

“It’s Just Information”

I am firmly planted on the grid. More than that, I am firmly planted on many grids. I have been reckless with my personal data, and it is profiting someone else.

I am my most exposed self with Apple, Google, and Facebook. Apple has a literal tracking device that I keep with me at all times, and manages all of my mobile access and casual communication over telephone and iMessage. Google’s mail, calendar, storage, search engine, photos, and browser I stay logged into can also sum up my life: my past, my present routine, writings, financial receipts, high school graduation pictures, even this paper. Facebook knows which social groups I am a part of, how many friends I have, my ideal image, how I define myself, and data collected elsewhere while I am logged in. There I am, in these three contexts: my innermost identity as I communicate casually, my professional and organized identity, and my polished social identity.

Mark Zuckerberg may claim that “you only have one identity,” but while Facebook’s data profile is designed for public self-expression and self-promotion, I do not see my Google and Apple data profiles the same way. If Facebook is my highlight reel, I allow Apple and Google to manage my private bloopers. Dijck writes that social media platforms are tools for shaping our identities, but I often draw a mental line between “public” and “private” and forget that my data is still accessible to someone.

Almost all of my time is spent explicitly touching technology. In the past 24 hours, on mobile and desktop platforms, I have consciously exchanged information with: Amazon, Apple’s Camera, Apple’s iMessage, Apple’s Notes, Apple’s Phone, Apple’s Podcasts, Apple’s Safari, Apple’s Weather, CCLE, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, GroupMe, Gmail, Google Calendar, Google Chrome browser, Google Maps, Instagram, MyUCLA, OneTab, Postmates, Snapchat, Spotify, and Trello. On Internet browsers, I have mostly looked at resources for this paper, but I also visited a government site on how to renew a passport and looked at retail links for Christmas shopping.

In addition to my conscious data interactions, there are implicit data collections that I frequently forget about. For example, by being logged into Facebook in the background, their Terms and Conditions allows the company to see my web surfing off of their site and sell all collected data to data brokers without my knowledge. I assume that by researching passports, I now will be marked by data broker as a future traveler. Even the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power collects data of when my home uses electricity. LADWP must have information of my apartment’s usage, like whether we are frequently home and if we are irresponsible with our bill pay or environmental footprint.

My most frequent explicit data traces were to save or request useful information, connect with people, take photographs, or consume entertainment. It is hard to say my most frequent implicit data traces, but I am most aware of the tracking of my web surfing and forgettable automatic uploads.

I initially gave permission for automatic uploads in case of a digital emergency. My photographs are doubly saved in Google Photos and Apple’s iCloud with my iMessages, and everything I write in Apple’s Notes uploads immediately to my Gmail. This results in a large profile of data that has been collected that I never think about.

My data profile includes a very large collection of photographs taken by me and of me, divided mostly between Apple, Google, and Facebook. In an insecure flurry in middle school, I untagged myself from every photo my mother had posted of me on Facebook, so I now would have to search through the depths of her archive to see what photos even exist of me online. As the New Yorker article “In the Future We Will Photograph Everything and Look at Nothing” reminds us, with today’s rate of data creation, it is unlikely that any human will ever go through the trouble to access those buried photographs. However, an advanced algorithm could bring that blackmail to light with ease. I further assume that she backed them up to Apple and Google libraries as well.

I first saw the division of Apple, Google, and Facebook as a modern separation of powers, but I have come to see it as three distinct threats. Each company holds the rights to my data, and they also sell it. Even if the companies are heroes, they each are vulnerable to cyberattacks.

A former Facebook employee once told me that Facebook actually collects data on the amount of times you look at your ex’s profile after a breakup, “to see how crazy you are.” I don’t even know what the “healthy” number of times to cyberstalk your ex is (over-looking seems the most ‘crazy’ but could I be labeled heartless to not look at all?), but it certainly made me self-conscious. It raises the question: Does the data matter if it does not affect you?

The TechCrunch article claims that the price of data varies based on its use for marketing. Information proportionally grows more expensive with its likelihood to result in a profit. Through this argument, Facebook would be collecting the “crazy” data in order for advertisers to make a more targeted profit. At the most, it should mean that I will start seeing advertisements for local cat shelters.

However, I struggle with the question of identity. If the data labels me, is it true? Does Facebook get the authority to decide what is true about me? Is my identity nothing more than a propensity to result in an advertiser’s profit? I don’t know where that “crazy” marker could go. A credit score’s only value is its effect on your financial requests. I should not care about labels if they are not going to be used. Philosophically, if it is not a tool, and it is not art, then isn’t it worthless?

Aside from economics, there can be malicious privacy invasions. I used the word ‘cyberstalk’ in jest before, but a lack of digital privacy can create a physical threat. Cyberstalking is a danger my parents caution me about. I wish I could say I listened to them, but without a thought I recently posted on Facebook about being “on the air at 8pm” for UCLA Radio, which means that every social connection knew where I was at that time.

In addition to physical threat, there is a societal, political, cultural one. Eli Pariser reminds us that even logged out, Google looks at 57 signals to personalize your information. The collection of data directly affects the curation of data that you see, data that most trust not to be biased. Through the personalization “filter bubble,” Internet users can be unaware of their biases and misinformed news.

Another surprising thread from my data trace was the vulnerability of my finances. In addition to my big three culprits, even unsuspecting companies like Postmates have my credit card and address saved. Researching how companies protect credit card data, I found the Payment Card Industry’s Data Security Standard (PCI DSS), a guide for security requirements created and enforced by a council of major payment card brands. PCI DSS mandates that merchants cannot store sensitive authentication data, they must encrypt and truncate the data they keep, and they can only store payment information if there is a “legitimate business need.”

All in all, I question how much of my data trail is voluntary, how much is convenient, and how much is necessary. For example, I have my credit card numbers memorized, so reliance on companies to store that data is purely for convenience. Is there a consequence for

Some parents choose to keep their children “off the grid” until they can make the choice for themselves. On the far end of the spectrum, there is a story of a girl in Texas without a birth certificate, so off the grid that she struggled to get onto it. “I am unable to get a driver’s license, get a job, go to college, get on a plane, get a bank account, or vote.” Although that’s a problem almost none of us have

A recent article written by a runaway fugitive claims “anyone can disappear if they’re willing to lose everything.” I think of becoming invisible as two options: to either disappear and continue with my current routine, or disappear and break my pattern to do something unpredictably different.

Multiple companies have enough data stored about me to intimately know my regular schedule. Apple tracks my iPhone, Google Calendar knows my pattern, MyUCLA knows my class schedule, the list goes on. To continue my daily life and be untracked, I would have to abandon my current technologies and actively delete my data history.

To truly get creative with my data tracking, I pretended I was a wanted criminal, attempting to disappear from the government’s eye. My cell phone and computer must be destroyed. I would have to withdraw all of my money in cash, since electronic payment is recorded. I would have to go to a physical library to find a map of where I was going, because if I looked up my destination on Google’s search engine, that would be a traceable giveaway. I would have to shroud my face in public, for fear of surveillance cameras. Or, as suggested on the WNYC podcast “Note to Self,” I could submit so much excess, purposely misleading information to confuse the system so that companies would struggle to see the truth through the garbage data. Of course, even if I am not a fugitive, I still may be interested in maintaining my privacy.

There is a scene in the movie *Boyhood* where the protagonist, Mason, complains about the modern experience of living life through a screen. He says to his girlfriend Sheena, “You have been, you know, checking your phone this whole time, and so what are you really doing? You don’t care what your friends are up to on Saturday afternoon, but you’re also obviously not fully experiencing my profound bitching. So, it’s like everyone’s just stuck in, like, an inbetween state, not really experiencing anything.” To this, Sheena replies, “It’s not an experience. It’s just information.” She explains that she found the directions for their road trip, she texted her mother, and her friend posted a picture on social media of her new pet pig. Mason replies, “Okay you’re right, that is a really cute tiny pig. Our lives can go on.”

I disagree with Sheena. It is so much more than just information. Our digital dependence is a growing tumor, and that is how data brokers profit. I’m simply waiting for the iCloud to turn to iAcid Rain.

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