constructs the purpose of these laws.

This section will look at the discourse of privacy and how it is portrayed in the texts analysed. It will achieve this through firstly looking at how Acxiom discursively constructs the issue of privacy legislation and its role in loss-avoidance and reputation management. Having done so, a discussion on how the consumers, and by extension, the individuals who construct these laws, and the reason as to why will follow. Carrying on from that, an explication on how that changes the intent of privacy laws themselves is next. Lastly, a brief discussion how mythopoesis plays a role in Acxiom's sociotechnical imaginary and how it attempts to incorporate the individual consumer through making compliance with their system a rewarding experience.

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<sup>7</sup> The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is an EU legislation passed in 2018 for increased data protection of members in EU countries. The California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) is a similar piece of legislation, also passed in 2018, passed by the state of California in the US. While it only covers individuals living in California, it has forced many companies dealing with US customers to roll out similar privacy measures in order to reach national coverage in the US for their websites and services.

## Privacy-by-Design and Avoidance of Litigation

At face value, it would seem the laws enacted are to be followed for their content is just, they aim to reduce harm to individuals, property, etc. However, the 'justness' in privacy law, as construed by Acxiom, is one closer aligned with the previously outlined neoliberal ideological arguments. An employee at Acxiom, in a video aimed at industry professionals discusses identity management solutions and the necessity to: 'wrap everything in a privacy-by-design framework' (Hollaway, 2020), which initially seems like the sound, and just, course of action to take. However, following right on, he shows how the necessity for this 'privacy-by-design' framework is not one that is undertaken for the good of the consumer, or to be compliant with the law based on the justness of the law itself. Instead, these types of privacy-by-design frameworks, must be undertaken because: 'It is important to protect your brands reputation and avoid costly privacy litigation' (Hollaway, 2020). Implicit here, is a legitimization of impersonal authority.

This involves the letter of the law into the discursive space constructed and inverts its purpose. Instead of the law being a deontological good-in-itself, the law holds no intrinsic value of good. The law becomes a structure used to justify the same behaviour that was argued for in the previous chapter, that of being an efficient and 'good' participant in the market. The law, however, remains an authoritative figure; circumvention, or subversion of the law remains both 'costly' and 'unnecessary' (Ward, 2020) for the client. Acxiom is not encouraging their clients to break the law; however, it does allow Acxiom to position themselves in such a way that enable their clients to 'be efficient' through the use of instrumental rational legitimation. This instrumentality comes to the fore when one of the benefits of engaging with Acxiom's services is the ability to adhere 'to privacy regulation, in order to protect the company's [clients'] reputation' (Hollaway, 2020) thus turning Acxiom's services into not only an identity solution, but also a technological solution aimed at avoiding litigation and managing reputation. Additionally, this privacy-by-design is telling of the sociotechnical imaginary that underpins Acxiom's project. As this approach to privacy-by-design discursively incorporates privacy into their system design it allows Acxiom to automate and alleviate privacy concerns. This effectively dissolves the responsibilities of the state as the arbiter of the law into Acxiom's technology which

empowers Acxiom's 'ability to govern . . . with their rhetoric, technologies and business models (Mager & Katzenbach, 2020, 8).

## Who are the Subjects of Privacy Law?

Therefore, the sociotechnical imaginary that Acxiom is creating and disseminating is one that is based in privacy law as avoidance, and avoidance as automated, once again taking an instrumental approach in its use of rational legitimations. It is a way to take the authority of the state and resolve all issues of compliance into technological solutions of avoidance. This is further shown in the texts analysed as the approach to privacy regulation is seen as a continuous event. In the podcast analysed, the podcast host and senior employee of Acxiom quotes a tweet he found online and relates it to the potential hindrances that increased regulation may cause for identity resolution technology:

“we fear what we don't understand, and we destroy what we fear' and how much does that kind of mentality drive some of this regulation? Are we seeing this rise of privacy and this rise of regulation around this kind of converged eco-system [data-harvesting & MarTech] because it's just something that people just don't understand, and there is some kind of fear there? Or is it literally that it's just a generational issue in some ways, where people are just like, you know 'I have this kind of expectation' and the post-iPhone crowd as they start to mature and become consumers, are they going to have a completely different view?” (Hollaway, et al., 2020)

This quote highlights much of what has been covered above. It infantilises the consumer as an entity that either fears data or does not understand it. It positions the regulators as a hindrance, an opposition, to Acxiom's position through the use of an evaluative legitimation. It robs those not 'in the know' of authority in the matter and elevates those who are to a moral position above the rest. As has been shown, Acxiom presents itself as the way for clients to become 'good' participants in the marketplace, and regulators, entirely in line with the neoliberal approach to governance, are seen as a superfluous actor as the market should

be able to regulate itself.

Additionally, the above quote involves the consumers in the privacy design, as the speaker assigns blame for these regulations to the aforementioned consumers that are accused of 'having this kind of expectation' (Hollaway, et al., 2020) thus embedding them within a practice of evaluative legitimation, again. Thus, the regulations that Acxiom opposes, are constructed out by individuals that are already discursively ascribed the status of 'not in the know', therefore rendering them incapable of constructing fair and reasonable laws. In this case 'Having this kind of expectation' is a thinly veiled argument for 'them' being upset that datafication is hampering the individuals' right to not be constantly monitored or surveilled, 'a right to privacy' (UDHR, 1948) essentially. Through subverting the 'right to privacy' into 'this kind of expectation', Acxiom enshrines a discursive wariness of privacy regulation into their system. Privacy-by-design is construed as something ageing, that the 'post-iPhone crowd' [younger millennials and gen Z, those young enough to not have any real impressions of the world pre-datafication] will rectify, and again unleash the unbridled creativity of the market.

### From Neutral to Negative: The Individual and Privacy Law

Furthermore, as Hollaway discursively constructs the letter of the law as a direct negative through the use of an explanatory rational legitimation equating privacy law to a lack of 'understanding' and 'fear' (Hollaway, et al., 2020), if one views the consumers with their 'rights to privacy' as those currently in power, and those in power 'fear that which they don't understand, and destroy that which they fear' then, Acxiom are engaging in moral legitimation of themselves as 'good', as they are enlightened and understand identity and data solutions. This becomes evident as Hollaway distinguishes between the 'pre' and 'post' iPhone generations, with the pre-iPhone generations being the older generations, and therefore those being in positions of power within government and the judiciary (Hollaway, 2020). This conclusion can be drawn as Hollaway does not yet consider the post-iPhone generation to be consumer, ergo not being active in the marketplace. They are therefore construed as powerless in regard to changing legislation or influence the politics



surrounding privacy regulation. The effect of this argument is that the letter of the law becomes 'bad', because it is written and enacted by those who 'don't understand' (i.e., those who 'have this kind of expectation' (Hollaway, et al., 2020)). This semiotic meaning-making all of a sudden turns the aforementioned deontological argument on its head. Because in the sense that Acxiom here reconstructs the law, the practice of the law itself (being data and privacy regulations), is a negative. This type of in-depth legitimating abstraction, where an entire group of consumers and individuals are reduced to a 'fear', and this fear is used to discursively empower those on the opposite side of the argument, shows how semiotic meaning-making can split and divide groups without drawing a direct division of in, and out-groups. Because of this division in attitudes towards the law, the semiotic meaning of any privacy law itself now has a deontologically negative value. According to Acxiom's employees, currently: 'the fear is outweighing the benefit and there might be a little bit of overreaction in the industry to you know all technology' (Hollaway, et al., 2020). The law is 'bad' because it is written by people who do not understand what they do, as Acxiom's own employees argue that they are required to have a 'strong voice about what's fair and what's best [when it comes to privacy regulation], not only for advertisers but consumers alike' (Hollaway, et al., 2020). However, the consumers they here speak for, are the same consumers the speakers earlier disparaged for having a lacking understanding of the effects of privacy law. Thus, Acxiom further ingrains themselves as the experts authority on privacy law, at the behest of the consumers they are trying to speak for.

Their fear is based on misunderstanding, and as the discussion in the podcast carries on, the three employees at Acxiom all agree that the more you learn, the less you fear tracking and the less need you feel for the necessity of privacy regulation in society (Hollaway, et al., 2020). This discussion essentially amounts to Acxiom positioning itself as a way for customers to be 'compliant (Ward, 2020; Acxiom, 2020b, 2020a) with existing privacy regulation, and to future proof it for any changes in said regulations (Acxiom, 2020b; Hollaway, et al., 2020).

## Experiencing Privacy Law: How the Individual Plays a Part

These discussions concerning the ‘justness’ of privacy law and whether it is a deontologically laden concept or no, could be analysed through the lens of mythopoesis. As shown above, the approach any individual takes towards privacy legislation, can be reduced to how much one knows about it. Through an exemplification of mythopoesis, they are arguing that as the whole industry of data analysis ‘pops up . . . overnight’, it ‘takes a while for consumers to really understand’ (Hollaway, et al., 2020). This argument rests on that, as consumer ‘learn’ more about how data tracking is not harmful, and that legislation, on the other hand is, they will come around to the market-perspective of the matter of privacy, and thus be justly rewarded with a ‘seamless customer experience’ (Acxiom, 2020b). There is an aspect to this argument that follows that of an individual learning to see the ‘truth’ of this technological system and through this endeavour being rewarded for ‘engaging in legitimate social practices’ (van Leeuwen, 2007, 105) with the benefits that the system can bestow upon her. Less ‘intrusive’ privacy laws allow companies like Acxiom to collect more data and provide a ‘holistic customer view’ (Acxiom, 2020b) for the client, enabling the client to offer the consumer ‘highly personalized offers and engagements to high-value audiences’ (Acxiom, 2020a). This ties in with the sociotechnical imaginary that Acxiom are creating and maintaining, as this mythopoesis allows the consumer to be involved and fill a roll in the ‘continually rearticulated awareness of order’ (Jasanoff, 2015a, 26) that Acxiom’s technological system proposes.

## Summary

This section has dealt with how the discourse of privacy and its laws is present in the texts analysed. This was achieved through first looking at how Acxiom portrays the privacy laws themselves as deontologically empty. Having done so the section moved on to cover how Acxiom portrays the individual present in its system. Following naturally from that, the section looked at how this changes the content of privacy law from deontologically empty to a negatively laden concept. Finally, the section briefly looked at how Acxiom constructs and

encourages compliance with its approach to its system and rejection of privacy law through mythopoesis, and thus rewards individuals who comply and take part in their sociotechnical imaginary. What this chapter has hoped to achieve, is show how the idea of privacy law exists and is activated throughout the marketing material as an ever-present looming threat to Acxiom and its clients' profit margins and RoI. This chapter has also showed how the individual is constructed as both subject, and creator of privacy law, and how this is construed as a hindrance to Acxiom's goals. Following on from this, the project will turn to the core of Acxiom's business model, identity, and how it constructs the concept through discourse.

## Identity Structure – Who is the Individual in RealIdentity?

This section will now turn its attention to the discursive aspects of the Real Identity system itself, and investigate how the system interacts with identity as a concept. To achieve this, the section will first look at how Acxiom define their own Real Identity project. Following on from that the section will analyse and explicate on three questions that Acxiom themselves argue that any identity solution must be able to answer in order to show how Acxiom's own explicit approach to identity is discursively misleading. The questions are in order 'Who is this person?', 'Where is this person engaging?' and 'How is this person behaving?'. The questions all raise important problems and intricacies of the Real Identity system itself and are thus answered and investigated in order. Taken together, this section aims to shed light on the structure of identity that Acxiom posits its system controls, and what effects this may have on the individual consumer.

### RealIdentity

Acxiom state that their 'RealIdentity' project is the collective name for their portfolio of identity resolution and identity builder services (Acxiom, 2020a). The Real Identity project is portrayed as the foundation of their company as they attempt to let marketers, through connecting 'fragmented data together in an effort to accurately identify, recognize and connect with consumers – anywhere, at any time, across any channel, device, touch point or location to deliver exceptional experiences' (Acxiom, 2020b). This is the basis for their identity services. It starts with the foundational thought that identity is unknown with 'fragmented data' and should 'resolve' into a knowable identity that can be tracked, examined and monitored; across all and any channels for marketers to reach with targeted ads. However, this approach to identity is in the texts analysed portrayed in a different light. Identifying, recognising and connecting are all verbs that require action on behalf of the viewer unto the viewed. Therefore, implicit in the core statement of the Real Identity project is the argument that the type of identity that is required for this project to function, is a conceptualisation of identity which exists as a property extrinsic to the individuals that make

up the ‘identities’ existing within their system. It exists as something separate, but related to, that which one is trying to identify, recognise or connect to. Acxiom’s technology allows marketers to:

‘Accurately identify and connect with consumers anytime, anywhere – and over time . . . Only Acxiom delivers global identity solutions at scale across multiple use cases and platforms to ensure clients have and keep a competitive edge in all people-based activities.’ (Acxiom, 2020a).

Here, the identification and connection are, through a legitimization of expert authority, equated to ‘only Acxiom’ being able to deliver this type of identity-driven marketing. The identity and connectedness between Acxiom’s clients and their consumers are granted through Acxiom’s Real Identity solutions. The Real Identity project hinges on Acxiom’s ability to ‘optimize and resolve all data points (online and offline)’ (Ward, 2020). This in turn is a type of instrumental rationalisation, as the ‘optimisation’ required of Real Identity insinuates a form of ‘goal-orientation’ which is based in Acxiom’s purposefulness as an actor, carrying out this identity project (van Leeuwen, 2007). Taken together, this is the foundation of identity for Acxiom as a threefold project. These reasons taken together comes down to Real Identity’s capability being its ability to:

- a. Gather fragmented data across all channels, offline and online
- b. With said fragmented data it can optimise it into profiles
- c. Which in turn lets Acxiom’s system connect, identify and recognise consumers – anywhere at any time

These three criteria show how the function of Real Identity, at its core, starts at the widest set of data, and narrows it down, step by step until it eventually arrives at the system being capable of identifying consumers ‘anywhere at any time’ (Acxiom, 2020b).

The discussions of data is generally referred to as taking place through touch points (Ward, 2020, Balogh 2020; Acxiom, 2020a; Acxiom, 2020b; Hollaway, 2020; Hollaway et al., 2020). A touch point is any point where an individual consumer, interacts with a business, or

where a business is able to gather data about the individual. Acxiom defines the purpose of Real Identity solutions to be able to resolve three questions:

- **‘Who is this person?’** Considering personally identifiable information (PII): name, address, email, mobile number, date of birth, Social Security number or tax ID, along with biometrics and credentials (Acxiom, 2020b).
- **‘Where is this person engaging?’** Considering device or channel insight, mobile device, smart card, etc. (Acxiom, 2020b).
- **‘How is this person behaving?’** Considering any observed or reported behaviours and actions’ (Acxiom, 2020b).

In order to examine the validity of this definition, and what it achieves, this section will now examine the three questions in order.

## Who

Colloquially, identity could be contained in only the first question ‘who is this person?’, what defines them, what are their likes, dislikes, feelings, attitudes. However, Acxiom, through an instrumental rationalisation cordons off everything that is not a direct identifier, or PII which is also the legal term for any such information that may be used to tie information to an individual, as separate from ‘who is this person’ (Acxiom, 2020b). Instead, the who, refers only to the physicality of the person, i.e., the body. The first question thus refers to the *addressability* of the individual, how does Acxiom guarantee that the individual in their system is an ‘actual’ person. Acxiom deals with identity but defines the ‘who’ as only such signifiers that link information to an individual. Through linking touch points containing personal information to a body aim to create ‘a master key ring for each person with all the keys (identifiers) related to them hanging on’ (Ward, 2020). Through employing a legitimization of abstraction, Acxiom equates this set of keys, which may be used to unlock information about ‘who’ the person in their system is as an addressable person. The key chain metaphor aims to prove the importance of bringing ‘records together to determine if

they represent the same person or if a relationship even exists' (Ward, 2020). That means this is done in order to prove that identifiers used form the key to a lock that is actually existing. Not necessarily to find out what the person's own sense of identity is. It aims to understand, the physical aspects of the person, where does she rest, to what name does she respond. It is legitimization in the form of instrumental rationalisation that scales back identity from the person and separates her into two categories, the addressable 'body' and the 'person'. It reduces the individual to a number of 'keys' (Ward, 2020) that can be used to unlock information about the individual's body and how she exists in the eyes of society<sup>8</sup>, in order to be able to translate her into a profile in Acxiom's system. This type of evaluative legitimization is the grounds for introduction of the individual into the system of Acxiom's sociotechnical imaginary as it evaluates 'who' the person is (dutiful taxpayer, registered homeowner, renter, indebted, etc.). As the individual is stripped down to her bare facts, she is moved from a physical body, into a material fact of Acxiom's system. This stems from the fact that sociotechnical imaginaries 'are not natural, . . . they do not reflect any intrinsic properties of humans or things' (Jasanoff, 2015, 339). Thus, the separation of individual from body, into touch point in a system reflects the way Acxiom's sociotechnical imaginary integrates individuals as profiles, leading up to the 'deepening' of said systemic existence by the following two questions of Acxiom's three questions.

## Where

The second question 'Where is this person engaging' (Acxiom, 2020b), is a system-based question, which must be answered in order to connect the 'who' of the first question to the 'how' of the third. The first question separates the *body* from the *person*. The second question is on where there exist data to be gathered for the profile. A senior employee stresses the importance of 'having a true omni-channel solution which is anchored in known PII identities with privacy compliant connectivity are the solutions that will bring lasting relations with consumers' (Hollaway, 2020). Of import in the above quote are three words,

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<sup>8</sup>Name, address, date of birth, Social Security numbers and tax IDs are all information gathered and used by the state in order to keep track of the individual in the population.

omni-channel, PII and connectivity. The privacy compliance was covered in the above section on privacy discourse, so that will be of less importance for the discourse of identity structure as discussed in this section. Omni-channel PII connectivity, essentially, a reiteration of the a-b-c outlined above, list defined as the core of the Real Identity project. However, what is omni-channel? Acxiom considers an omni-channel view to being able to ‘recognize customers and prospects whether they’re on digital channels, offline, mobile, or buying in-store’ (Acxiom, 2020b). Thus omni-channel extends beyond online behaviour. The data that Acxiom aim to collect is not limited to online touch points, it extends into the real world. This is justified through a theoretical legitimation through equating their aims with *the* natural course of action (van Leeuwen, 2007, 103). Said legitimation argues that the goal of its technological system:

‘is to achieve truly superior people-based marketing – enabling marketers to recognize and reach real people across channels and devices in real time rather than simply marketing to anonymous personas or devices’ (Acxiom, 2020b)

In this passage, Acxiom acknowledges that the profiles in its system are not ‘real’ people, but instead that its system is adept at connecting said profiles to actually ‘real relationships’ (Acxiom, 2020a). Acxiom asserts the superiority of their system on the basis of reaching ‘known’ entities (i.e., real people) through a rational legitimation which implies that marketing to known entities yields better results than targeting anonymous personas and devices blindly. In addition, the theoretical legitimation of the system’s ‘ability to, through its profiles, reach ‘real people’ (Hollaway, et al., 2020), 2020a), thus, reaching them as they *really* are (van Leeuwen, 2007, 104). Together, these legitimations show the duality of the individual within Acxiom’s system, first as a real person to be reached through Acxiom’s system, and secondly as a profile which exists as the ‘solved’ version of the individual’s identity within the system.



## How

This brings the section to the third and final question of Acxiom's Real Identity project, and to some extents the most interesting one. If the first two dealt with who the *body* of the person is, the second answered how individuals *interact* with the system and how it results in two versions of 'real' identity existing, then the third attempts to answer *how* this came to be. The wording of the third criteria for Real Identity, is one that further develops the fact that Acxiom as an entity presents itself as aware that there exists a genuine split between the actual identities of individuals, and the identity that exists within its systems.

The question itself 'how is this person behaving?' (Acxiom, 2020b), is one that reinforces, that the identity that Acxiom purports it has, is one closer to a traced outline of the individual's identity, than the actual identity as lived by the individual herself. This is referenced by one of the blog posts analysed as it discusses the necessity of building in a 'pain tolerance' for mismatched information, or incomplete data sets and the potential problems that may arise from it (Balogh, 2020). This type of abstract legitimisation raises an interesting point about the nomenclature pertaining to the authors or speakers using terminology related to biological functions, but that will be covered later on. For now, it is important to focus on how Acxiom legitimates observed and reported behaviour as a function of identity. Essentially, how they take choices and preferences from the intrinsic lived identity of the individual and incorporate them into the extrinsic concept of identity as it exists within the Real Identity systems.

Acxiom see the changes in the way identity has been used in data-analysis approaches before as

'A data solution that considers "identity" is simply referring to matching on an email address or a hashed email address. But that's not true identity resolution' (Acxiom, 2020b)

Through this expert authority legitimisation, Acxiom asserts that 'identity' is not tying an individual e-mail to an account or other online touch points, instead:

‘A true and comprehensive solution should provide a holistic customer view – for example, tying multiple email addresses to an entity that has other representations in the offline space’ (Acxiom, 2020b)

Here the case becomes that a ‘true’ solution needs to tie online identity, as it exists within Acxiom's systems, to ‘other representations’ in the offline space. This is in line with the argument this paper has made that Acxiom’s identity solution constitutes an outline, or a tracing, of real lived identity as no matter how sophisticated, Acxiom’s identity solutions have no ability to know the intrinsic motivations or justifications for behaviour of individuals, they can only rely on ‘observed or reported behaviours and actions’ (Acxiom, 2020b). This is point is based on the previous question of ‘where is the person engaging?’, as the data collected varies. Acxiom concede that online data may at times be ‘dirty’ or ‘inaccurate (Hollaway, 2020), and that offline data is the best way to counteract this, i.e., relying exclusively on online data creates an insufficient set of data to accurately predict the ‘identities’ of a group of consumers (Ward, 2020). However, this type of observing identity only creates a set of parameters that show what an individual ‘has’ done, not ‘why’ she may have done it. This is the impossibility for Acxiom’s concept of external identity to ever be anything else than mimicry of the individual’s own held sense of identity. However, through a form of instrumental rational legitimation, Acxiom shows how this shadow of identity, is equally well suited to the ends it aims to meet, through the naming convention they use.

Acxiom refers to the type of Real Identity solutions as ‘identity resolution’ (Ward, 2020, Acxiom, 2020a, Acxiom 2020b), i.e., that is, attempting to resolve the question of identity through their technological system. Acxiom are aware that their solutions are not the ‘genuine’ identities of the individuals within their system. They even acknowledge that ‘every enterprise has its own view of identity, what constitutes a person may vary by application’ (Hollaway, 2020). This is where the distinction between lived identity and the system identity comes to the fore. Identity is no longer a singular thing, not even within the sociotechnical imaginary of Acxiom’s own system is the identity of an individual a singular defined entity, it is always loosely related to its lived ‘real’ counterpart. Through legitimising themselves as ‘having expertise in building brand-specific identity-graphs’ (Acxiom, 2020a), Acxiom has taken on the power of dividing and separating identity on behalf of their clients.

Within the technological system that Acxiom are curating, the individual no longer exists as a whole person, but instead exists as a nexus of information, with characteristics included or excluded depending on what the particular client needs. A senior employee at Acxiom states that they 'yet to find two clients using precisely the same definition of an individual' (Balogh, 2020). Showing how within the system, not only does Acxiom 'make' the system, but they also govern it (Mager & Katzenbach, 2020, 8).

Identity is not just a traced outline, it is a set of building blocks, a playground where Acxiom has the ability to, through instrumental legitimation, reconstitute or deconstruct identity on behalf of their clients for their *predictions* of what the specific client may want from the concept of 'identity' (van Leeuwen, 2007) of what the individual consumer in their system may or may not want. At this point a 'connecting online and offline privacy-compliant manner' (Ward, 2020), entails, for Acxiom, saving all data and touch points possible, and creating sets of the valued data for their customers under the guise of selling 'identity' through 'master data-management' (Acxiom, 2020a). It is a legitimation based in abstraction, where Acxiom takes the concept of identity as an intrinsic quality of the individual, extricates it, and uses it as perfect commodity that is always benign to the client. Any information that is unwanted or deemed unnecessary (i.e., dirty) can safely be excluded, Acxiom's Real Identity 'allows a client to access a preferred consumer view tailored to the unique lens of the brand' (Acxiom, 2020a). Thus, the 'lens' of the client, is all of a sudden the driving force in the definition of 'identity'. It refocuses the onus of identity from attempting to genuinely mimic and trace the identity of the individual, to instead focus only on those parts of identity that are amicable and beneficial to the client. Acxiom through an authoritative legitimation of expertise, assumes the power to define identity in such a way that it becomes agreeable to the client. The actual lived identities of the consumers are mere data points from which Acxiom extricates data to fuel its algorithms. The Real Identity is only real as so far as its starting point are real people. In the sociotechnical system individuals exist as perfectly commodified entities that are free to be defined and redefined by Acxiom. Acxiom possesses the discursive power to dictate what constitutes 'identity', to include or exclude characteristics, preferences, identifying PII's, entirely as they deem most useful to the client without regards to the actual holistic identity as possessed by the 'real'

individual and her identity with its complete set of traits and identifiers. Through this instrumental rationalisation, the system however may run the risk of missing key components of identity as perceived by the individual, and thus 'misidentifying' the individual, only because it runs counter to the client's preferred concept of identity. In their sociotechnical system Acxiom is the 'primary agent' that embeds sociotechnical change as a natural part of social order which aims to equate technological advancement with how Acxiom perceives the world 'ought' to be. (Jasanoff, 2015a, 27). The first question separated the *body* from the *person* in Acxiom's system, the third has successfully separated *identity* from the *person*, what is left exists only as touch points in Acxiom's system.

## Summary

This part of the study aimed to investigate exactly 'how' Acxiom's Real Identity system functions. To do so, it first distinguished the characteristics that an 'identity system' needs to fulfil. Having done so, it looked at the three criteria that Acxiom themselves outline for any identity solution, and how Acxiom legitimates their own system as successful in fulfilling all three. The three questions were the 'who', 'where' and 'how' as constituent parts of identity. Having done so, this section has shown how the Real Identity system manages to detach both the addressable *body* and the individual *identity* from the *person*. Leaving a system in which identity exists only as a commodity to be used and moulded by Acxiom. Following on from this, the next section will turn its attention to the teleological aspects of the Real Identity system and investigate the techno-utopian themes present in the texts analysed. This was undertaken in order to show the process of creation of 'identity' as it exists within Acxiom's system to show how the conception of identity on which their system relies is one that differs from the colloquial usage of 'identity'.

## Techno-Utopianism – The Drive for an Algorithmic Future

So far, this paper has examined three discourses present in Acxiom's marketing material, privacy, identity structure and the neoliberal market ideology. All three of them have been heavily related to the actual functioning of the Real Identity project itself. What enables it? What drives it? And how does it slot into society as it currently exists? This section will move to a more diffuse discourse present in the texts, that of techno-utopianism. To accomplish this, this section will first provide a very brief note on what techno-utopianism is and what its main argument is. Having done so, the section will move on to examining the role of 'knowledge' as a signifier for expertise, and how Acxiom infuses this 'knowledge' with a teleological element. Having done so, the text will turn towards the techno-utopian themes themselves and examine the role of the individual within this discourse. How the individual exists in a dual way, and the role that technological systems themselves play in the way techno-utopianism intermingles with the sociotechnical imaginary of Acxiom.

### A Brief Note on Techno-Utopianism

Examining the discourses so far discussed, Acxiom takes a central and commanding role in the discursive construction of other actors and phenomenon in the realm where they engage. This has been seen in its approach to neoliberal market policies, the rule and efficacy of privacy law, and last but not least, the deconstruction and restructuring of identity. However, these three phenomenon taken together, starts showing signs of a greater underlying theme, a unifying idea. That idea is the concept of techno-utopianism. Techno-utopianism can be loosely defined as an idea of a future built on the fact that 'technologies have a significant impact on social life as they transform the ways we interact and communicate as well as the ways the society is organized' (Dickel & Schrape, 2017, 52). And that such technologies 'pursue a rhetoric of potentiality—a potentiality already present in current technological designs, possibly to be released in a yet to be arranged future' (Dickel & Schrape, 2017, 47) to further embed technology as the driving force of social change. The

utopian element in this stems from the idea that technology historically has been shown to overcome problems faced by humanity and increase productivity<sup>9</sup>.

## The Teleology of Expertise

There is a teleological element present regarding the usage of technology in the texts examined, for example, the Acxiom employees participating in the podcast field a discussion on the worthwhileness of privacy law and the role it plays (which has been discussed above). The conclusion they arrive at is that technology is not at fault, instead the current privacy legislation is superfluous, and the AdTech industry would be better served running legal checks on itself, as they argue:

‘we’ve seen a great ability of the industry to run a check on itself. And I think we, at Acxiom, always want to be involved there, helping to run the check’  
(Hollaway, et al., 2020)

This approach shows how the participants infuse a ‘goodness’ of direction as previously covered into the ‘understanding’ of technology and the marketplace, and as it evolves, the righteousness of the developments themselves will come to the fore and supersede the currently existing regulation as a more efficient and ‘just’ framework. While this is not uncommon, corporations tend to prefer systems of self-regulation over legal restrictions and boundaries, what is interesting about Acxiom’s approach is that the purported ‘goodness’ of their approach is built into the system *itself*. Acxiom do not argue that any *company* can do this, but instead that their *system* is set up to properly handle these matters and that this stems from their ability to deliver ‘a global identity solution’ (Acxiom, 2020a). Therefore it is the referral to a technological system as solution as opposed to industry-wide expertise that anchors the theme of techno-utopianism in this discussion. This is a clear example of mythopoesis, as the speakers all argue for the benefits and rewards that *could* be garnered by society as a whole if regulations were rolled back and the neoliberal market was allowed to

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<sup>9</sup> The industrial revolution leading to increased productivity, the mass production of vaccines helping negate deadly diseases and the internet creating a much more inter-connected world, etc.

do what it allegedly does best. However, the argument does not stand on the basis of them saying the market is a sufficient mechanism for regulation. Nestled in their argument is the basis of Acxiom being the better arbiter of privacy disputes and where the borders should be drawn owing to their position of 'having all the experience' (Hollaway, et al., 2020) of the marketing industry. This stems from the argumentation covered in the discussion on privacy above. They have arrived at the position they are in owing to their privileged position of 'knowledge' within the discourse of techno-utopianism which is legitimated through an expertise authority.

The themes of 'knowledge' being the basis on which the ability to legitimate oneself as an authority, and the infusion of wariness of change with a negative connotation is present in both the blog texts that are analysed. As both authors position themselves as authorities, in one case, owing to the time spent within the business of data collection and identity for so long to have seen it evolve (Balogh, 2020). And in the other, through equating the business of understanding data-analysis and identity as something that needs to be simplified for the common individual to understand (Ward, 2020). What this accomplishes is establishing a discursive space in which time spent with, or experience gained through interacting with said systems infuses the actor with the authority to establish common goods, benefits and negatives of the system itself. This legitimation of authority underlines the above quote from the podcast regarding the debated efficacy of regulation. As both the blog post authors argue, their expertise with data analytics has given them a position that allows them to better judge what is best for not only themselves, but for clients and consumers also.

The problem that arises with the approach present in the texts is how it uncritically equates their own knowledge of the system as a positive, the theme of expertise is justified through their ability to deliver 'seamless experiences' (Hollaway, et al., 2020), to improve consumer 'experience and increase revenue' (Ward, 2020) and to 'create a true lifetime value' (Acxiom, 2020a) for each client. These statements at face value may seem innocuous, but the conflation of a 'good' for the consumer is involved only through the lens of increasing revenue for the client, thus their definition of 'good' for the particular individual consumer instead hinges on a logic of exploitation of that very same consumer. Involving the logic of the neoliberal market as the driving factor for this type of improvement, stemming from the

logic of the market demanding never-ending increases to a client's RoI is a legitimization of abstraction, as Acxiom refer to the 'good' (the genuine benefits for a individual consumer) of their system in a way that is in this case separated from the actual 'good' their system attempts to achieve (i.e., profit for their clients). An abstraction which skews the balance of good from the consumer to the client through waving away any criticism of the system as coming from those who do not possess the 'knowledge' of the insider. The argumentative basis that the system is not in fact opaque, but transparent, only if one possesses the knowledge to see it, is one that further infuses the 'knowledge' of Acxiom with a legitimization of authority. It reduces the outsider to a meek observer, rightfully powerless as they do not possess the knowledge to formulate worthwhile critique unless they too gain the 'insider' knowledge of the system, at which point they no longer exist as outside observers. It is a definition of 'knowledge' that is entirely self-contained. This becomes increasingly pertinent as the texts speak to prospective clients, they are aimed at either current clients, or prospective ones (Ward, 2020; Acxiom, 2020a; Acxiom 2020b), i.e., clients who have either been granted, or will be granted the 'knowledge' of the system. The teleological theme of technology as a 'good' for the client instils the values of techno-utopianism into the discourse, as the use of technology, in this case Acxiom's system, will 'solve' the problems faced by marketers in the current state of the world with technology rapidly changing in order to further the aim of the client (Hollaway, et al., 2020).

## Technological Systems and Techno-Utopianism

Looking at the above teleological implications of technology being equated to revenue increases, based on the knowledge possessed only by Acxiom's own experts, the techno-utopianism readily available in the texts becomes clearer. As the ability for clients to engage with Acxiom's identity systems is portrayed as the 'sound' course of action for a client owing to Acxiom's superior size of identity database (Acxiom, 2020a), its flexibility to adapt (Ward, 2020) and its ability to reach 'real' people (Acxiom, 2020b), it starts to show how these legitimations of expertise all feed into the discourse of techno-utopianism. Because in all these cases, the success is tied directly to Acxiom's system itself. The rational neoliberal



behaviour to attempt to maximise revenue is found in the solution of Acxiom's algorithmically driven software solution. This is mirrored in the idea of Acxiom's sociotechnical imaginary that has been hinted at throughout the text.

If Acxiom morally positions itself as 'good' under current privacy law and is able to construct identity that benefits the client, the potential gains for a client to embed itself within this system outweighs the potential loss of revenue that could be suffered if it did not. The sociotechnical imaginary here starts erasing the distinction between social and technical (Jasanoff, 2015), as Acxiom argues, the job of a marketer is difficult, she needs to reach real people, but to reach real people in today's digital world, she needs a technical solution (Hollaway, et al., 2020).

Acxiom's technical solution positions itself as a solution that encompasses all these worries, it presents a singular solution which presents 'diverse visions of the collective good' (Jasanoff, 2015). The 'collective good' here from Acxiom's standpoint encompasses a good for Acxiom, as it garners a new client. A good for the client as she gets access to Acxiom's system. And yet, without having a say in the matter, a good for the consumer as they are presented with 'seamless experiences' (Acxiom, 2020a) of advertising and marketing. The visions presented are also diverse, as Acxiom points out 'there is no "one size fits all" for identity. Each brand has its first-party data collected with unique keys, business rules, requirements, and use cases' (Ward, 2020) here echoing the argument made in the section on identity structure how the governing factor of what constitutes identity is no longer a characteristic of the individual person, but instead what each specific client requires 'identity' to be (Hollaway, 2020). The subsuming of the social into the technical, i.e., 'real' people as they exist in Acxiom's system, being the basis of said system creates a situation in which the sociotechnical imaginary is driven forward. Through positioning the individual consumer as the basis of the system, without them, Acxiom's Real Identity system would be null, Acxiom attempts to infuse the individual consumer with some form of agency:

'One must strike a balance that uses identity resolution in a way that is accepted by consumers – one that they understand, agree to and expect – to deliver value and an excellent experience.

After all, customers [consumers] today expect the brands to know them'  
(Acxiom, 2020b)

The agency here is seen in the techno-utopianism of Acxiom's project, the technology which facilitates Acxiom's revenue stream serves in the above quote to fulfil 'expectations' of the consumer. They discursively reframe the locus of their project from that of the client, to that of the consumer. Through imbuing the fulfilment of consumer expectation with the 'success' of the technological system, the individual consumer is taken onboard as a co-producer of this sociotechnical imaginary. Acxiom legitimates the individual consumer both as an abstract touch point within its system (i.e., as a technical component of the system itself) and as a valued core entity as receiver of 'value and excellent [experiences]' (Acxiom, 2020b) outside of the system.

Through introducing the individual consumer, for the first time as a benefactor, but also as an actor, Acxiom shows how its Real Identity solution is one that will make life better through technological systems. shift from before. The sociotechnical imaginary that Acxiom attempts to maintain is based in this necessity of technological systems, individual consumers, clients and Acxiom, together in the co-creation of this system are trying to navigate and make their way in this 'new world' (Hollaway, et al., 2020) that technological change has brought on. Acxiom has designed a system that implies 'the stability and instability of social arrangements' (Jasanoff, 2015, 22) and how technological systems can disperse power throughout these systems (Jasanoff, 2015). For while this section has involved the individual consumer as an actor in Acxiom's systems, her greatest qualities is this duality of existence, as intrinsic cog in the system and as extrinsic receiver of the outcome of Acxiom's project. This is rooted in the sociotechnical imaginary, as Jasanoff dictates: 'the making and governing of digital technology are not two separate spaces and sets of practices' (Jasanoff, 2015a, 8). In this instance, Acxiom are not only 'creating' the space for this digital technology to exist, it also 'governs' it, and as part of the neoliberal techno-utopian project, it construes any threat to it (i.e., privacy legislation) as a needless project that only serves to hamper its own project. In this position of power, Acxiom is able to direct the imaginary of this techno-utopian project in its preferred direction as the power invested in

Acxiom, both as creating and governing body of said system, allows it complete discursive control in how they construct the role of both themselves and of 'privacy law' in the eyes of their clients. This discursive power rests with the rational legitimation in which Acxiom frames employing an identity solution system as the rational course of action for any marketer wanting to maximise ROI from her marketing spend (Ward, 2020; Hollaway, et al., 2020; Acxiom, 2020b).

Acxiom through naturalising the usage of their Real Identity solution is able to equate managing and capitalising of the huge amounts of data created (Hollaway, et al., 2020) with being a good participant in the market. As Dickel and Schrape argue, 'through technology, society conceives itself as the creator of its own future' (2017, 54). Therefore, if society through technology conceives itself, and Acxiom controls the technology, then society, should to some reasonable extent follow the sociotechnical imaginary as constructed by Acxiom. This argument is structured as a type of mythopoesis; the sociotechnical imaginary is based in 'real' people, and these people at the same time exist as the foundational touch points in the technological system itself, the techno-utopian discourse of progress changes the role of the individual into one that is both a part of, and benefacting from/exploited by the very system itself.

## Summary

This section of the paper aimed to give an overview of the discursive elements of technological-utopianism, and the teleological justifications present in the texts analysed. In order to achieve this, the paper started with a brief note on technological utopianism itself. Having done so the paper moved on to examine how Acxiom through its authoritative legitimations positions itself as an expert, and how the teleological underpinning of this expert legitimation infuses 'knowledge' with a discursively laden position within the system. Following on from that, the section moved on to evaluate what role the individual herself plays in the system, and the dual role occupied by her. This was done through examining the individual both as the recipient, but also foundational element of Acxiom's system. This project was undertaken in order to facilitate the coming final analysis of the discourses so far

identified in the texts, and to examine the sociotechnical imaginary of Acxiom in light of the topics hitherto covered.

## Pain/Hygiene – How to Humanise a System

As the above four sections have covered the major discourses identified in the corpus, what remains is a brief overview of two themes that necessitate an explication each owing to their specificity and importance for the framing of Acxiom's project. These two are in order; a brief discussion of the naming convention employed by Acxiom 'Identity Resolution', and the implicit meaning(s) of the name given to its RealIdentity project. And a short discussion on a theme with an even more narrow scope, identified only in the two blog posts analysed; how Acxiom applies biological terms to its systems, and how they intersect with the project of Acxiom's identity solutions. This is undertaken in order to facilitate the discussion of the study's findings in the coming chapter.

### What's in a Name? Resolution and its Meanings

In their definitions of identity resolution as covered above, Acxiom signals that the goal of 'Identity resolution is the ability to optimize and resolve all data points' (Ward, 2020). Resolution thus refers to resolving the problem of incomplete identity, to which the capabilities of Acxiom's system is the solution. Implicit in this definition, is the presence of a problem, one does not resolve unproblematic things, as the noun Resolution is defined by the OED as 'The action or an act of finding the answer to a question, the solution to a problem, etc.; the elimination or easing of doubt' (OED, 2021). This active definition of 'resolution' fits well with Acxiom's purported purpose of identity, that it is a question, a lock for which the 'keys' (Ward, 2020) need to be found.

Resolution as the search for the solution to a problem as outlined by the OED aligns with the resolution of the identity question in the texts analysed. However, a second aspect of this definition relies on the authoritative legitimization of expertise that Acxiom has engaged in throughout all the previous discourses examined. This legitimization being Acxiom's ability to ease or eliminate doubts among their clients, through engaging with its services. This comes from the positioning Acxiom has engaged in as market leaders within resolving exactly these types of identity related questions (Acxiom, 2020a; Hollaway, 2020). This legitimization rests on the basis of the discursive spaces which has been examined in the prior four sections, it

exists within the market, as an attempt to ease doubts and encourage clients that they are 'good' participants. It rests within 'privacy-by-design' (Hollaway, 2020) framework that attempts to make privacy law redundant. It, as the name 'identity resolution' would imply, attempts to unravel the discursive structure of identity, in order to resolve it into the commodified profiles that 'answer' the question of identity for the individual client. And lastly, through the aforementioned authoritative legitimization of expertise, Acxiom states that employing an 'identity [solution] is necessary to ensure you get higher RoI from your marketing spend' (Acxiom, 2020b), thus evoking the techno-utopian discourse of progress and improvement through technological solutions, alongside the neoliberal rational legitimization of being a 'good' participant in the marketing through increasing RoI.

Thus, the term 'identity resolution', as seen above, contains several definitions of identity resolution as Acxiom themselves define it. However, the Oxford English Dictionary offers many other meanings of 'resolution'. The one most pertinent for this particular study is that of: 'the process of reducing a non-material thing into a simpler form or forms, or of converting it into some other thing or form' (OED, 2021). This definition instead in a more definitive function engages the systematic aspects of Acxiom's system. This definition instead sees identity as the reduction of the generally vague and unknowable sense of self-identity that the individual possesses into the, on the contrary, very knowable and systemic type of identity which Acxiom's RealIdentity uses. Their system enables clients 'to take partial data and turn it into a fully recognized individual customer view' (Acxiom, 2020b), ergo, converting the 'partial data' into 'fully recognized' identities. This simplification of identity from nebulous and unknowable into definitive entities is very suited to the techno-utopian discourse explicated on in the previous chapter. If identity as it exists in individuals is unknowable and opaque, then RealIdentity helps 'cut through the noise' (Hollaway, 2020) in order to ensure that the profiles that exist within the system are 'anchored in known identity' (Hollaway, 2020). It is essentially the transformation of non-quantifiable vague lived identity into the algorithmically founded 'definition of the individual' (Balogh, 2020) in Acxiom's system.

## Pain and Hygiene: Non-Biological Systems

Following on, it is time to turn to the varied wordings employed by Acxiom in the texts which usually refer to an actual individual physical body. This brief section will first cover the topic of 'hygiene' and its usages in the corpus. Following on from that, this section will discuss the 'pain tolerance' that one of the texts specifically deals with and what the implications of said 'pain tolerance' may be. The need to cover these two specific terms is rooted in the linkage it establishes between the physical body of the individual that experiences pain and maintains hygiene, and the algorithmic system of Acxiom's which through these texts is ascribed the very same characteristics.

In the video investigated for this project, the speaker refers to the importance of 'data hygiene' and by extension the importance of avoiding 'Dirty, out of date and inaccurate data [which] will dramatically limit your ability to connect identity signals together' (Hollaway, 2020). This quote employs a role model authorization, in this case being the text's positioning of itself as a leading example who is able to guide the client to a state of cleanliness. The definition of 'good' data as being 'hygienic', shows how constructing data that is 'clean' as a direct positive, (Acxiom, 2020b) whilst remaining 'dirty' is a clear-cut negative. However, the problem posed with this terminology is the fact that a piece of data, as Acxiom defines it above, is not 'clean' or 'dirty'. It may be 'accurate' or 'inaccurate', 'true' or 'false'. Yet, they chose to invoke the image of cleanliness. This helps Acxiom position itself as an actor that extols the virtue of cleanliness, conjuring up the image of professionalism and clinical knowledge, through an authoritative legitimation of expertise. Further, the referral to the clinical knowledge also recalls the image of the laboratory, needing to remain pure and clean in order to avoid contamination. The same can be argued for the data gathered by Acxiom, if it becomes tainted or unpure, it becomes invalid for use in their revenue generation, like a sample becomes tainted and ruins the results of an experiment. This is similar to the argument in one of the above chapters on the prevalence of themes connected to the neoliberal market-ideology in the texts. In those instances, Acxiom aims to construct itself as a way through which the client can be a 'good' participant in the market through 'guiding overall brand marketing' (Hollaway, et al., 2020). In this case, Acxiom's focus on discursively constructing themselves as the purveyors of hygiene allows Acxiom to establish not only

themselves as an authority. The emphasis on hygiene also allows the RealIdentity system to be discursively constructed as a vessel for clinical knowledge and scientific prowess, thus enabling the client to engage in those same practices as a proxy for possessing the knowledge and ability to themselves.

A similar case of terminology employed by Acxiom attempting to bridge the gap between system and person, is in one of the blog texts analysed in which the author describes the varying degrees of accuracy a system has as the “‘pain tolerance’ of a miss’ (Balogh, 2020). Here the author attempts to equate a system not accurately predicting identity of the consumers as being ‘painful’ for the system through employing a legitimization of abstraction through equating pain as described by the author with pain ‘felt’ by the system. The impossibility of the system experiencing actual pain is abstracted through the text as the reader is mistakenly supposed to engage with the experience of pain they know, and apply it to the system. The author separates the objective aims of the system from the system itself, and instead equates succeeding or failing at its task with the system or client feeling ‘pain’ for failing at the task.

The author of the text thus places the goals of the system within the subjective realm of pain avoidance, as opposed to fulfilling the goals of the client which is its original purpose. This has the potential to be problematic, as constructing the system as a ‘feeling’ thing complicates the concept of identity as an inherent quality of the consumers, seeing how the ‘who, where, how-data’ (Acxiom, 2020b) gathered by the system are based off of the feelings individual consumers have as things or products. Consumers which exist doubly inside the system (as data-points) and outside the system (as actual individuals). Seeing how, generally speaking, an individual’s sense of identity should remain relatively stable in their day-to-day life, the author of the blogpost argues that he has ‘yet to find two clients using precisely the same definition of an individual’ (Balogh, 2020). Therefore, a miss that is “‘painful’ to one system’s definition of the individual, might not pose a problem for another system’s definition of the individual.

Another blog post states that, concerning identity solutions ‘The true value though is in getting it consistently right . . . because a brand recognizes them at every interaction’ (Ward, 2020). Here, the author engages in a goal-oriented rational legitimization, the entire point of



the system, its 'true value', is being *consistently* successful. The 'true value' of the system is its ability to 'predict' identity, but the identity that the system attempts to predict is as above stated any form of identity defined by the client's needs, ergo, a facsimile of actual identity void of the genuine qualities of the identity possessed by the individuals it tries to identify. The definitions of getting it 'right' and the 'pain-tolerance' set for each individual system varies company to company. This engages the outcomes of Acxiom's system as being individually defined as 'right' or 'wrong' as opposed to the binary outcomes a technological system produces. The inclusion of the pain-tolerance as defined by the text (Balogh, 2020) only muddies the discursive project of Acxiom. The inclusion of the usage of the term pain serves only to attempt to justify the imperfections of the system itself to the clients paying to access the services of Acxiom's. It discursively constructs the system as a 'feeling' entity which it, by most metrics, is not. This inclusion of pain thus serves mostly to cover for the system's own shortcomings in order to make the project seem more humane to prospective, or current and disgruntled, clients.

The application of these biological functions to the technological systems can be seen as a discursive subversion of the expectations of a system. It attempts to humanise the system for the client in order to allow the participant (the client) to justify their actions, as the non-blog texts aim more to highlight the *efficacy* of the system, as opposed to the sensitivity of the system. The biological terms of hygiene and pain-aversion are both also laden with a sense of sensibility. A successful venture maintains proper hygienic rigour as explained above, additionally, a rational individual will avoid pain. Thus, through involving these two terms, Acxiom are able to construct the service offered as a rational tool that their clients may use for their own benefit.

## Summary

This final section of the analysis set out to investigate two minor themes identified in the discourse that did not quite warrant entirely separate sections. Those two discrete themes were that of the underlying themes of the name chosen by Acxiom for its project. The second was that of the usage of biological terms, especially *hygiene* and *pain tolerance*, by Acxiom to

describe an entirely non-biological system and what implications this has for the discursive construction of the system itself. Through the addition of these biological terms, Acxiom seemingly strives to humanise their system and equate the system itself with that of a rational actor.

## Analysis/Discussion

Having finished the empirical investigation of this project, it is time to engage with the findings of the study as it has attempted to dissect the discursive construction of Acxiom's RealIdentity project. This discussion will be twofold, first this chapter will investigate how Acxiom has discursively constructs the system, and how it aims to embed the techno-utopian ideals of Acxiom's into the stated purpose of the system itself. Following on from that the chapter will investigate the social/technical – hardness/softness divides of the sociotechnical imaginary and how the RealIdentity system exists on both sides of the divides as a hybrid system capable of circumventing said divides in a naturalised manner.

### Acxiom's Underlying Techno-Utopianism

The discussions on identity in the previous chapters has shown how the data management and identity resolution solutions offered by Acxiom carry with them a plethora of discursive elements and power relations implicit in the texts analysed. This initial part of the analysis will focus on the part of the discourse analysis that has been given the most attention, namely the composition of identity and how the different discursive themes identified intersects with the sociotechnical imaginary Acxiom disseminates and in which ways their constructed identity plays a part in this.

As the delineation of discourses present in Acxiom's system that the previous chapters constituted, a set of ideas which govern the sociotechnical imaginary of Acxiom's can be identified. The theoretical basing of 'identity' that Acxiom relies on in its technological system is one which is built upon the four pillars identified in the previous chapters. Namely, identity as a concept is constructed by an amalgamation of the four discourses that have been discussed. It exists in a between-space of real lived life and technological system. Fuller's concept of 'flecks of identity' works as a fine starting point for said concept, as it highlights how in today's data systems identity becomes a category of 'standard objects, within databases as a primary compositional element' (2005, 148). This standard object as a compositional element shows how the view of identity taken by Acxiom is one in which the identity created in the system is one that must not only engage in a successful referential

project to the consumer (i.e., the set of identifiers and classifications must be 'true' to the consumer's real preferences', at least as a starting point). The identity defined in Acxiom's system must also be one which is able to engage in the neo-liberal marketplace as a carrier of value. After all, Acxiom are not engaging in a purely cartographic project in which they are attempting to merely store information. Instead, all data stored must also be one from which value can be derived, ergo, the system must be able to extract value from the stored data. Therefore, 'identity' in Acxiom's system is a form of identity that can be argued is engaged in the dialectical process of the techno-utopian discourse outlined above. The dialectical element in this instance being the self-reinforcing nature of identity in Acxiom's system. It deals with the dual nature of identity both as the thesis of original 'lived' identity of individuals, and the antithesis of the value-carrying 'commodity' identity in the system as it is categorised and used to fuel the synthesis of influencing the offline identity of individuals with the help of the 'commodified' type in its system. Through being able to control what data exists within the system, and to which ends the data should be put to use, control of the system becomes synonymous with control over the sociotechnical imaginary, as 'discursive embedding of technological developments and commercial products is pervasive' (Mager & Katzenbach, 2020, 4). Thus, control of the system, enables discursive control over the sociotechnical imaginary that the system itself is disseminating, which in turn feed into the dialectical system itself, further entrenching the power and capability of the system itself.

This finding is further strengthened by the view of identity that the analytical element of Acxiom's system itself presents. In the section on identity structure in the previous chapter, three factors for any system dealing with identity were coined by Acxiom, 'where, how and who'. These three factors constituted what Acxiom deemed to be the base for the 'master key-ring' (Ward, 2020) for each individual existing within the system. However, as this analysis is attempting to show, the identity that Acxiom's system deals with in actuality is one that is far deeper discursively embedded within their project than three qualifications on how the data is gathered. Indeed, the RealIdentity project in a systematic fashion gathers the data as Acxiom states, from the 'where, how and who', however, when said gathering process is done, the data takes on a separate set of characteristics, although it consists only of the 'where, how and who'-data, it is set to work to start working on influencing the physical

offline-individual from whom the data is gathered. The data-system which allows companies to identify and categorise individuals in order to successfully market to them, is set up in such a way that it attempts to influence the individuals from whom it gathers data. It's a circular relationship in which the aforementioned new set of characteristics the data takes on are of such nature that they begin to exist in-between the 'mental and the material' (Jasanoff, 2015b, 329).

This may seem to be a leap of logic, to go from data being gathered from consumers about their identities, storing it online to all of a sudden having said stored information having the ability to influence the individual consumer's behaviour. It is within this transformation that the promise of the imaginary in which Acxiom participates resides. Owing to the precision of the data possessed by this type of company (Acxiom is just the example for this particular study), and the ends of the data it is used to accomplish they are able to engage in working in the imaginary through their technology, relaying the promise of said control to their clients.

The techno-utopian solution Acxiom presents in its construction of 'identity' is one that aims to let its clients gain access, insight, and control over the intricacies of identity belonging to its consumers. Through this buy-in into Acxiom's sociotechnical imaginary of identity, the aims of Acxiom become even further widespread and dispersed throughout society. The way in which Acxiom are capable of employing their system in infiltrating discourse on identity as a naturalised element is the foundational aspect concerning their own construction of identity. Through their assertion that aligning identity with techno-utopianism as the 'natural order' of things as technology develops and changes human interaction, so their sociotechnical imaginary aims to insert the same ideas of development and change as into the concept of identity as it exists as a shadow of the individual's actual identity within Acxiom's system. This essentially means that in the material above analysed, Acxiom presents a version of identity as a composite concept. Referring back to the above idea regarding the dialectical relationship, in Acxiom's imaginary, identity is not only that which exists offline, but instead a synthetical thing, containing both the actual 'who, where, how-data', and at the same time as a result and outcome of the RealIdentity system.

What exists as a possible counterbalance to this sociotechnical imaginary in which identity

is reduced to a value-generating double of the individual, may be argued is privacy law. However, as has been shown in the section on privacy, even privacy law can be discursively subverted in order to instead allow privacy law to be perceived of as a deontologically empty term, thus rendering such legal constructs discursively toothless. This type of legal discursive subversion is one that further helps the dispersion of Acxiom's sociotechnical imaginary, as these imaginaries must be collectively sustained (Jasanoff, 2015a). Through engaging an approach to legal constructs as deontologically empty, Acxiom discursively embeds this argument in the usage of their system, thus imbuing a technological system with social meaning. In essence, Acxiom has, as shown in the chapter concerning 'privacy', managed to imbue their technological system with the discursive subtext of agonistic relations to privacy law, thus rendering the system into one that furthers the aims of the techno-utopian designs of progress. As a sociotechnical imaginary, the system Acxiom has constructed is one that fits in with the plethora of other co-existing and competing imaginaries in society (Jasanoff, 2015a, 22). As such, it is important to remember the importance of this co-existence, imaginaries are not total entities, they serve only to further a certain agenda or idea, without necessarily engaging with the totality. Imaginaries are smaller than ideologies, and more materialistically based in technology than pure discourse. That is where Acxiom is making its main discursive imprint on the sociotechnical imaginaries existing in society, concerning the role of identity and its relation to privacy law under a techno-utopian ideal of progress.

The discourses identified in the previous chapter has through van Leeuwen's theory of legitimations shown how discourses present in texts signal the sociotechnical imaginary that Acxiom are attempting to disseminate to its clients, and their consumers in turn. Acxiom markets the promise to through data create and maintain databases that are capable of creating a type of identity that exists solely within their system and yet maintains the ability to influence outcomes for the individuals from whom the created identities were based on remains the core tenet of the RealIdentity project.

## Hard/Soft – Social/Technical

This sociotechnical imaginary based in the hybrid landscape between ‘the mental and the material’ (Jasanoff, 2015b, 329) through its hybrid nature straddles the technological/material divide. This idea was briefly touched upon in the section regarding the pain/hygiene concepts in the last section of the analysis. However, this point deserves further explication and analysis as it uniquely positions the data system as a no longer purely technological system. In any given sociotechnical imaginary, the very term itself ‘sociotechnical’ implies a coming together of the socio/technical spheres of life. The very term hinges on the nexus of the ‘instability of social arrangements’ (Jasanoff, 2015a, 22) and the ‘structured hardness of technological systems’ (Jasanoff, 2015a, 24). Through the clear difference inherent in the instability/hardness divide the social/technical duality becomes apparent. Only when they are bridged into a socio-technical do they become enabled to start forming a sociotechnical imaginary. This is the space which Axiom’s system occupies. It through a dialectical process takes the social data and transforms it into a commodity within its technical system and transforms it into sociotechnical identity profiles within its system which are then fed back into the social sphere in order to attempt to sway consumers, on the behalf of its clients.

These data-doubles of identity are comprised of what Fuller refers to as ‘standard objects’ of identity (2005, 148). These standard objects are the likes and dislikes, race, income, etc., which position the individual’s data-double in the system. This idea of a data-double, or as Fuller refers to it as, the individual’s ‘fleshier shadow’ (2005, 151) is afforded a luxury that the hardness of the system, or the instability of the social arrangement are both unable to achieve, namely: their ‘perspectival dislocation’ (Fuller, 2005, 151). Perspectival dislocation, the characteristic of existing inside and outside of the instability/hardness – social/technical divides at the same time, as the dialectical result of the sociotechnical imaginary. The created identity in the system exists on both sides of the divide at the same time. As these identity structures are created from the flecks of identity as standard objects they remain inextricably linked to the individual as she really exists and identifies (Fuller, 2005, 157) in the real world, and as the building blocks of the technological system, thus ensuring the linkage between the social/technical remains stable.

As this identity comprised of standard objects maintains the stability of the socio-technical

link, it helps further the techno-utopian ideals of Acxiom's imaginary. Through the inextricable link between the data and the individual the pervasiveness of the technology itself, as it harvests data from individuals at every junction and feeds it into the data double as it exists within the system, this data-collection loop becomes further and further embedded within the social with each repetition. With each repetition, it becomes more and more difficult to imagine 'data that cannot be fully separated from 'us'' (Douglas-Jones, 2021, 67). Because of this, the techno-utopian ideal of progress becomes further enmeshed within the process of Acxiom's RealIdentity system.

Additionally, as Acxiom has designed its system to straddle the techno/social divide through its usage of these flecks of identity as above discussed, it additionally allows the system to assume characteristics that are closely related to the social instability side of the sociotechnical starting duality. Namely, Acxiom assigns its system attributes traditionally connected to living. In the texts analysed, the dual characteristics of pain, and the systems ability to experience such, and hygiene of the data, and the assumed benefits of cleanliness were assigned to the system. While neither of these two attributes themselves are particularly ground-breaking<sup>10</sup>, for example, data-cleaning has been an established term in computer science for many years dealing with ensuring that data is up to date and correct for its intended uses (Rahm & Do, 2000, 3). The way in which they are used however are interesting. If anything, these terms are used not in order to help the client understand that the system Acxiom are offering is helpful to their cause. Instead, both the hygiene and pain discourses are used to facilitate a 'softening' of the hardness of Acxiom's system. Instead of using the biological terminology to convey competence, Acxiom instead chose to invoke the idea of the system *itself* feeling pain, and benefitting from proper hygiene. Acxiom's inclusion of true/false criterion that they described as being 'painful' for the system to miscategorise opens the door for further 'humanising' of their technological system. Through discursively constructing the system as something that is capable of feeling feelings, Acxiom attempts to construct their system as something closer to 'human'. This approach can be seen

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<sup>10</sup> For example, the phrase 'to have a clean record' denotes blank, as opposed to clean, or it 'may be painful for a researcher to have to go through peer-review a third time' although no *actual* pain was experienced.



to be entirely in line with the wider project of Acxiom's, to create and maintain a system that exists as a natural sociotechnical entity on both sides of the socio/technical divide.

Essentially, the productive force of Acxiom's, meeting the social world of reality produces a new type of system that is discursively embedded in both traditions (Jasanoff, 2015b, 11). The RealIdentity project, is based in both camps of the sociotechnical imaginary, it exists as a hybridised system facilitating a type of identity work on behalf of Acxiom that helps soften and blur the delineations between social and technical as it used in the sociotechnical framework.

This type of system, straddling the hard/soft divide, is one that may have far-reaching consequences. As the section focusing on privacy showed, the discursive construction of privacy law as deontologically negative may prove to be problematic even without a technological system such as Acxiom's RealIdentity in place. With such a system in place however, the risks become exacerbated through the techno-utopian ideals that the system extols. As any imaginary becomes ingrained in the instability of social arrangements, so does the virtues of said imaginary. In the case of the sociotechnical imaginary as examined in this project, the imaginary contains elements that are in direct opposition to legislation. As outlined in the section on the privacy discourse, only those who possess the 'knowledge' about the technological system, are able to make informed decisions about the limits and legislations that should cover said systems (Hollaway, et al., 2020). However, this ends up being a closed off system which self-regulates on the premise of techno-utopianism, which in turn further disseminates the virtues of techno-utopianism. While techno-utopianism in and of itself is not necessarily a negative idea, when the debates regarding it are carried out on the justification that one needs to possess the 'knowledge' in order to engage with it, it becomes an uncritical movement. This becomes further problematic as the techno-utopian imaginary itself focuses on further enabling those with the 'knowledge' of technological systems to assert themselves as authorities in knowledge, and imaginary, production (Mager & Katzenbach, 2020, 8). Thus, the potential problem inherent in the techno-utopian imaginary, is one which cordons off one of the key aspects of the imaginary itself, the ability for any individual to engage and labour with it as it embeds itself in the general population. Instead,

the techno-utopian imaginary is one which actively seeks to limit the imaginary itself to only those deemed fit to engage and control it.

## Summary

This discussion has aimed to establish the two main trends identified in the research of this project. Firstly, it aimed to discuss the techno-utopian ideal of Acxiom's RealIdentity system and how it defines 'identity' as a constitutive part of the system itself, and not only as a product or starting point as a data point. This was done through working through the identity structure and purpose of identity as an entity, and as a 'standard object' of Acxiom's system. Following on from that, the chapter turned to looking at the hard/soft – social/technical divides that are inherent in the theoretical framework of sociotechnical imaginaries and showed how Acxiom's system is defined and discursively constructed as a system that exists on both sides, as a naturalised system, of both the hardness of a technological system, based in the instabilities of social arrangements. Taken together, these theoretical investigations show how Acxiom has created a system that is so deeply discursively embedded in the sociotechnical imaginary of techno-utopianism and how it interacts with the concept of identity that it becomes almost inseparable from it. It is not possible to separate the system from it the social, the social from the technical.

## Conclusion

This project set out to engage with texts from the data-analysis company Acxiom's website concerning their RealIdentity project. In order to show how the company engages with the concept of identity, and the underlying techno-utopian discourse that presents itself through its messaging. To achieve this, the project engaged in a critical discourse analysis, relying on van Leeuwen's theory of legitimations and legitimating practices to bring to the fore what power structures and imbalances that were present in the text. The legitimations identified constituted five different major discourses that had been established through an inductive reading phase, prior to the analysis. The discourses identified and subsequently analysed were:

1. Neo-liberal market ideology: The discourse pertaining to the market ideology of Acxiom is one mainly preoccupied with how the market is portrayed as a rational space, and the easiest way for a potential client of Acxiom's to be perceived of as a rational actor is to engage with Acxiom's services. This was shown to be a result of a deep-seated market ideology which permeates the texts, an ideology which equates the rationality of the marketplace with rationality writ large.
2. Privacy: Privacy, and subsequently privacy law, was found to be discursively constructed as a net negative in the texts analysed. The study found that Acxiom positions itself as a better solution to the problem than what legislation can achieve owing to those working for Acxiom possessing the inside 'knowledge' required. Owing to said insider knowledge, Acxiom positions itself as a better solution to questions regarding privacy law than what could be achieved through legislation from above. This was seen as a result from a deontological subversion of the role of privacy law on behalf of Acxiom.
3. Identity structure: Identity was engaged with in the texts through Acxiom's own discursive construction of their 'RealIdentity' project, to examine the flaws in their conception of identity as a function of their 'How, who, where-data'-approach to identity structure. The discursive element of how Acxiom's approach hinges on a separation of the addressability of the *body* and the individual's sense of *identity* from

the person as a coherent actor was shown to be a false separation which results in the commodification of identity.

4. Technological-utopianism: The section on techno-utopianism identified how implicit in all the texts analysed exists an approach to technology as a teleological process leading to an improved state of social interaction. However, this teleological argument is focused on the possession of 'knowledge' of the system and control of the system leading to subsequent control outside the system. This discourse builds and expands on the prior three discourses and how they interact and create the foundation for the techno-utopian discourse which embeds itself in the imaginary, positioning Acxiom, once again as the logical outcome and necessity of a society engaging with technology.
5. Naming/Biological Terms: Lastly, the project investigated two particular phenomena. Namely, the choice of RealIdentity as a name for a self-purposed 'identity resolution'-project and the implications the naming of the system has for the project as a whole. Secondly, the section paid special attention to Acxiom's application of biological terms, *hygiene* and *pain*, as two terms of special interest for the attempted humanisation of their technological system. Taken together, the two trends discussed in the final chapter identified how Acxiom's construction of their system contains a multiplicity of problems and discourses, all present and active in the texts.

These discourses were all examined through the lens of sociotechnical imaginaries, a theory specifically aimed at examining how the social (i.e., real existing people) interact and co-exist with technological systems. This particular theory was utilised in order to highlight how Acxiom's technological system is so reliant on the social of individuals that it necessarily must straddle the social/technical divide to function. They were all analysed according to van Leeuwen's theory of legitimations to examine how the interplay between the discourses enabled a construction of Acxiom's RealIdentity system as a lodestone for a techno-utopianism imaginary through its technological system.

Throughout the study, the project aimed to investigate the discursive elements of the texts here analysed, and to what extent they contained elements of a techno-utopian ideal.

Through investigating how Acxiom legitimates this discursive standpoint, it aimed to see how the imaginary is grounded. In using van Leeuwen's theory of legitimations, it enabled a look at the discursive justifications for the messaging in the texts and thus a grounded examination of the power structures that exist in the omni-directional 'Acxiom-Client-Consumer'-relationships. Through investigating the power relations that are legitimated through the texts, the core of the techno-utopian imaginary was delineated as a multi-faceted idea that guides Acxiom's messaging. Throughout the texts, Acxiom's consistent tone of positioning itself as a not only an authoritative guide, but a morally justified and rational actor, anchors their discursive position as an empowered one. This discursive empowerment is the promise Acxiom makes to its clients, that they too can assume those very same morally and rationally justified discursive characteristics, and thus become a part of the techno-utopian change that they see as desirable for society.

Additionally, the project aimed to highlight how Acxiom's concept of 'identity' is one that is complimentary to its techno-utopian ideals as the dual identity (as lived 'real' identity, and algorithmic 'commodified' identity in the system) on which Acxiom relies only functions with the further embedding of technology as is core to the imaginary in question. The study's focus on legitimations further helped to engage the discourses in relation to the sociotechnical imaginary framework to show how Acxiom also constructs itself and the use of 'knowledge' as a way to assert themselves as a lodestone to guide clients in the rapidly changing world of data-analysis and marketing.

## Future Research

Building on the premise of this paper, the author invites future research active in the same area to focus especially on replicating the study with other companies, and thus discourses. As the research design enables a study with a higher degree of validity and relatively low generalisability, owing in part to the inductive method by which the discourses analysed were identified. Therefore, conducting more studies with a similar research methodology, may help tease out a fuller picture of the techno-utopian imaginary as it has been portrayed here. For example, the texts analysed for this particular study placed great emphasis on the

role of privacy, and especially privacy law and how those are discursively constructed. Acxiom being an American company, are there any discernible differences in approach to privacy law (although Acxiom, when active in the EU are still bound by GDPR)? Another aspect, staying with Acxiom as the particular focus of research, which might prove fruitful for future research is to expand the scope of the study. While this study intentionally chose not to ignore multi-modal content of the texts, there may be plenty of meaningful discursive elements present in analysing for example the turn-taking present in the numerous podcasts published by Acxiom, or looking on a more structural level, how clients are guided through the website through the use of link-trees and landing pages. Looking at which information Acxiom presents as important, and which (such as GDPR cookie-compliance, etc.,) that is hidden away from easy perusal by customers. Further, the techno-utopian imaginary as delineated in this study may be an analytically useful concept to apply to other data-driven industries to see how the imaginary sustains itself. This may prove especially poignant if one were to conduct a study applying a theoretical approach more heavily inspired by the 'free labour' from the critical media studies field, as outlined in the background chapter of this paper.

## Closing Remarks

To conclude, as more and more sophisticated data systems are developed and as more and more industries become datafied, the need for inquisitive, and critical, studies looking at the underlying assumptions and power structures on which they are built become needed. This study has looked at texts surrounding one such system and in what way it is discursively construed. As has been shown, the nature of the discourses identified throughout the study are of a varied nature, yet they all tie into the grander idea of the techno-utopian theme which Acxiom maintains. Examining such discursive trends and phenomenon shows how the, today widely accepted, practice of marketing based off of data analysis contains power structures that come with their own set of circumstances and legitimations, a discursive positioning that assigns Acxiom a role of control in the imaginary that their texts attempt to disseminate.

Finally, this study has looked at how such discursively constructed systems contain the foundational elements of the creation of a shared idea of what the future holds, and to what extents such futures are maintained within and outside of the system itself. As these types of technological systems are not due to dissipate or relent in their spread, discussions about the underlying structures remain important in order to ensure that the discursive arena in which society grapples with itself and its problems is one that is not dominated by actors with veiled interests. Any discursive element that helps dictate what is accepted, normal or wanted in society must be examined and investigated. Techno-utopianism carries with it such underpinnings with its focus on systems and logic. The justifications for such underpinnings are therefore a field of study that must remain persistent in its examinations, lest society become overrun with algorithmically driven change, all 'working for the better of mankind', yet furthering only the power and embeddedness of the values of their creators. Our imagined futures are contested, but not only by companies seeing the future in an algorithm.

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