

(Article published in the College Newsletter, edition 2)

Annoying privacy trade-offs like targeted advertising

-Jaganya Srikumar

The digital world is everywhere and is expanding over time. Some argue that the days of privacy are lost while others fear that we have gone too far beyond the limits. In fact no one can raise an argument on the concept of privacy being revolutionised. The wide usage of the internet favoured marketers in expanding their marketing tools such as digital data. Presumably, many among us are fond of browsing through e-commerce. But, have you ever wondered why these ads make it to our social media feeds so soon? Here's the reason: with the cookies that you see on every site and with the constant sharing of personal information, knowingly or unknowingly, you are endlessly being watched! Your privacy is traded off to third parties. Thus, we become the products and our data, their service!

For a long, advertisements have played a crucial role in stimulating favourable responses from the mob. The traditional ads have played a passive role whereas the targeted ads played the exact opposite. Their effectiveness has navigated the advertisers from the traditional forms of media, such as print newspapers. As a result, ad networks or advertisers constantly go after customers collecting and sharing information pertaining to them. Multinational companies and Corporates like Facebook, Twitter, and Google suck up a massive amount of our data and convince their advertisers that it is more likely to hit the potential buyers than the existing competition.

While it sounds congenial to show ads that are pretty custom-fit to our needs, things can get pretty awkward when you are showing a Youtube video to your friend and suddenly a pre-roll ad pops in, relating to a sensitive content for which your search intention was genuine.

To cite an example, the need to strike an embarrassing conversation when someone else takes your phone or computer which you have been using the whole day for idle browsing and shopping, the target ads proves to be a way of privacy manipulation. Thus, the internet turns out to be a surveillance nightmare when what you browse is spotted everywhere!

Advertising has become so economical that whatever being advertised cannot be trusted blindly. The content we see everyday online is based on our demographic information, interests and other varied reasons. This is how corporations work, by factoring in our location, personal preferences and the account with which we operate in order to generate search results. Businesses in the modern era work with no ethics. Personalisation of ads has made people unaware of where to draw the line between what is right and wrong. Consequently, we are lured into their falling traps. For instance, the unhealthy way of eating, targeted towards young children. Most of them don't know any better when they are presented with the images of fast foods and cakes while watching videos from their favourite youtube channel. The frequency with which children are exposed to advertising is perturbing as these innocent beings are constantly the objects being prayed upon!

As we observe Data Privacy Day on 28 January every year, there are many ways to safeguard and limit the ways in which the digital footprint cannot be misused. However, many hold onto the idea that since the data is already out there in the hands of big organisations like Facebook, a world of democratically shared information is right around the corner. Unaware of the currency that they have been exchanging for convenience, targeted ads and content algorithms tend to

thrive, creating new opportunities to misuse data. While digitalization has been growing more into the real world, laws regarding privacy are becoming outdated. Thus it is only until the consumers become aware of their data rights, a safe and sound digital platform is presented in front of us!