

To: All Staff
From: Robin Gould

Subject: Important Discussion of Data Policy And Tracking

As you all are likely aware, invasive data collection is an increasingly important problem to tackle. This (voluntary) discussion/open forum of this topic will seek to address difficulties, and hopefully raise and highlight solutions by employees of the company to inform policy going forward. This is an initiative pursued by company leadership, as they seek to foster healthier relationships between employees, the company, and data. As the representative for our Data Dept. I will be the one to broach the topic and discuss some of my own personal experiences. Also, please review our current data policy, which you will find attached. As a company, we cannot guarantee we are mistake-free and will remain that way, however our data policy hopes to avoid harmful behavior towards users. We serve our user base and are obligated to avoid harmful tracking practices. I hope to drive home the importance of this viewpoint in this discussion.

Attached to this memo is a pdf file with Chapter 6 of the book *Technically wrong: Sexist apps, biased algorithms, and other threats of toxic tech* which discusses this topic in depth from a different perspective than my own. As I will reference topics from this chapter, I highly recommend that you skim it before continuing with this discussion. It brings valuable insight, and helps to detail a variety of issues with invasive data collection with examples.

My primary (work) computer is a modified Thinkpad T400 with a hand modified CPU and flashed bios chip. (It is basically just librebooted with extra steps) I have no social media accounts and disable javascript by default and only consume media through command line apps. I also use a flip phone for my personal phone.

I just want to assure you, before you think I am recommending doing this, NONE of this works for any so-called “data detoxification”. Despite all these extreme measures I STILL am tracked invasively. There is no realistic amount of effort you can put in to avoid being tracked completely. Either you are being tracked invasively, or you aren’t. I still use credit cards, pay taxes etc. so I have tons of publicly available information that is easily accessible to companies like Acxiom as mentioned in the article. If you think it is worth it and reasonable to go to Richard Stallman levels of effort and commitment to avoiding being tracked, you are either already doing it, or you are severely underestimating how difficult and stifling it is to do as an average person. As the chapter mentions “I can’t tell you how to fully detox from data collection; in fact, I think the only way to do it is to stop using digital products altogether. Anything else is just a method for limiting your exposure,”

(Just as a side note I do NOT live the aforementioned pseudo-data detox lifestyle because I believed it important, I take all of these steps because they don't negatively impact the way I live my life and because they are fun for me)

Realistically this means that you are always going to be tracked invasively. It is impossible to remain vigilant at all times, and it takes one slip up to let a company track you more intensely, even if you try to monitor your digital footprint. As the article says "In this way, cuteness becomes another cloak for tech companies: a shiny object that deflects criticism. Because the more we focus on the balloons and streamers, the clever videos and animated icons and punny humor, the less we'll question why companies are asking us for so much information," This cloak helps to disarm you, and is related to the reason I would be almost none of you fully read terms of service. It is convenient to ignore it because of how technical and complex the language often is, the same way the article discussed how Uber, in the past, has made their "put in address" functionality hard to see in order to try and squeeze as much location data out of their users as possible.

This is why it is so important to avoid harmful practices. Eventually the business model of selling data will most likely be legislated out of relevancy due to its harm toward the end user. As a company which relies on online users, our user base is entirely vulnerable to harmful data practices. It is highly imperative that we stay away from those business models of revenue generation. As it stands, our current subscription model is growing and healthy and I believe that if our company had a financial incentive to sell data, we would naturally adopt harmful data practices as a result.

Bibliography

Wachter-Boettcher, S. (2018). *Technically wrong: Sexist apps, biased algorithms, and other threats of toxic tech*. W.W. Norton & Company.