

Inquiring Minds topic – 27 July 2018

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How Facebook tracks your every move: Fact vs. fiction

From USA Today

Questions:

1. Are we or are we not being manipulated?
2. What about other social media? What have you discovered?
3. How are you overcoming this problem?
4. Are you revealing your political/social views? If so, are you opening yourself up to receiving news or information that supports only those views?
5. How does this compare with brainwashing?

I carry my phone everywhere I go, and the last thing I need is an app such as Facebook listening in on my private conversations. But is that really what's going on? In the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal— which compromised the personal info of up to 87 million people on Facebook — there's a whole heap of confusion.

Does Facebook actively spy on you? Is it reading private messages and texts? Does the app track your phone calls and location? CEO Mark Zuckerberg has been grilled by lawmakers on many of these questions. But you may have more.

Let's take a look at how Facebook tracks you — what's true, what's not — and what you can do about it.

True or false: Facebook spies via your phone's mic

In settings, you can toggle off the microphone for Facebook.

FALSE: The other day I was talking about prom dress shopping with my daughter. The next time I checked Facebook, ads for frilly dresses showed up everywhere. Has this happened to you? You're talking about a random product or company, and then see an ad for that exact same thing? It feels spooky for sure. But, according to Facebook — the fear of 24/7 microphone spying — is all in your head.

“Facebook does not use your phone's microphone to inform ads or to change what you see in News Feed,” Facebook spokesperson Joe Osborne said via email. “We don't show ads based on what you're talking about out loud.”

Facebook does, however, request access to your microphone — for posting videos or making calls using Facebook Messenger. If you don't use either of those features, it's easy to keep it turned off through Facebook settings on your mobile device.

True or false? Facebook tracks your location

You can turn off location tracking on Facebook via settings.

TRUE: Facebook tracks your location for several reasons, including so that you can “check-in” to certain places, letting your friends and family know where you are or where you've been. Facebook also uses your location to serve up ads.

Facebook says people grant apps access to know your location when you sign up for them, and they can use this information to show locally relevant content or ads. You can control this.

True or false? Facebook sells your data to advertisers

FALSE: Facebook makes the vast bulk of its money from ads, and by default, it uses your profile information — such as your interests, age, location, pages you've followed — to show you ads it thinks you'll respond to and hopefully click on. Advertisers don't get your specific personal information from the network, however, and Facebook has stressed that distinction.

“There is a very common misconception that we sell data to advertisers, and we do not sell data to advertisers,” Zuckerberg told Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, during his testimony last week. “What we allow is for advertisers to tell us who they want to reach, and then we do the placement.”

But the uproar over the Cambridge Analytica revelations has forced it to make changes to how advertisers use Facebook, giving a window into how this ad-targeting worked. In late March, Facebook said it would end an arrangement that had allowed advertisers to target Facebook users with information gleaned from third-party data brokers, such as their offline purchases or public records. Advertisers can still upload information they already have to aim ads at people on Facebook.

True or false? Facebook reads your text messages and listens to your calls

FALSE: Facebook's mobile app has a feature that lets you sync your texts and calls with Facebook Messenger. This is an opt-in feature, meaning you have to specifically give Facebook permission to do it, and it is only available on Android phones. If you have Facebook Messenger on an iPhone, you can still choose to sync your phone's contact list with the app, but not calls and texts.

Facebook says it offers call-syncing so you can more easily find your friends and family on Messenger by pushing frequent callers to the top of your contact list. The fact that it tracks your call and text history is part of this functionality, but Facebook says it doesn't actually listen to calls or read the content of any text messages you send. It does however, note the date, time, and who you were talking or texting with. And it automatically scans links and attached photos for malware and child sexual abuse.

In early April, Facebook said it plans to delete all logs older than a year and reduce the kind of information it takes from customers to offer this feature.

You can easily purge all of this information — even if you’ve already agreed to it. Under the Settings of the Messenger app, turn off “Continuous call and SMS Matching,” and Facebook says it will delete all previously stored data. You can also empty out your call logs and contacts on the Web using Facebook’s contact and call logs page.

True or false? Facebook can follow your every move on the Web

You can change how Facebook tracks your web browsing habits.

TRUE: Facebook’s ad business depends on it knowing as much about your likes and dislikes as possible, and it gets some of its information from other websites you visit. A feature called Facebook Pixel can snoop on your Web browsing habits even when you’re not on Facebook, and it uses the data it gathers to paint a more accurate picture of who you are.

The good news is that you can control whether Facebook uses the data it gathers to target you with specific ads.

An additional option is to use an extension on your computer’s browser, such as Ghostery or the Firefox Facebook Container. Ghostery lets you see — and disable — trackers running on webpages, while Facebook Container walls-off the app from the rest of your online browsing.

True or false? Facebook can track what you buy when you’re offline

TRUE: Facebook helps advertisers track what it calls “offline conversions,” which is an in-store purchase. It’s not nearly as easy to track these kinds of purchases than those you make right from a Web browser, but by partnering with payment providers such as Square, call center groups and retailer loyalty programs, Facebook can show advertisers whether their ads are working on the right people.

There’s no easy fix for this, but you can take some steps to keep your brick-and-mortar purchases somewhat private. For example, keep your loyalty cards at arm’s length, using an email address and sign-up information that isn’t associated with your Facebook account. Avoid digital receipts when possible, as that’s yet another way for a retailer to get your email address and make the connection. Doing this will keep data-gathering companies from connecting the dots between your store purchases and your Facebook persona.