

I realise that I do go on a bit about what I see as the dangers of Facebook, but, while acknowledging that fact, I don't apologise for it. This week I spotted something that is not directly Facebook's fault, but is a consequence of collecting all that personal data about people's lives, thoughts, beliefs, actions, and which is surely a gross misuse of that data. Here's a precis:



US colleges and even government departments are more-or-less forcing students and job applicants to open up the most private data in their Facebook accounts to prying, official, eyes. They do not need hacking techniques to get into the accounts on the quiet (although I'm sure such techniques exist and are available to any organisation that wants them enough). Instead, they just use bullying tactics – such as forcing a job applicant to open up their Facebook account in front of the interviewer, or making it a condition of application that a student “befriends” a snoop paid by the college to spy on students via their Facebook accounts.

If I ever try to have a conversation about online privacy to anyone under about 30 years old they just think I'm insane. They “don't get it”. They can't see why it's potentially a bad thing to trust your most personal secrets to websites over which you have no control. Well, surely no-one can be oblivious to the threat to personal liberty that's obvious in the tactics described here.

It's easy to say “that's in the USA, it wouldn't happen here”, but why wouldn't it? The way I see it is that the very fact that all this data exists constitutes a threat in itself. There are bound to be people out there keen to exploit the power that is latent in the data itself. I doubt very much that people on the receiving end of such bullying could plausibly deny that they have a Facebook account, so what are they to do?

One of the positions often taken by people who don't care about personal privacy online is to shrug their shoulders and say “I've got nothing to hide. I don't care what people see”. To my mind, that's an attitude taken by people who haven't thought it through. We all present different facets of ourselves to different people in different situations. Imagine a typical eighteen year old enjoying herself on an evening out with friends. She is doing nothing wrong, nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to “get found out about”. Nevertheless, would that eighteen year old feel comfortable if she thought that an authority figure such as a parent, teacher, employer, or policeman, could listen in to every word of every conversation, record it, replay it, analyse it? In effect, that's the kind of thing that's happening if people are being bullied or forced into opening their Facebook accounts to authority figures with no right to be there.

Most of my computer support clients are more likely to be the parents of such bullying

victims rather than the victims themselves, but maybe that makes this topic more - rather than less - relevant to you.

Update 23/05/2018:

The original link was to http://redtape.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2012/03/06/10585353-govt-agencies-colleges-demand-applicants-facebook-passwords, but the web page isn't there any more.

And remember what they say - just because you are paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you!

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