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BIG-DATA PLATFORMS & TOOLS

Want to Move Off the Big Data Information Grid?

Robert Plant, Associate Professor, School of Business Administration, University of Miami
5/8/2013
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State-run big data projects are in the news. CISPA and the IRS are trying to monitor our personal data and build big data solutions at the national level. The FBI, MI6, Mossad, and the Russian SVR, among other intelligence agencies, exchange information with one another through technology services such as the NSA and GCHQ.

Cleaning your bread crumbs
Each of us leaves a trail of data bread crumbs everywhere we go. These crumbs collectively map our life, but this is in many ways unavoidable. Technology allows us to accommodate modern life in an easy and effective manner. However, this raises a question: Is it possible to go off the grid completely? Can we actually become Brill Lyle, Gene Hackman's character in *Enemy of the State*, and live without an electronic data trail?

You would have had to have thought of this a long time ago -- probably as far back as the deregulation of the web itself in 1995. Most of us have a whole series of accounts and data trails. We use credit cards for everything. We pay our bills electronically. We hardly carry cash, and we text, talk, tweet, and transmit seemingly our every thought to anyone who is willing to listen. Adding data to the world is far simpler than removing it. Data is like tattoos -- even when we have them removed, there are residuals.

Clearly, other than living in a cabin in the Montana woods, Ted Kaczynski style, using only cash and not filing federal taxes, the ability to live off the web completely is a challenge. But there are steps that can take you partially out of the big data world -- perhaps not all the way, but enough to cut down on your exposure.

How to disappear
First, find out what's out there. Start by getting a credit report. This will show who is keeping track of you financially. Delete all the credit and charge cards you don't use. Even nonuse is data.

Then run background checks on yourself. Databases such as intelius, Spokeo, LookupAnyone, myLife, PeekYou, peoplefinders, Pipl, and privateEye can capture and store public data about you. These data sets can be deleted or modified by following the instructions at each site. Commercial firms such as abine.com, deleteme.com, and Amskme.comare also offer this service .

Next, delete all your social network accounts. The biggest data sink for many of us is our addiction to Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Hopefully, we have been exercising self-control while sharing our life through these portals for the last few years. However, their public deletion does not mean that the data is gone.

Even if Facebook states "permanently deleted with no option for recovery," it does not state that the data is removed from its servers -- only that you won't be able to reactivate it. Twitter says it keeps your data for 30 days before it is permanently deleted. LinkedIn has a Data Request Policy that lets you have access to all the data associated with your account, including email addresses and messages, who linked you originally to join, profile pages, and IP records, including the dates a particular IP address was logged into for your account. It doesn't keep specific times or names of IP owners, nor does it keep past copies of your profile or deleted email addresses. Further, once a deletion has occurred, it takes 24 hours to leave the production environment and six months to be deleted by the overall system. Interestingly, Linked In says the US government made requests for data from only 49 of its accounts in 2013.

Don't forget to delete all those accounts from social networks you set up years ago but perhaps no longer frequent. Sites such as MySpace, FriendsRunited, and Badoo may not delete your data just because you have not been there in a while. Even Siri keeps your voice instructions for two years on the Apple servers. Those funny questions you asked at a bar one night (like "How to I make a Molotov cocktail?") could end up with the government if CISPA passes and Apple decides to do some data detection work on the government's behalf.

Google yourself -- or, rather, Dogpile yourself. Dogpile.com provides results from all the search engines. These results can then be systematically attacked for deletion. Perhaps you have an old CV on a corporate profile page, or maybe a picture of you from spring break of 1996 shows up on go.com or on AltaVista's search engine. Internet tattoos like these may still be online. The search engines can be asked to remove them, and when the information is sensitive (such your credit card or health record), these requests can be expedited.

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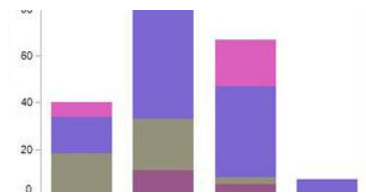
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However, just because something has been deleted does not mean it has been removed from the cache memory in every device on the planet. The data's half-life may be longer.

And just when you thought you were safe, it's unnerving to find that the Internet itself is archived. The Wayback Machine has archived 240 billion web pages dating as far back as 1996. However, it is very easy to have documents removed from this archive, which is a truly great source of data.

Even if you don't want to be Brill, you may want to leave less of a footprint in the big data world. The scarcity of your data could actually work in your favor. If companies start to pay people for data, and yours is not already out there, by definition its scarcity will make it more valuable. Who knows? Perhaps it could help you pay for that Montana cabin with no Internet connection.

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COMMENTS

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Mike Lata, User Rank: Blogger
5/28/2013 | 8:18:36 PM

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Re: Too late.
If you guys want to check out a very interesting sci-fi piece that sounds very plausable read this about Skynet:

http://www.goingfaster.com/term2029/skynet.html

"It wasn't a fair universe, nor a kind one. If there was a God, his love and forty-five cents would buy you coffee. No one seemed to be at the cosmic controls anymore. It was every man for himself, until SKYNET became alive and filled the void left by a seemingly disinterested God. Its vision was very controlled. The ultimate dream of man, carried out by one of man's lowliest tools; eliminate evil men. But there was a touch of evil in all men, and SKYNET was having trouble separating the worst of them out. So the totality of humanity, with all of its biologic messiness, wasn't wanted. And to this machine-god, forgiveness just did not compute. Only cold retribution for the sins of the past."

Also this is very interesting because it shows how AI might come about similar to the sci-fi concept of Skynet:

http://io9.com/how-skynet-might-emerge-from-simple-physics-482402911

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Daniel Gutierrez, User Rank: Blogger
5/14/2013 | 12:53:43 PM

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Re: Too late.
@Saul, Gibson's concept of cyberspace, or what others call the "Matrix" is slowly creeping into present-day human society, see Google Glass. [but I don't know if any sci-fi-becomes-reality would prepare anyone for Vegas!]

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AlphaEdge, User Rank: Exabyte Executive
5/14/2013 | 9:48:05 AM

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Re: Too late.
I think it is going to be difficult to be removed from the big data information grid. What shall we do with the privacy of the personal data? It sounds like dangerous!

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Saul Sherry, User Rank: Blogger
5/14/2013 | 9:09:38 AM

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Re: Too late.
'Mirror World' makes me think of William Gibson - who uses it to refer to the transatlatic trip, so an American ends up in the UK feeling very bizzare as they end up in a world almost but not quite the same (and vice versa, as I discovered first hand in Vegas last week!)

In terms of data collection, we're certainly in a fragmented mirror world, but there are big slices of data not yet captures... how far away are we from an implant which measures the calories we stick in our mouth?

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Saul Sherry, User Rank: Blogger
5/14/2013 | 9:05:39 AM

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Re: Too late.
i'd say a deep dive on Bieber would be very interesting to record labels now, who might seek to recreate the conditions that led to this hysteria! You know, now that's he's so old and past his best.

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James M. Connolly, User Rank: Blogger
5/10/2013 | 4:02:33 PM

Re: A glass stream
All these steps (and the know how to execute those steps) to drop off the information grid? I've left enough breadcrumbs in my life to make it impossible to hide in plain sight. Of course, even if I did pick up all those crumbs it would be pretty hard to continue work as a web editor. Guess I might have to go for the cabin in the woods. Good thing I already have a sleeping bag and a sharp axe in the shed.

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Mike Lata, User Rank: Blogger
5/9/2013 | 6:35:16 PM

Re: A glass stream
Regarding the original topic, it is becoming harder and harder to disappear off the grid so to speak and become like Gene Hackman in Enemy of the State. I always found the movie ahead of its time and in a way it predicted (did film makers use predictive analysis?) the Patriot Act and other things to come. I think people who truly want to be anonymous online use services such as TOR and the Tails CD that anonymizes everything. But true anonymity takes a lot of discipline to not leave bread crumbs. It requires passwords with differnt characters for each username and other things. Info on Tails: http://tails.boum.org/. Security and anonymity are separate entities, however, and to be truly untraceable these individuals also need heavy enryptions with multiple drives using TrueCrypt for instance for those documents they need sfaeguarded. I have also heard there being distinctions between anonymity and privacy. You can be private but some companies still keep your proxy logs for instance so you are not truly anonymous in some cases. Supposedly there is this company that makes money off this ignorance called privacy.li that keeps logs, but claims it is secure and private offshore data hosting (like that matters when its srvers are in countries such as Hong Kong with very heavy tracking laws).

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Mike Lata, User Rank: Blogger
5/9/2013 | 6:27:39 PM

Re: A glass stream
I really think that the Glass could be moving agoogle in the direction of true big data with the ability to analyze so much about us on an almost-constant basis as long as we are wearing those glasses. It will be interesting how Google's ads will work on the glass and if we will be seeing targeted ads newr our eyes mirroring the businesses, for instance, we run across or the areas we are located geographically. It could really change targeted asvertising.

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Robert Plant, User Rank: Blogger
5/9/2013 | 12:09:56 PM

Re: A glass stream
Yes this has all kinds of opportunities, perhaps they could be used in a board meeting to see who is paying attention. A class to see if people are reading the powerpoints, or at a football game to see where to place adverts. Ethics and data use will be challenging on this topic I fear.

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Saul Sherry, User Rank: Blogger
5/9/2013 | 11:38:47 AM

A glass stream
Robert, this is something I was thinking about this morning. With the glasses ability to track eye movement, would this form a new massive data stream that google could sell back to companies looking to improve UI (could work in either the digital or physical realm).

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