

# CHAPTER 3: RIGHT TO PRIVACY IN CYBERSPACE

## 3.1 Introduction

### 3.1.1 More Doctors Smoke Camels Than Any Other Cigarette

There is no secret that smoking is bad for your health. However, the first major report warning of smoking's dangers was published 60 years ago by the Royal College of Physicians in the U.K.<sup>1</sup>

A study published in the September 27 issue of *Nicotine & Tobacco Research* – UCLA researchers examined dozens of internal tobacco industry documents made public after a 1998 court case, and found tobacco companies had known cigarette smoke contained potentially dangerous radioactive particles as early as 1959.

The radioactive particle in question – polonium-210 – is found in all commercially available cigarettes and inhaled directly into a smoker's lungs, the researchers said. Their study outlines how the tobacco industry was also concerned by the particle, and even studied the potential lung damage from radiation exposure.

The Big Tobacco companies told the Public Health Community that Polonium 210 is a naturally occurring element found in the air, soil, and water and therefore can be found in plants, including tobacco.<sup>2</sup> Big tobacco companies spent decades concealing their research, lying and covering up what they knew.<sup>3</sup>

Why am I talking about Big Tobacco in this chapter, which is on social media and its impact?

That is because, people like to compare Big Tobacco companies with social media platforms, especially around the impacts and harms of social media on kids.<sup>4</sup>

Facebook, now Meta, is one of the biggest social media company. Two of the top three messaging apps are owned by Meta – WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. The biggest photo sharing app called Instagram is also owned by Meta.

There are ample of studies showing us the harmful impacts of social media on kids, teens, our mental health, on our democratic elections, public events, etc. And many of those studies are from Facebook (Meta) itself.

Just like Big tobacco companies, who spent decades concealing their research, lying and covering up what they knew, Facebook (Meta) is also doing the same.

Wall Street Journal in their Facebook File series revealed internal company documents that show that the company (Facebook) knows its products cause harm, including to kids.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.2 Big Tech and Capital Surveillance

Our personal and private experiences have been hijacked by Silicon Valley and used as the raw material for extremely profitable Digital products.<sup>6</sup>

The term surveillance capitalism is not an arbitrary term, Silicon Valley deceives us so well. We believe that we have some control over the data that we share with these Big Tech companies, we can opt out of personalised ads, or turn off analytics, etc but that is not really helping.

We think that the only personal information they have about us is what we have given them, and we think we can exert some control over what we give them, and therefore we believe that our trade-off here is somehow under our control that we understand. What is really happening is that we provide personal information, but the information that we provide is the least important part of the information that they collect about us.



Fig 3.1: Illustration of transfer of data.

Spelling errors in your search terms which colour buttons you prefer how fast you type how fast you drive? This is called residual data. Twenty years ago, this type of data was considered as extra data, a digital waste. Eventually, it was understood that these so-called waste material is extremely useful.<sup>7</sup>

Facebook knows our hobbies preferences and friends Because they retrieve a lot of information from the digital traces we leave behind unwittingly.<sup>8</sup>

The companies like to say we collect data so that we can improve our service, and that is true. They collect data and some of it is used to improve the service to you, but even more of it is analysed to train technologies to predict patterns of human behaviour. This allows them to predict what a person is going to do in the future, with a significant amount of accuracy.

Once you have the behavioural surplus, the comprehensive behavioural data of hundreds of millions of people, you can start predicting the preferences of specific groups or a community.

And then sell that prediction to their business customers, and in return, you see a very relevant ad of your favourite product with a discount.<sup>9</sup>

Simple thing like buying a certain kind of shampoo can divulge essential information about us?

For example, the New York Times reported a case of a supermarket chain that knew a girl was pregnant even before she did. The markets algorithms discovered that the girl switched from fragrant shampoos to more neutral smelling products. Since the olfactory senses of pregnant women becomes stronger, the market algorithm assumed this girl must be pregnant. Her father didn't know until He was repeatedly sent special offers for baby products.<sup>10</sup>

Big Tech sometimes knows us better than we know ourselves, they can predict things like our personality our emotions our sexual orientation our political orientation a whole range of things that we never ever intended to disclose at the first place.

How do Google use all the collected data about you?

“We also collect the content you create, upload, or receive from others when using our services. This includes things like email you write and receive, photos and videos you save, docs and spreadsheets you create, and comments you make on YouTube videos.”<sup>11</sup>

This is from Google’s privacy policy, these 42 words explain that everything you do on Google, from using their search engine or YouTube, to saving your private photos and documents in Google Drive, etc are being collected by Google. Your emails are not that private as you think, everything you type is being collected by google. Google knows that I copied a paragraph from their privacy policy.

“We collect information to provide better services to all our users — from figuring out basic stuff like which language you speak, to more complex things like which ads you’ll find most useful, the people who matter most to you online, or which YouTube videos you might like. The information Google collects, and how that information is used, depends on how you use our services and how you manage your privacy controls.”<sup>12</sup>

Only 71 words to explain how they use your data. If you need to know more the right to explanation comes handy, the right to explanation is crucial for accountability and transparency in the use of algorithms to make decisions in our lives.

Data mining companies like Google and Facebook profits off by selling our personal data to advertisers. Data is the new oil. Oil leaks, so does data. Quite frequently the data collected by those data mining companies are

leaked by hackers, government agencies or criminals. That user data then lands in the public domain. Your personal and sensitive data is now in public domain.

That is a clear violation of our right to privacy, which is a Human Right.

This is why practising digital security is fundamentally about claiming our rights. Human rights are protections, and when we claim our rights, we protect ourselves. Demanding our privacy is, first and foremost, insisting that our rights cannot be taken away.

### 3.3 Impact on Democracies and Elections

Times have changed in the last 15 years, now we can consume and interact with online content. People of all ages are on social media like, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, etc. and that is where they are getting their information. The majority of people no longer watch prime-time news shows. I do not remember when I last watched news on television, but I do follow a lot of news agencies and journalists on social media, including YouTube.

And the political campaigns for elections understand this, and that is why they also target people to gain their vote on social media.

Politicians are spending more and more money on social media. A research firm, Burrell Associates, estimated that political campaigns spent more than \$1.4 billion on digital advertisement in 2016.

While the Russians (and more and more the Chinese, North Koreans, and Iranians) use digital tools to dangerously disrupt our democracy, perhaps the greatest threat to our freedom comes from tech companies that recognize that we're neither the product nor the customer. Instead, they see us as monetizable data, as beings whose behavior can be predicted, manipulated, and therefore, profited upon.<sup>13</sup>

Imagine Hitler having access to the tools like the social media? Imagine Hitler using Facebook to spread hate against the Jews. If you can imagine this, then you are imagining the present. We live in a world where bad actors use technology to spread hate, commit crimes, recruit terrorists and divide our society. All this can affect our lives, our democracy.

Democracy should not be taken for granted, it should not be replaced with other forms of governance. Democracy is not the greatest form of governance at our disposal, but it is the best among the worst. Democracy is worth fighting for, we need to protect democracy at all cost.

### 3.4 Misinformation and Fake News

What is fake news?

False news stories, of a sensational nature, created to go viral online for:

Generating web traffic or discrediting a public figure, political movement, company, etc.

Fake news can be found on pretty much every corner of the internet.

Social media is a primary source of information for many people, which puts them at risk for consuming and sharing fake news.<sup>14</sup>

A global study of almost 20,000 people found that 62% believe there to be a fair extent or great deal of fake news on online websites and platforms (including social media).<sup>15</sup>

Social media is the second most popular source of information about news and current affairs in the entire world.<sup>16</sup>

Social media arrived into an already polarized world. Starting around 2009 a series of design changes added fuel to the fire, it was the like button, the retweet button and then algorithmicizing everything. These three changes converted social media into one of the greatest dividing forces we have ever seen.

These changes created social media as an outrage machine. Unless you are a famous personality, nobody would have asked how do you feel, but after the advent of social media, unlike TV news channels, the communication became symmetrical. Anyone now can voice their opinion and make their voice heard. Social media brought democracy back to the people, but not everything was blooming. This chapter focuses on the bad side of social media and its impacts on our society.

It starts with the business model because social media runs on advertising dollars, its designers will do whatever it takes to keep us engaged. Just like Big Tobacco companies would make more profits if we were hooked on their products. The more we use their product, be it social media or tobacco, the more they make money.

Social media platforms make more money the longer we stay on the platform, this means they have an incentive to present us with information that is most likely to draw us in to keep us engaged, to keep us coming back and spending more and more time online. The most engaging content is content that triggers our emotions, particularly moral emotions like moral outrage, so the algorithms built into these platforms that select information to show to us push to the top of our feeds content that is likely to trigger strong emotions like outrage.

Tribal emotions like outrage are part of our biological makeup within the appropriate scope outrage helps bind together a moral community, but just as our taste for sugars and fats didn't evolve for a world full of fast food, our taste for moral outrage didn't evolve for social media.

In India, we quite a few fact checking websites and social media handles. I would like to quote some fake stories circulating on the internet lately. I have taken these stories for The Quint's WebQoof Fact Check Platform.

A video which purportedly shows Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal talk about accepting bribes, along with his Punjab counterpart Bhagwant Mann and other leaders of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), has been shared on Twitter by the Spokesperson of Delhi Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) unit, Naveen Jindal.

However, the video has been edited. The original video, which is from an interview conducted by Hindi news channel India TV in April, shows Kejriwal talking about 'ending corruption in Punjab in ten days'. This story was published on The Quint on 9 April 2022.<sup>17</sup>

A video, which shows a mob brandishing guns and knives, and also shouting provocative slogans in front of a temple, is being shared on social media, linking it to the recent communal clashes in Madhya Pradesh's Khargone on the occasion of Ram Navami.

However, the video is from a Muharram procession that took place in 2018 in Khargone, and it is not linked to the recent clashes.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.5 Conclusion

What can be done? Can we do anything to control the way social media impacts our lives? Can we prevent fake news and misinformation from being spread like wildfire on the internet?

When it comes to Big Tech, “we are not the product, we are the raw material”, as famously said by Shoshana Zuboff, the author of the book 'The Age Of Surveillance Capitalism'.

According to Zubov our personal and private experiences have been hijacked by Silicon Valley and used as the raw material for extremely profitable Digital products.

The easiest way to counter this is by claiming your digital rights and using privacy-focused alternatives. One can easily replace Google, Facebook, Microsoft, etc from our lives, all it takes is some effort and determination to live a private life.

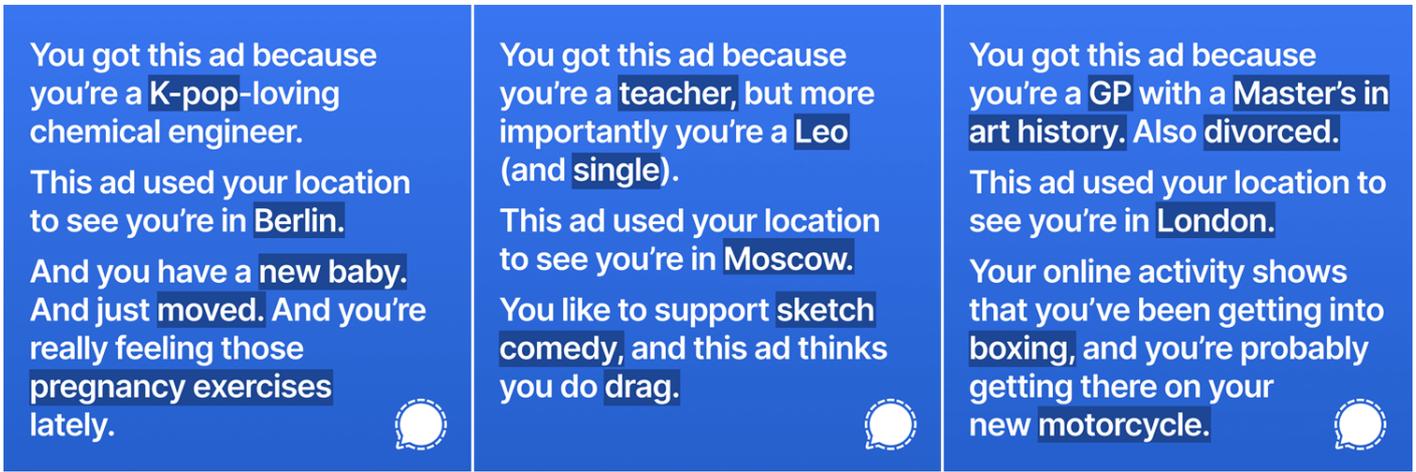
A quick glance at the privacy policy and the terms of services on companies like Google and Facebook will give you a rough idea about the amount of data collected by them.

You will not tell your passwords, share your emails or private messages or your exact location with any stranger, right? Then why share all this data with companies with Google or Facebook, which uses this information to profile you?

Target advertisement are extremely precise, to prove this Signal Foundation used their Instagram account to spread awareness about this.

They created a multi-variant targeted ad designed to show us the personal data that Facebook collects about us and sells access to. The ad simply displayed some of the information collected about the viewer, which the advertising platform uses.

The following are the samples of those advertisements ran by Signal on Instagram.



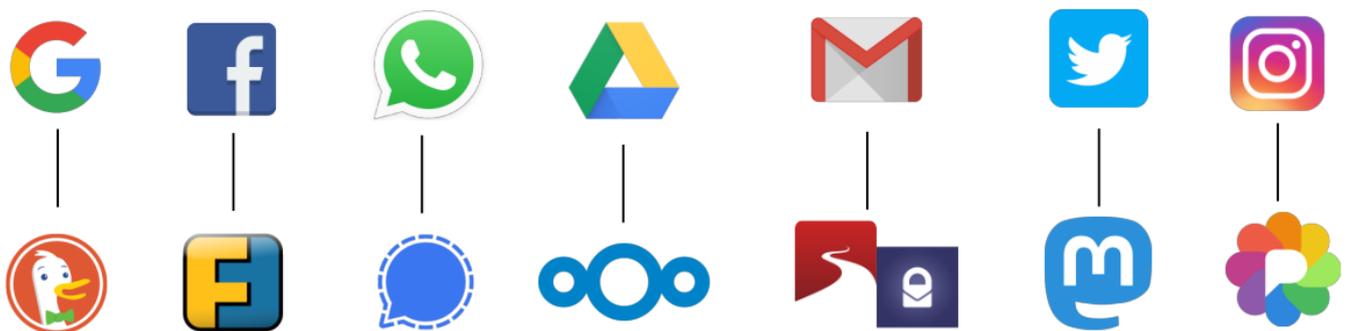
*Fig 3.2: Signal adverts on Instagram<sup>19</sup>*

Facebook disliked this idea and suspended Signal's Instagram account.

Companies like Facebook aren't building technology for you, they're building technology for your data. They collect everything they can from FB, Instagram, and WhatsApp in order to sell visibility into people and their lives.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.5.1 Alternatives to Use

Here is a list of free and open sourced alternatives to Big Tech technologies. These alternatives put you, the user in controls of their freedom, privacy, and data.



*Fig 3.3: Ethical social media alternatives.*

In my opinion, email, search engine, browser and private messenger and four major areas of our lives which we need to take back in control from the Big Tech.

Instead of using Gmail or Outlook, we should use ProtonMail or Tutanota, which are promotes online privacy and does not collect our data. Instead of WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger, we should use Signal Private Messenger or XMPP or Matrix. Firefox is a great alternative to Chrome, which is owned by Google. And finally, instead of Google as our search engine, we should use a private alternative like DuckDuckGo or Qwant.

### 3.5.2 Combating Fake News and Misinformation

Firstly, we need to understand that we are humans, are as humans we are bound to fall for fake news and share it with others without even thinking about it.

Not everything is bad about the technologies we use, fortunately we also have websites with help use know the credibility of a news source. One can easily use these options to extinguish the fake news wildfire. Hoaxly is a software which provide technological assistance for teaching people to be data literate consumers. It can fact-check a particular news article which the user is reading and inform the user if the article is questionable or manipulative.<sup>21</sup> There is another similar initiative called NewGuard. They are combating fake news and misinformation for the last several years, and they have been rating news sites if they meet their stands of professional journalism.<sup>22</sup> And lastly, use common sense to fight fake news and misinformation. Read before you share, fact check yourself before you comment or like.

### 3.5.3 Social But Ethical

Mainstream social media platforms are heavily algorithmised. Algorithms built into these social media platforms decide what you see and what you not. And if you remember, these companies what used to spend more time on their social media platform. The more eyeballs they will have for a longer period of time, the more money they will make out of us.

The main purpose of these algorithms are to keep us hooked on their platforms. What do you see when you log in? I have a Twitter account, and let me tell you about the type of tweets I see when I log in to my account. In my public feed, I see tweets from the people I follow, tweets liked by the people I follow, the tweets retweeted by the people I follow, and apart from all this, I also see promoted tweets, tweets based on my likes, tweets based on my retweets, tweets based on my interests. The algorithm is continuously working, trying to guess which tweets will make me spend more time on their platform.

Be it Facebook, LinkedIn, or Instagram, all mainstream social media platforms work like this. Are there any alternatives? Yes, there are many alternatives, one of them is call Mastodon.

Mastodon is a decentralised, open sourced, ethical and algorithm free social media platform. There is no one big company controlling or running Mastodon, anyone can set up their Mastodon server. Mastodon is not one big social media platform like Twitter or Facebook, it is a collection of small servers called 'instances', which are managed, funded, and controlled by the people. Anyone can participate by creating their instance, and they can have their own rules for that instance, or they can simply join an existing instance.

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