

Consent is crucial

Data and data science have suddenly emerged into the spotlight. First, there was a data breach at Facebook, which saw allegations of the U.K.-based Cambridge Analytica (CA) illegally accessing over 87 million users' information for personalisation of digital campaigns. Then there were allegations that the official mobile apps of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Congress party had sent user data without consent to foreign companies for analytical purposes.

Data on 'up to 87 million' Facebook users shared with U.K. firm

The rapid rise of data science can be attributed to the voluminous amount of information that is being generated with every activity of ours in this digital age — IBM says that 90% of the world's data has been generated just in the last two years — and the strides concurrently made in the world of mathematical modelling, computation, and Artificial Intelligence-powered algorithms. These trends are creating unprecedented, far-reaching possibilities built on our growing capability to analyse vast quantities of the most complex of data in real time, and helping us get insights that can assist us in taking best-informed decisions across sectors.

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Data science generally tends to produce win-win scenarios for the practising organisations and their end users. For example, its application in election processes can make it possible for various political parties to understand their voters better, and to reach out to them more effectively. The insights derived after analysing feedback from the electorate can be used while creating manifestos, formulating policies, and selecting candidates — steps that can essentially usher in a more transparent and participatory democracy.

Nevertheless, there are growing fears that applications of data science, along with large social media platforms with hundreds of millions of active users, could unduly subvert our democratic processes, and turn our elections into mere marketing campaigns. However, it should not be forgotten that similar fears in lesser degrees existed across time, while our mass communication technologies evolved from the print, to the radio, and then the television medium. Data-driven social media and digital platforms should be seen as yet another stage in this evolution.

If data is the new oil, how much does an Indian citizen lose?

Facebook and CA find themselves in the dock, not for putting in action any of the applications of data science, but for illegally doing so. While major Indian political parties continue their mud-slinging over the hiring of CA, and oversharing their app data with third party analytical firms based overseas, the more pertinent deliberation should be if any of their activities related to data handling, from collection and storage to sharing and transfer, were done illegally, without the consent of the users. That would be a serious breach of trust, compromising the privacy of citizens. These events also call for the expedited creation of strong data privacy and protection laws, without which our newest fundamental right will remain easily exploitable words on paper.

The writer is the Executive Director of Cyber India, and the Vice President of Navoathan Foundation

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