The internet has an inconceivable amount of data and media available from your home, at all hours of the day. Aside from broadband fees and certain pay per view options this service is completely free. Andrew Lewis once said “if you’re not paying for something, you’re not the customer; you’re the product being sold”. This quote is very apt in terms of modernity and its commodities.

Recently when logging onto certain websites users will have been confronted with a statement regarding cookies used on the site, here is Channel Fours, “Like most websites Channel 4 uses cookies. In order to deliver a personalised, responsive service and to improve the site, we remember and store information about how you use it. This is done using simple text files called cookies which sit on your computer. These cookies are completely safe and secure and will never contain any sensitive information. They are used only by Channel 4 or the trusted partners we work with”. Most users would simply dismiss this message by clicking yes to the terms and conditions and proceeding with what they were doing, but what are these ‘cookies’ and why do websites and their ‘trusted partners’ need them?

Firstly it is important to identify what exactly a cookie is. An internet cookie is piece of text that a website can use to store information about a user on their hard drive, these information stores are usually assigned id numbers that correlate to the user’s hard drive. Cookies allow this data to be accessed at any time (Brain 2000). Within the terms and conditions associated with accepting the use of cookies, the user accepts the use of other forms of cookies such as flash cookies and beacons. Flash cookies can be used to reinstall cookies that you may have previously deleted. Beacons much like cookies track a user’s actions within the website, but these are more adaptable and can easy be used to log any text that a user types on the website, for example passwords or email addresses. It is important to state that although these cookies can be used for such matters. In the most cases they are not. For example flash cookies are mainly used for preferences within online video media, like tracking what setting you usually have the volume at, or what type of adverts you would prefer to see (Tene & Polonetsky 2012).
Mostly though these websites do not ask for agreement to terms and condition regarding their cookie policy and this can be deceiving. By simply using a website then you are agreeing to be put under surveillance from their technology. This has been identified by the internet browser Mozilla Firefox as an invasion of privacy and has developed a tool to track the trackers; ‘Collusion’ a Firefox add-on allows a user to see what companies are tracking their activities on the internet through cookies installed on their hard drives. The results are nothing short of shocking. Here is my graph from 25 minutes of normal internet surfing.

Although this looks very confusing, it is in fact extremely simple. The logos with blue halos are websites that I have visited (Facebook, online dictionary, photobucket, msn). All these websites I have not agreed to a cookies agreement, but this does not mean that they do not use them. The white circles indicate companies that have paid for data that has been collected on me through cookies within the website. As stated earlier not all these cookies are bad, but some seem to be very out of place. For example I logged onto dictionary.reference.com, this website is used by thousands on a daily basis and clearly this has been noted by companies wanted to buy data, collusion identified fifteen cookies that were being used to collect data and therefore fifteen companies that were buying and using the data I enter on this website, companies including FlickR, online dating sites and other marketing companies.

These companies use the data that has been collected to personally advertise towards someone’s desires or to collect information on what products are more likely to be consumed by a certain demographic, corporations in a bureaucratic sense are seeking predictability and control over its audience (Kovacs 2012). This Internet advertising market is valued at $31 billion a year (IAB internet advertising report 2011). Although this has been credited in the New York Times editor Josh Quittner, claiming that advertising is unavoidable and therefore the advertising we receive should be the best advertising for us (Quittner 1999), and come to think of it, me personally as a male, I cannot remember the last time I was advertised a bra. In turn this attitude has been critiqued by many writers on the grounds of the identity of the consumer.

This constant surveillance clearly has been highlighted before, one of the most profound writings in history George Orwell’s 1984 shed light on the subject with his all encompassing ‘telescreens’. This type of surveillance can be seen as a breach of human rights. In 1948 the UN declared that ‘no one shall be subject to arbitrary interference in his privacy, home or correspondence’ It is now believed though that all power is held by the ruling classes and the vulnerable and powerless are at a disadvantage to the forces that control society (Lyon 1994).

In the past surveillance critics focused on legal protections of data and privacy. These issues that have been previously raised are now more relevant on a broader scale, with the focus on issues regarding identity, ethics, education, politics and safety in a globalised setting. Internet based surveillance is put under much scrutiny (Lyon 1997). Internet cookies create profiles of users and their actions within the datasphere, this knowledge is specialized and is used to increase the power of modern corporations. This specialized knowledge spreads ever increasingly into
our private life, and is therefore used to classify society and therefore the corporations can use this knowledge to define what is ‘normal’ for a certain demographic, meaning that people are less autonomous and seen more as objects of a corporations imagination. Therefore our ideas of identity are unfounded and there begins a paradox of choice within social order (Schwartz 2005; Joyce 2010), Lyon refers to this as the ‘electronic eye’. The electronic eye is ever pervasive all knowing and all powerful. This system of organised consumption is likened to the news system, the news tells us what to believe and what to think, this is a news agenda. In terms of consumption it is referred to as a shopping agenda, or the shopping gaze (Lyon 2003).

Also internet cookies reveal insecurities that people hold in relation to security of their information. Previously information was stored by public sector groups through census data and other records such as driving licenses and passports. The private sector knew only what you personally told them (for example when signing up to store loyalty cards). Now though your data can be bought in a market place, by any corporation that has the funds to do so. Bentham’s Panopticon prison is excellent in describing this form of surveillance, the prison is under constant surveillance but the prisoners do not know when or who is watching, therefore the inmates behave and conform at all times. Fouccault states that this prison system is relatable to modern day life in the sense that people know that they are under constant surveillance but they are unsure as to who holds the key information. Therefore they are always susceptible to control (Joyce 2010).

The question has to be asked though, why does this happen. A large factor in how this happens is the government. As governments fail (as they did in 2009 with the banking crisis) citizens look for reassurance and consistency within an ever more complex and globalised world. We no longer have situated security or a local identity. Therefore the public crave security and consistency and this is found in the technologies that the post modern world provides (Lyotard 1979; Lyon 1994).

The postmodernist world has being one of consumption and greed, where privacy is ignored and superficial fallacies of products are seemingly imprinted onto human’s consciousness. The problems lie in the fact that internet cookies can be used to capture information from a person without their knowledge of doing so, and this is evident in most technological aspects of life (especially post 9/11), for example the possible introduction of identity cards in Britain, New passports with inbuilt data chips, driver licenses now how more information than ever before and the introduction to RFID chips into almost every shop bought consumer good (Lyon 2003). This data collection means that privacy is no longer an option if a person wants to function in the modern world, and this is where ethically the issue resides.

Critics of Lyon, Foucault and others mentioned claim that this integration of knowledge is a benefit to many, including the government in terms of protection. If you have nothing to hide, then why does it matter, and to a certain extent this is true. With new technologies such as collusion a user is able to make informed decisions based on what websites they use and what data they put into the datasphere (Tene and Polenetsky 2012), this why proposals such as ‘do not track’ surface. Growing sick of the non-transparency of corporations in what they do with data collected. This group has called upon new legislation to be put forward that would mean that an ‘opt out’ system would be in place for people that do not want their data to be shared (Tene and Polenetsky 2012).

Cookies have potential benefits to internet usage, but they always are used in ways we cannot control and this lack of control is unacceptable. Arm yourself with knowledge and become aware of your data.

Notes:

For more information see:
Omer Tene and Jules Polonetsky
And
Bibliography:


Tene, O. and Polonetsky, J.(2012) To track or ‘Do not track’: Advancing transparency and individual control in online behavioural advertising [Online], Available from: <http://mjlst.umn.edu/prod/groups/ahc/@pub/@ahc/@mjlst/documents/content/ahc_content_376890.pdf> [Accessed November 2nd].

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