

Since when was your privacy a commodity?

December 3 2015, by David Bradley

Have we sold out on our privacy to big data? That's the question addressed in the *International Journal of Society Systems Science* where researchers identify a gap in big data research. They suggest that while privacy has been extensively explored in many disparate different settings, it has not been studied sufficiently in the context of the social and technological changes that have accompanied the advent of the big data era.

Vincent Charles of CENTRUM Católica Graduate Business School, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Lima, Peru, Madjid Tavana of La Salle University, Philadelphia, USA and the University of Paderborn, Germany, and Tatiana Gherman of School of Business and Economics, Loughborough University, UK, explain how the potential of big data has in many instances exceeded the expectations of its proponents and the organizations making use of it. However, they say, despite its vast importance and application, some important aspects of big data remain the subject of debate, the [privacy](#) of personal information being one critical example.

Big data expands the opportunities of making better decisions at the strategic, tactical, and operational level by allowing raw data to be transformed into meaningful information useful at all levels of the organization. Commonly, web browsing habits and demographics provide such [raw data](#), which is useful to those buying advertising space on web sites. But, big data offers much more than that; its real potential comes from spotting patterns of behaviour and allowing predictive models to be developed from those patterns, something that is simply not

possible with conventional surveys and data gathering from smaller samples.

Although to begin with using big data was a challenge, the collection, storage, and processing of such a large amount of data can now be managed relatively easily. "The real challenge facing companies is how to interpret the data and how it can be used to obtain the most economic and social value so that it can be turned into a competitive advantage for the company," the team reports. At the moment, most companies lack the skills to develop useful [predictive models](#), so that they simply collect massive amounts of user data with a "just in case we need it" attitude. However, the team says, "Without human interpretation, judgment, involvement, commitment, common sense and ethical values, big data is both meaningless and worthless."

Worthless or not, huge quantities of personal, private behavioural data are being gathered constantly. Privacy is a difficult concept to define, especially in the face of just how liberal we are with much of our personal data, photos, innermost thoughts and such on social networking and social media sites. Moreover, given the complexity of the terms of service of so much of the digital technology we use today from the smart phones and tablet PCs that run the apps and display the websites, it is difficult to know for sure whether hundreds of millions of people have essentially given up any right to privacy they thought they might have. They may well have handed a free rein to the organizations they rely on for sharing their photos, their thoughts, gossip, and news, to use the [big data](#) that is accumulating on countless servers around the world in any way they see fit without the users having any recourse to know what information is being held on them nor how it is being manipulated and exploited.

"It is believed that this tension between the individuals' interest to protect their own privacy and the companies' interest to exploit [personal](#)

[information](#) could be resolved by means of empowerment, which is, giving people more control," the researchers explain. But, we may well have gone way beyond the point of no return in that regard. "Society has changed tremendously over the past few years and we are now witnessing the mutation of the very definitions and meanings of traditional concepts, such as privacy," the team adds. Our data is now traded like a commodity and our privacy with it. Nevertheless, the researchers assert that we do still have rights: "It is our belief that in a democratic capitalist society it is right and also necessary that individuals fight by all means to have their right to privacy respected. Even the case of willing disclosure does not give a third party a moral right to own it and make use of it," they say.

More information: The Right To Be Forgotten – Is Privacy Sold Out in the Big Data Age?

www.researchgate.net/publication/260111111_The_Right_To_Be_Forgotten_-_Is_Privacy_Sold_Out_in_the_Big_Data_Age

Provided by Inderscience Publishers

Citation: Since when was your privacy a commodity? (2015, December 3) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-12-privacy-commodity.html>

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