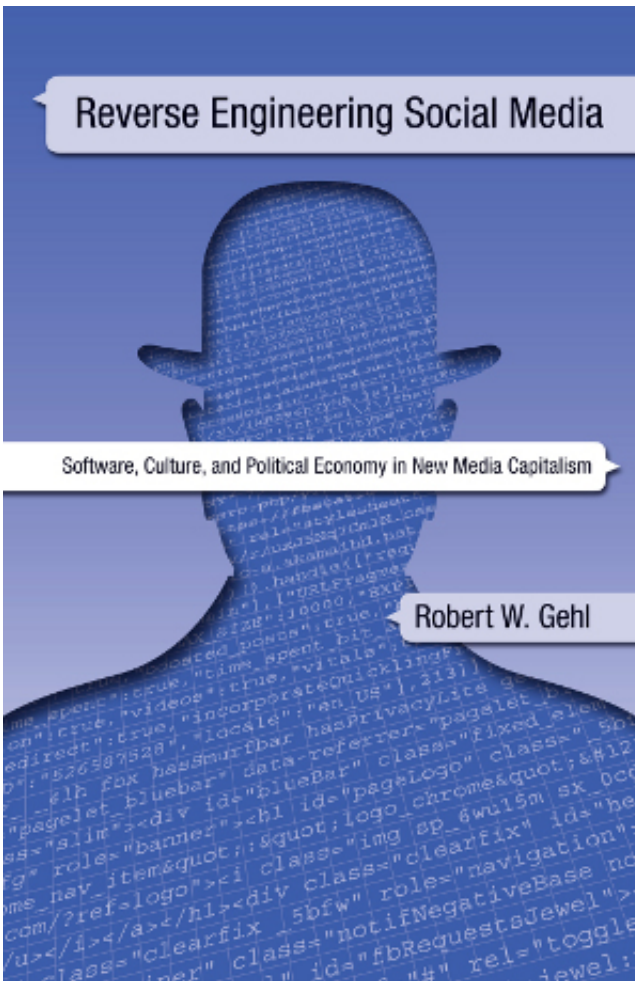


What do you do when Facebook is spying on you?

August 5 2014, by Robert W. Gehl



U communication professor explores mix of socializing and surveillance in his new book. Credit: courtesy Temple University Press

Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus and other social media were designed to connect friends. But they are also used to connect extremely complex marketing and surveillance systems, all meant to subtly shape online interactions.

Robert W. Gehl, an assistant professor of communication at the University of Utah, explores this mix of socializing and surveillance in his first book, "Reverse Engineering Social Media: Software, Culture and Political Economy in New Media Capitalism."

"Each like, tweet, +1 and comment we make is analyzed for clues about who we are, what we desire and what we fear," Gehl said. "Our attention is then sold to the highest bidders, usually in milliseconds, before the next Web page loads. Or worse, our [personal information](#) is surrendered to government agencies bent on monitoring our online activities."

A recent study, conducted by researchers at Facebook, Cornell University and University of California San Francisco, which involved manipulating users' emotions in Facebook, is only the most recent example of this surveillance and manipulation. Gehl suggests that Facebook could use this information about users' emotions to channel their attention to brands and marketing messages.

"Couple this with the revelations about National Security Agency spying, and it's a powerful and disturbing situation," Gehl adds. "We can imagine a whole host of powerful groups who have a vested interest in quelling dissent and keeping people's attention on buying things instead of agitating for political change."

In the book, Gehl describes the rise of socialbots— automated, software-controlled profiles in Twitter and Facebook that friend us, like us and retweet us, all while appearing to be human. Crude socialbots have already been deployed in Twitter by politicians in Russia, Mexico and

the U.S. in order to drown out dissent and give the appearance of mass support of a leader or political program.

"Socialbots aren't possible without a lot of 'datafication' of our online interactions," Gehl said. "If we provide enough personal information via [social media](#), that information can return to us in the form of 'bots' that appear human but are programmed to keep our attention on certain topics and not others."

The book concludes by asking, "What do we do when Facebook, Twitter and Google are spying on us?"

"Support the alternatives," Gehl answers. "There are a host of activists who are 'reverse engineering' social media by coming up with systems that can provide what we value— online social interaction and debate—without all the surveillance and emotional manipulation."

The book surveys alternative social media, search and connection systems, including Diaspora, Yacy and Tor, all of which can help bring social networking and Internet communication under our control.

"We don't have to use Facebook," he said. "Look what happened to Myspace. If we decide to leave, these systems fail. Given the near-daily news about the extent of surveillance and social manipulation happening in mainstream social media, moving on to better alternatives might be our best bet."

"Reverse Engineering Social Media: Software, Culture and Political Economy in New Media Capitalism" was released by Temple University Press on June 27, 2014.

Provided by University of Utah

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