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What we can learn from the Facebook data scandal

By Nakshatra Pachauri

Recent news about the collusion of Facebook, Cambridge Analytica and the Trump election has brought forward one of the more covert and often insufficiently discussed problem of Social Media platforms to the fore. Instead of calling out Facebook alone, I prefer to use Social Media platforms as the problems related to big data enterprise and privacy are as much a Twitter/Whatsapp/Instagram/Snapchat issue as it is for Facebook.

Yet right now Facebook is being attacked from left, right and center by everyone including their own ilk. The question this merits is whether the data problems with the Social Media platforms are only limited to explicitly share data (which Facebook is being blamed for) or is it also about the (more often used) method of implicitly acquiring and utilizing user information?

A lot has been written specifically on Facebook (and its mechanizations) in the last few days thereby (implicitly) giving a free run to other Social Media enterprises. It is a bit unfair and contrarian to the virtues of western freedoms to target one while the others (in the same boat) make merry! So to bring the discourse back to Social Media (rather than

Facebook alone), I decided to research more about the advertising policies of the other Social Media mammoth.

While the data being used by Cambridge Analytica was harvested from Facebook user profiles and activities, similar techniques of data storage and analysis have been also employed by another giant Social Media platform for a while now. On April 13, 2010 Twitter launched its own advertising tool, calling it 'Promoted Tweets'[\[1\]](#)! These Tweets, as the name suggests, were supposed to provide advertising opportunities to anyone interested in *accessing* the time of platform users. The intent here was the same as that of the advertising guru who provided Facebook advertising and marketing tools to the advertising companies and user-consumer alike.

It is indeed quite revealing to see what Twitter policy[\[2\]](#) states with regard to its own advertising opportunities. On the question as to what are Promoted Tweets, the Twitter policy states:

- *Promoted Tweets are ordinary Tweets purchased by advertisers who want to reach a wider group of users or to spark engagement from their existing followers.*
- *Promoted Tweets are clearly labeled as Promoted when an advertiser is paying for their placement on Twitter. In every other respect, Promoted Tweets act just like regular Tweets and can be retweeted, replied to, liked, and more.*

So the limitless opening for the corporations to invade our private lives exists not just on Facebook but also on Twitter. Like Facebook requires advertisements to be labeled as such, so does Twitter. But the explicit labelling hides a more sinister and implicit hack into each user's private data on which the user doesn't have any *protective* insurance. As soon as labelling is achieved, the responsibility frameworks for the platforms vanish while the precious data remains on the servers controlled by the platforms based in the West!

And how does Twitter determine which Promoted Tweets to display in a user's timeline? After all, what must appear on anyone's timeline should be explicitly understood and approved by that person, right! Isn't that part of the individualist society's search for gaining exclusive individual rights, which is often also touted by the Social Media platforms? Yet on this aspiration of individualized freedoms, the stated twitter policy is that:

- *A Promoted Tweet will appear in a user's timeline only if the Tweet is likely to be interesting and relevant to that user.*
 - *Our platform uses a variety of signals to determine which Promoted Tweets are*
-

relevant to users, including what a user chooses to follow, how they interact with a Tweet, what they retweet, and more.

Thus, twitter is informing us that their analytics will maneuver the user timelines based on the 'interests of' and 'relevance for' that particular user. The user is extended no rights whatsoever to approve or disapprove the selection made on his/her behalf by Twitter in order to fill corporation coffers.

But can the users opt out of seeing promoted tweets in their timelines? Twitter Policy states:

- *We are strongly committed to delivering the most relevant ads to the right user at the right time.*
- *Users who dislike a Promoted Tweet can simply dismiss it from their timeline with a single click, but they will not be able to opt out of seeing ads in the timeline.*
- *As always, we are paying close attention to how consumers interact with Promoted Tweets and we'll continue to make iterations and improvements as we better understand consumer reaction.*

Yet again whatever advertisement one sees on his/her timeline is to be decided by Twitter and its analytics. Even to ignore a Promoted Tweet, one would need to make at least one *click* thereby giving data points for a company to register in case you may or may not like that particular advertisement (after all it's the attention economy folks).

More importantly, however is the policy under which one may not be able to avoid completely the interface with the advertisements provided by twitter at any point while using Twitter! So there is no option to opt out!

The data analytics involved would even analyze the time spent before one 'clicked' on the dismiss button. It is that scary! This is what is the intent when the Twitter policy romanticizes the idea of 'paying close attention to how consumers interact (*read* behave) with Promoted Tweets'.

Aren't the companies who pay for Promoted Tweets interested in this data and wouldn't they access it after paying a price? There is enough evidence that advertisers derive great advantage by posting on Social Media platforms making even more money by way of compounding their advertising investments.

And this is where it becomes scarier as by the time the Social Media's advertising blitzkrieg began, the World was still coming to terms with in the face advertising campaigns and commercials on the mainstream media! However while the choices of the consumer were coming under intense pressure, to make those choices still broadly remained the user/consumer prerogative.

However today as the Social Media marketing strategies play with our minds (especially the attention spans) and snatches away our right to disagree to their marketing web, the distinction between 'what a user *chooses* to follow' and 'what a user is *forced* to follow' becomes irrelevant.

But wasn't it fed to us that in the *promised* free world, a user/consumer could decide for himself/herself? Forcing a population and its hands after all was a trait of the despots, who were of course regularly condemned by the West as the enemies of the free world! Yet Social Media and its western masters have been doing the same, ironically in the name of bringing democracy and freedom to the rest of the world.

In the last chapter of my recent book, *Post Zombieism - The Social Media Hordes*, I discuss the platform responsibility problems related to Big Data and Privacy as well as the idea perpetrated by the Social Media giants of bringing democracy to us and helping us to build 'new' communities.

Ultimately there is no difference between various Social Media platforms as far as mind and behavior control is concerned. Some of these are more successful than others in raking up revenues and compromising our private data which they had no business stealing yet this is what has been happening. And this is only one of the serious implications of the Social Media wizardry. There are many other problems such as criminality, radicalization, terrorism, polarization, loss of knowledge etc. which I also write in my book about.

As we see, the privacy issues aren't new and it's also not that people haven't been warned before. Yet the ultimate question which arises in the current context is why now? A few reasons come to mind:

Firstly, it's quite clear that Facebook became a pariah as it double crossed the American establishment by allowing Russia (and Trump) to win! This looks to be *prima facie* *raison d'être* for the western establishments to go after Facebook. But then what exactly did

Facebook or Cambridge Analytica do to feel the wrath of the 'free' world?

To be fair to Trump (and I know it's a sin to do so), the reasons behind the significant establishment attack on Facebook today only reeks of an elitist liberal humbug! Trump won the election and say Russia helped Trump win it. Hasn't this been done by the United States around the world before with and without the assistance of Social Media under all administrations?

In fact, the media tools used by Trump et al. were first utilized by the darling of democrats, Barack Obama. After all, he was the first Social Media President! But once the tool the democrats cherished assisted in toppling of their dream run, all hell broke loose on Facebook. In the end, the 'Yes We Can' turned into 'Make America Great again', while everyone's data was harvested and privacies were breached by mostly western corporations!

Secondly, it's also the Russian angle. How can the post *perestroika* slayed mammoth rise up again and play your game on your turf? Even for this '*rising from the ashes*' success story of Russia one needs to look no further than the Obama doctrine on Syria (which also incidentally replaced Al-Qaeda by the more feared Islamic State) which was forced to accept Russia at its rightful place. Now the same democrats are crying hoarse that the mighty Russians have arrived at the game!

Thirdly it's also about cut throat competition. This is a competition to attract user attention. This shows clearly in the attacks on Facebook driven on (and by) Twitter. In fact, Whatsapp co-founder Brian Acton has supported the call for #deletefacebook^[3]. And to announce this he has also used Twitter! The free world crusaders (the Twitter platform and its users) are in an overdrive to cannibalize their own by facilitating the movement to bring Facebook to justice^[4]! So while data collection (and storage) is fair game (considering Twitter is not being trolled like Facebook), sharing of same data (especially in cases where it means acting against the western enterprise) is a crime!

Professional rivalries set aside, this clearly demonstrates another problem associated with our society and not just with platforms alone. Our attention spans are getting shorter (in fact a 2015 research found that the average attention span of a human is now shorter than that of a gold fish - about 8 seconds^[5]) which is leading us to only understand *tangible* realities. Whatever can be *seen*, can be supported or attacked!

The intangibility is being ignored completely in the public discourse today. Who has the time to invest and understand abstract information when everything is being fetched for us? The effect of this tangibility can also be seen in the psychology of *nounism* where only names get used to make a point. Arguments are not needed, name calling is enough! This seems to be because we find easy and convenient outlets (such as Social Media platforms) to execute our opinions.

Trump is as much a metamorphosis^[6] of this phenomenon as is this selective attack on Facebook. This also reflects in the line of the ongoing attack on Facebook alone. So everyone (including Twitter) is now concerned about data privacy and big data undertakings. What about the other serious social problems associated with Social Media as a whole? We won't discuss that because we can only deal with one problem at a time while the other problems become even bigger.

Finally, there could potentially be a more problematic (and sinister) twist to the current crisis. In an article published in November 2017, on Forbes.com titled 'How much revenue can Instagram drive for Facebook'^[7], it was clear that Instagram is the new money making machine for the Facebook conglomerate.

That teenagers (the largest demography) were moving away from Facebook was already apparent in 2013^[8]. As the mobile connectivity has risen, Instagram has become the medium of choice for a large population. Looking at the continuing popularity of Instagram, wouldn't it be better for all associated to Facebook to jump ships? Hasn't the corporate enterprise in the West done this time and again! And hasn't Trump done it^[9]?

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2010/apr/13/twitter-advertising-google>

[2] <https://business.twitter.com/en/help/overview/what-are-promoted-tweets.html>

[3] <https://www.ndtv.com/business/facebook-data-breach-delete-facebook-says-whatsapp-co-founder-amid-cambridge-analytica-row-1826770>

[4] <https://www.cnet.com/news/deletefacebook-hashtag-trends-twitter-facebook-users/>

[5] <http://time.com/3858309/attention-spans-goldfish/>

[6] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/ambigamy/201105/trumps-name-calling-symptom-nounism>

[7] <https://www.forbes.com/sites/greatspeculations/2017/11/13/how-much-revenue-can-instagram-drive-for-facebook-in-the-future/#52ab4ac87b4f>

[8] <https://www.cnet.com/news/why-teens-are-tiring-of-facebook/>

[9] <http://money.cnn.com/2015/08/31/news/companies/donald-trump-bankruptcy/index.html>

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For more information about and to buy this book, please go to:

<https://www.southcentre.int/product/post-zombieism-the-social-media-hordes/>

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