

Questions beyond Facebook

“By entering these premises you are agreeing to be photographed and video recorded,” read a signboard at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington DC that several thousand crossed this weekend to view the annual USA Science & Engineering Festival Expo. Hardly anyone noticed that, pretty much the way we all signed up for our Facebook accounts. In slices of the future that were on showcase inside were micro-sensors on the body that would capture health parameters around the clock, nano robots that could swim through the bloodstream and talk with robotic doctors, and airport cameras which could scan passengers to see if they were carrying some diseases into the country. “You will be called the Mars generation,” a NASA scientist told excited children, and horrified parents, at one of the presentations. Facebook, if it continues to rely only on people’s proactive exhibitionism for its data and business, might face the fate of floppy disks, as these children grow up.

What the age of acceleration has done to its defining icon, the 33-year-old Mark Zuckerberg, and one of the richest persons on the planet, is a stark illustration of its cruelty. Mr. Zuckerberg will be appearing before two U.S. Congressional committees this week as an accused struggling to defend his actions and honour, a far cry from being the liberal hero that he was around this time last year. Then he, and other leaders of the tech industry in Seattle and Silicon Valley, had taken public positions against President Donald Trump’s anti-immigration policies.

Give me another chance: Zuckerberg on leading Facebook

The specific details of Facebook’s arrangement with Cambridge Analytica, the British political consulting firm that mined data from the social media platform for the Trump presidential campaign for 2016, revolves around the breach of the terms of usage between the two. The fundamental principle that Facebook can and will share data is not under any serious examination at the moment. Most business models of the emergent, technology-driven future are based on the presumed ability to harvest, analyse and sell data. American lawmakers will come up with some sharp indictment of Mr. Zuckerberg, but there is limited reflection on the structural changes in the country’s economic and political system.

According to futurist Raymond Kurzweil, what is unprecedented about the current advancement of technology is the pace at which it is enhancing human capabilities. A rocket enhances our ability to travel, more than the plane, which was more than the car, which was more than walking. Similarly, our ability to see, think, respond, talk... From that perspective, Facebook is an enhanced town square, or our village *chai* shop where people declared their political and social preferences and prejudices quite openly. Those utterances have never been private, but Facebook has allowed individuals to expand their reach beyond all geographical limitations. Politicians, who responded to tea shop rants and town square graffiti, began to respond to social media chatter using the same medium. Mitt Romney and Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi, all used this.

At various points romanticists dreamed that such openness of people’s views would not only help the rise of the first African American president but also spread democracy in West Asia and break up Chinese communism in a global digital insurgency. Facebook, far from being the cocoon of privacy, was designed to be the ultimate town square for the democrats, and a paradise for the exhibitionist.

Facebook revamps privacy policy on the heels of data breach scandal

A combination of computing power and the widespread availability of data takes this extension of

human activities to a level of efficiency humanly impossible. We can ask 10 friends and find out what is the best Chinese restaurant nearby, but Grubhub has it ready on phone. It can predict what you might want to order next; Uber could alert you a day before a travel date that you might want a ride to the airport; Airbnb reminds you to book a place to stay once you have booked a ticket. When you buy a painkiller, sellers of other painkillers would send you advertisements comparing theirs with what you bought. If you buy honey from Costco, Twitter tells you about the benefits of going organic with honey.

Nobody can beat Amazon in the game, because that is really where you put your money. Amazon, Google, Microsoft and numerous other companies hold data that Facebook cannot even dream of. Most of the things that Facebook knows about us are information that we have proactively shared; but the overall ecosystem of targeted advertisements online follows the digital trail that we leave behind every moment, most of it unwittingly but a large part of it unavoidably. For instance, as long as you are carrying a mobile phone, your location is not private.

This efficiency can be deeply unsettling for the life that we are used to. In 2012, an American teenager began receiving coupons for baby products from the supermarket Target. The outraged father of the teenager rushed to the local Target outlet, where the manager apologised to him. But as it turned out, the data analytics of Target that mapped the sale of 25 products to assign a pregnancy score to individual customers knew better than the father. The girl was pregnant and the Target algorithm guessed it right. In *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Yuval Noah Harari argues that voting in elections is something that algorithms will do more efficiently than humans. Humans are easily swayed by campaign jingles, slogans and emotions in the last moment, but a software that tracks our emotions, interests and preferences over a longer period of time could take a more rational decision on who to vote.

While private companies are interested in gathering data for optimised marketing and product strategies, the state is interested in collecting data from citizens directly and by claiming control over data collected by private entities. The state has primarily two purposes, of planning and security. From traffic management to disease control, and urban planning to population management, aggregated private data could be of immense value in public planning. In a widely reported case from 2016, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) invoked an 18th century law to force Apple to break the encryption in a phone used by a shooter. Apple refused. The judicial dispute ended with the FBI withdrawing its demand after it broke into the phone with the help of a third party, but the underlying question remains unresolved. James Comey, former director of the FBI, had repeatedly called for resetting the privacy-security balance, which he believed is tilted too far in favour of privacy.

Issues involved in managing metadata are a subset of the issues created by the underlying technological disruption, but the debates often custom target our outrage at the company or the CEO in the dock at the particular moment. Examining the structural transformation of capitalism, which essentially is its unprecedented acceleration aided by technology, and its impact on democracy, would be more meaningful.

varghese.g@thehindu.co.in

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