
It's time to claim ownership of our digital lives

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OPINION: Either we start changing the model or we stop playing.

Kurt Cobain, former lead singer of Nirvana, famously sang “Just because you're paranoid don't mean they aren't after you.” And ‘after you’ seems to be exactly what they are. I am referring to the tech-giants who are collecting, analysing and peddling user data, controlling the information super highways, and harvesting, bundling, and selling it off to advertisers. Their prime asset is information – our attention.

Back in 1971, Nobel Prize Laureate in economics, Herbert Simon, prophetically noted this about the information age that was yet to come:

“...in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients.”

Presumably there has always only been 24 hours in the day, and attention has always been a limited resource, but we live in a time where information is available in an abundance never seen before.

Information and data in such large quantities, volumes, magnitudes and attention in such short supply makes for an environment prone to speculation. Speculation as to what sort of information users are willing to spend their time on, and what the collected data may be used for in terms “enhanced customer experience,” [surveillance marketing](#) [7], and possibly behavioral modification of users to suit whatever agenda the customers are paying for.

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We must all realise that the business model of social media is to make the users the products, to keep us plugged in, and sell our attention to the advertisers who are the real clients.

Just like Robert De Niro says in the movie Casino:

“In the casino, the cardinal rule is to keep them playing and to keep them coming back. The longer they play, the more they lose, and in the end, we get it all.”

And as the data-mining company Cambridge Analytica just seems to have [demonstrated](#) [9]– to achieve this, you may use every trick in the book – the dirty ones too apparently.

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Time to renegotiate the price of digital citizenship

About one third of the world's population uses Facebook (approx. [2.1 billion people](#) [11] in December 2017), making them products on the shelves of the biggest store in the world.

But Facebook doesn't seem to be taking particularly good care of their products—selling them off to a third party without checking much as to how they will be used, selling airtime to parties interested in rigging elections, causing democratic havoc, and [so the list goes on](#) [12].

Perhaps it is about time for the users to claim ownership of their data, to take back their digital authority and renegotiate the conditions of their digital citizenship on social media.

And where to start? Well, laws are being put in place, for instance in the EU as the [amendment to the General Data Protection Regulation](#) [13]. Starting in May 2018, this intends to offer protection to the users of social media, and not the social media companies themselves.

And one more thing: As long as you are like the player in the Casino, you'll lose in the end the way things are now.

Either we start changing the model or we stop playing – and no, this is not being paranoid.

[Read this article in Danish at ForskerZonen, part of Videnskab.dk](#) [14]

 [It is about time users claimed ownership of their data, take back their digital authority, and renegotiate the conditions of their digital citizenship on social media, argues Vincent Hendriks, University of Copenhagen. \(Photo: Shutterstock\)](#) [15]

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