

Losing face

If you're not paying for a product, then you are the product. This old jungle saying predates the internet, but became an everyday reality with the arrival of free digital services — first email, and then social media and online storage. If you don't pay in cash, you are paying with yourself. The provider tracks your behaviour online, analyses your data and monetises the results. In that light, the collapse of the web of trust in which we are all enmeshed — all, including Cambridge Analytica, which went rogue, [Facebook](#), whose data it put to political use, Donald Trump and Ravi Shankar Prasad, who benefited politically and has been politically affected, respectively — was a crisis waiting to happen for over a decade.

This period saw the rise of Big Data analytics, artificial intelligence and social media, which crosslinks content, community and messaging. With convergence, this has an effect across media. Data is flowing and being analysed and leveraged in unprecedented ways, and it is impossible for the average user to understand the implications of the terms of service agreements which must be signed before a new app can be used. Users just scroll down and tick the right box, consenting to the monetisation of their data.

Perhaps it will be used to serve advertising more efficiently, or perhaps to persuade swing voters in the US and India. Service providers like Facebook must face criticism for imposing contractual documents of staggering complexity on retail users. When the scandal broke, Facebook took shelter in the legalistic argument that users had signed up with the third party app provider who siphoned off their data and sold it to a fourth party, Cambridge Analytica. It is unlikely that they would have signed obediently if they understood that they were consenting to the use of their data, and that of their friends, for purposes unknown. The app was only a quiz. If only they had known, they would have answered, "no".

Now that they know better, Facebook users are angrily pulling the plug to signal their displeasure. Lawmakers — including our own — are spluttering helplessly and threatening the worst. But some persuasive voices prefer to see this as the moment to initiate reform in information technology. The fastest-developing industry — with the possible exception of biotechnology — is regulated by nothing except the forces and rules of the market. The first step towards reform could be the simplification of terms of service, to make them human-readable. India offers a parallel in the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), which is simplifying communications with investors. Instead of presenting IT as the inscrutable demon, empowering users to understand what they sign up for would help ensure that they do not inadvertently become the product.

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