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Safety of your online data

The word NATO (i.e. North Atlantic treaty organization) happens to be a synonym for friendship, trust & most importantly "Allies". But during recent years, there have been some cracks developing instill a solid alliance. Many of these differences are due to obvious geopolitical reasons like the rise of China, the election of Donal Trump, etc. But most importantly it's the ongoing 'Silent Trade War' between Trans-Atlantic friends. Market access to each other's economy of their respective merchandise & good exports is one big part of the problem. But the equally big problem happens to new 'EU Tech-Trade rules' & 'Data privacy rules'. To support its young startups & develop them into 'Tech Unicorns', the EU has brought an arsenal of Tech & Data privacy rules as a hedge against the 'Big Tech' (American Giants like Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Amazon). EU understands the criticality & necessity of domestics European firms in the future tech landscape. In fact, if you ask some executive in silicon valley about whom they fear the most? The answer will be either 'Government of India' or 'Margrethe Vestager' (EU commissioner for Competition). Two entities also happen to be the biggest markets for 'Big Tech' outside the USA.

One of the most critical elements of this battle is new EU 'Data privacy laws' that make it difficult for 'big tech' to trade as usual in the EU. By why data? It's said that in today's world, 'Data' is the new 'Oil'.

In recent years, Artificial intelligence (Ai) has revolutionized almost every industry on the planet. There have been major breakthroughs in the world of Ai that have totally changed the economical games in different industries. But these magical Ai algorithms don't run on their own. They need fuel in the form of data to perform magically. The more the merrier fits perfectly on the utility of data in the domain of ai. The efficiency & magical performance of the Ai is exponentially proportional to data input. Thus, adding one unit of data to 100 units of data is different from adding one unit of data to 100,000 units of data. As one starts to understand the criticality of data in the world of Ai, understanding the monetization of Ai becomes very easy.

We in our daily lives generate quantum of data, much of it unconsciously. For example, while traveling in a car, Google can track our position, destination, starting point, Speed of the car, and many more things. Then, it tries to join the dots using powerful Time-Series based algorithms & millions of user's data. In the end, using a model trained on your data, Google can sell the more advanced (premium) prediction services to hyperlocal delivery companies, logistics companies, marketing agencies, etc to maximize their respective revenues. Similarly, Amazon & Google can help some American companies(like Jhonson & Jhonson) at the expense of their European counterpart (like Sanofi) to target more potential customers & clients in a particular geographical domain. This is the reason behind rising temperatures between the USA & the EU.

Although Ethics in Ai is a huge debate that has many facets to cover, 'Data Privacy' is among the most consequential ethical issues with Ai. The root of the problem starts from one simple question, Who owns the data? And the answer is still undecided or at best depends upon the situation. Does the personal data belong to the person in question or it can be used by tech companies to develop their products (& make money)? It might be tempting to say that the personal data belongs to the person & tech companies should've no right to use the data in any way. But this fundamental position will kill the ingenuity of Ai in its bud. Without easy access to data, companies won't be able to further develop revolutionary products. New breakthroughs like Google maps, Alpha Go, etc won't be possible as companies will run out of new data to train their model. It'll be a huge blow to the government, which might depend upon open data to cater its services in the remotest areas of the country by using the power of Ai. Thus, it won't be in the interest of the 'Greater Common Good' of the society. Neither will it be in accordance with the dictums of 'laissez faire' given by great pioneer economist 'Adam Smith'.

At the same time, we can't allow a free run to big tech, which not only kills young competition but can be draconian to a common citizen. The famous Britisher, an English literature giant, George Orwell wrote a popular novel 'Nineteen Eighty-Four', which centers on the consequences of totalitarianism, mass surveillance, and repressive regimentation of persons and behaviors within society. He popularized the word 'Orwellian', which now is a synonym for a totalitarian, oppressive regime. We regularly see the shades of 'Orwellian' (Government, corporations, etc) characteristics in our life. For example, recently a company 'Cambridge Analytica' was alleged to have used illegally sourced private data from Facebook to manipulate election results in various countries by helping to direct & induce 'fake news' towards voters. It was alleged that Facebook was aware of the shady operations of 'Cambridge Analytica' & was in cohorts with it. This is one of the many examples where a complete monopoly can sound disastrous for the whole society.

We know the fact that corruption is directly proportional to 'Power' & inversely proportional to 'Transparency'. We also know that extreme of any things is bad. Hence, we need a balanced approach to deal with the ethical issue 'Data Privacy'. We need to give enough freedom to corporations so that their growth is not disproportionately affected by stringent laws but at the same time promote transparency & best practices in the use of private data.

For example, there have been some recent developments like Federated learning, Edge intelligence, etc that allow some protection of privacy. At the same time, best practices for data sharing must be encouraged by the state. For example, the state can designate reliable & certified 3rd parties to share data in a way that minimum contextual information is shared, which at the same time is enough for the particular use case.

Still, we are far war from a concrete solution or universal framework for this problem. In my opinion, this issue is going to be more critical as the geopolitical competition between India, EU, USA, China gets heated up, thus causing the fragmentation of the internet standards.