Why I Will Never Join Facebook

Holding a PhD in computer science makes one undoubtedly techy. It is thus difficult to explain to people why I do not have a Facebook account. From my perspective, it is scary to see how much of a person's life is now available online, and how often people volunteer to profile themselves, unconsciously establishing an inerasable trail of data that can identify them ever after.

By Dima Damen

"You can see it on Facebook," a friend said when I asked for the photo of her newborn as I called to extend my congratulations. I felt somehow ashamed. How could I tell her that I do not have a Facebook account, or worse, that I had made a conscious, determined decision to avoid this web of knowledge often referred to as the "social network"?

Eighty-five years ago, the Hungarian writer Frigyes Karinthy wrote a short story, which he entitled "Chains." In his story, he hypothesised the "six degrees of separation" theory. The theory states that any two individuals around the world can be connected via a chain of acquaintances that has no more than five intermediary individuals. In other words, every individual around this world, including your worst enemy, is in fact your friend's friend's friends' friend's friend's friend!
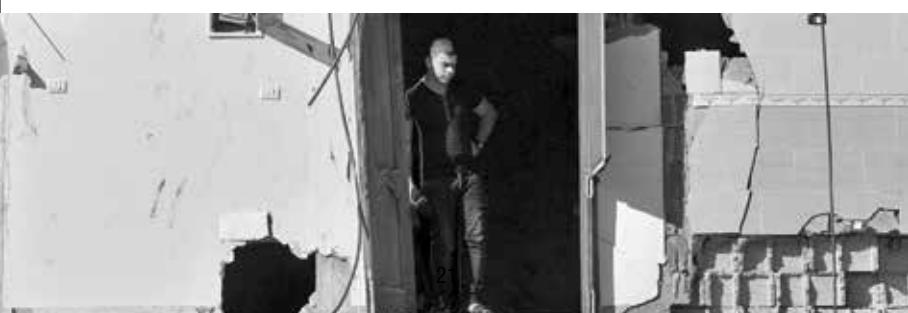
Forty-seven years ago, Stanley Milgram, an American sociologist devised an experiment to test Karinthy's weird hypothesis. In the experiment, he randomly selected citizens in the United States, and gave them a package to be delivered to a random stranger. The instructions each received required them to forward the package to someone they knew, who they believed would be the most likely candidate to know the target stranger. To Milgram's – and the world's – surprise, it took an average of 5 to 7 trips for the package to be delivered!

Today the social network sites are proof of how closely connected we are. This seems like a tremendous technical achievement. While that is conceptually correct, in reality this information is not freely available for anyone to query. This precious information is only accessible to certain companies that sell the information for marketing and, more crucially, intelligence purposes. One can imagine how an interested intelligence agency could inject individuals into the right locations within the chains network in order to ensure that they gain access to any individual in the world whom they would wish to befriend.

My discipline has taught me the power of data and algorithms. It was thus a very obvious decision for me to abandon joining most social media sites – particularly Facebook, which openly states extremely scary policies related to the ownership of the data, the ability to keep personal data beyond deletion dates, and the sharing of data with several intelligence agencies in the developed world. While most people in this world follow John Lennon's words: "Living is easy with eyes closed," I simply cannot.

To my amazement, the power of social media has been recently extended beyond even our wildest dreams. One month ago, a study conducted at the University of Cambridge, in

STILL STANDING!
ALL WITH GAZA

collaboration with Microsoft Research, revealed how you can discover a person simply by looking at the pages or topics that individuals have "liked" on their Facebook profile. For example, this method is 88 percent accurate in predicting a person's gender from his/her Facebook likes. Of these findings, some links seem implausible and fairly random at first sight. The one most referenced in the media is the link between high IQ and liking "curly fries." (Yes, yes, you read correctly, in case you were wondering whether your eyesight has deteriorated while reading this article.) Apparently liking curly fries is quite a strong indicator of a person's high IQ, and it can be trusted. You might argue that such research is bogus or irrelevant to our daily living since we are unable to imagine its usefulness or usability. For data miners, however, this is a rich resource, and so it is for people who are keen on tracing your thoughts and interests despite your utmost care in keeping your private data off the evil web of knowledge. With powerful models, even your smallest step in the world of social media can reveal information about yourself or your beliefs that you might believe are untraceable.

Soon enough, machines will be able to conclude patterns about us beyond our wildest dreams, and those who have access to the raw data and are capable of employing developed algorithms will have an ability to conclude and monitor our daily lives in ways we cannot even envisage at the moment. It would be naive to doubt that their next step would extend beyond monitoring to manipulating, hinting, and linking in ways that satisfy their personal and ideological goals.

It might be worth mentioning that the author of this article is not anti-technology. Tech is my profession, passion, and daily living. It is important to separate the technology from its usage, however. Social media has undoubtedly achieved the objectives of its creators. Alas, despite your opinion about this piece, there is no turning back for you. You, just like everyone else, are trapped.

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