



Socially Transmitted Data: The Toxic Waste of Technology

Facebook is the same age as my teenage daughter – 14 years old this year. I find a lot of similarities between the two of them. They both are experiencing growth spurts that are sometimes awkward and streaks of independence that border on rebellion. As I recall my teenage years, I often tried to get away with things and, when caught, I was forced to learn the hard way. The Cambridge Analytica fiasco has me questioning whether social media is learning the hard way or are we? Either way, trust and transparency only work if people have the time to pay attention.

In 2012 I created a unique marketing course about consumer information exchanges. Even with the continuous breaches and challenges of privacy, I am always stunned by how many students do not understand the realities of these exchanges. Over the past week or so, several former students have reached out to me, reflecting on the course and topics in light of the news about Facebook and Cambridge Analytica. They see the reality. I teach students in my marketing classes to be good stewards of consumer information; to use it ethically and to question the need to gather too much information. I also explain how much of their personal, social, and professional information is gathered, packaged and sold. If I was teaching this semester, there is no doubt that the Facebook/Cambridge Analytica data drama would be the final exam topic in my class. It offers the perfect example of the misconception that trust and transparency are solutions to privacy and hints at the reality that we are unconditionally surrendering our information.

At the end of the semester, students are often frustrated by learning how complicated it is to enact legislation and regulation around privacy. Last fall, one student slammed his hand on the desk during class and yelled, “DO something about this!” Companies, applications, and platforms (of all sizes) have been ‘getting away with’ collecting massive amounts of personal data, storing them, and disseminating them to others for years now. Data collection for no distinct purpose has long-term consequences that strike similarities to ignoring toxic by-products of manufacturing and dumping them into a nearby river. If we care about privacy, it appears legislators are not paying attention. Just last week, the U.S. Congress passed the CLOUD Act, easing the ability for companies to gather data from U.S. citizens. On the other hand, the European Union has the Global Data Protection Regulation, which “protect[s] and empower[s] all EU citizens’ data privacy,” with the goal “to reshape the way organizations across the region approach data privacy” (www.eugdpr.org). As of May 2018, companies non-compliant with the GDPR will face heavy fines. We can do more to protect privacy and data and we should, but that means paying attention and that’s not always convenient.

The Cambridge Analytica example is not a new data drama involving deception with technology. There are hundreds (if not thousands) of recorded violations involving social media companies and consumer data. As people exchange more information with apps, platforms, companies, and each other, the information spreads online farther than they may understand – as socially transmitted data. Much like a virus, these technology STDs often spread quickly and unbeknownst to the individual. Privacy policies or terms and conditions explicitly state that the information may be shared with third parties, affiliates, partners, etcetera but it is rare for individuals to read these lengthy documents of legalese. And these policies protect companies, not consumers. The Federal Trade Commission has encouraged making these clearer and understandable, yet even with added clarity the reality is that users have little to no control of that information or versions of the data after the initial exchange.

There is also no incentive (or cost) to business unless the transmission of the data cause explicit harm and that harm is discovered and reported. And that cost is contingent, and so far downstream, that the actors are typically unconcerned.

Companies are focused on empowering us to protect ourselves, yet most of the time, in our busy lives and with our reliance on convenience, we spend very little time and effort protecting our privacy. Most of us are dumping our data into the metaphorical river (cloud?), creating toxic waste for future generations to have to clean up. It is so incredibly easy to copy and share data. Openness is good, connections are great – but if there are no boundaries we are open to malicious and deceptive behaviors. We can only trust in connections and relationships that we are certain will not cause us harm. Even then, there is a margin of error. Without experience, we are exchanging information like teenagers, making mistakes and thinking with invincibility.

We are overwhelmed. We have so much to think about, we can't...even. While we should motivate our politicians to DO something, we can help them by changing how we characterize our exchanges of information. In truth, most of us know very little about our online information exchanges, mostly because we don't have the time to pay attention to the details. Instead of the prompt of "What's on your mind...", how about "What will you surrender today..."?