



# The Guardian



## 'This oversteps a boundary': teenagers perturbed by Facebook surveillance

**News that Facebook shared teens' details with advertisers throws focus on firm's ability to mine the data of its 2 billion users - and raises serious ethical questions**

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We know that Facebook keeps track of every like, click and post we make to its platform. If we often check in at airports, it's not surprising when we are shown airline ads. If we like a load of electronic music artists, we don't balk when we see a promo for a festival where some of them are playing. We have grown accustomed to it, and there's some visibility about what's going on in the black box.

More insidious, though, is when Facebook is quietly surveilling our online activity to deduce our emotional state, and sharing that information with advertisers - particularly when dealing with teens. First reported by the Australian, Facebook has shown advertisers - in this case, one of Australia's top banks - how it has the capacity to identify when teenagers feel "insecure", "worthless" and "need a confidence boost".

“This oversteps a boundary,” said 19-year-old Jess, who frequently sees links to counselling sites on her feed. “Facebook should be a safe space and it seems they are trying to invade that.”

Jess, who did not want to give her last name, said she was concerned about the idea that Facebook was trying to categorize teens’ mental health. “It’s almost like a Facebook diagnosis of mental illness, which is ridiculous.”

Facebook insists the information was designed to help marketers understand how people express themselves, and is not incorporated into any ad targeting tools. But the capability is certainly there.

In 2014, Facebook published a study detailing a huge psychological experiment it secretly conducted on almost 700,000 users to see how manipulations of the news feed altered their emotional state. The study was widely criticized as unethical, and Facebook announced a new set of guidelines for how the company would approach research in the future, including a more rigorous ethical review process.

However, the study provided a window into Facebook’s ability to mine the data of its almost 2 billion users - something the company is reluctant to admit to its users but keen to highlight to advertisers.

In the wake of the US presidential election, Mark Zuckerberg dismissed the notion that fake news on Facebook influenced the outcome as a “crazy idea”. At the same time, Facebook’s advertising sales team was bragging about a targeted campaign that was able to “significantly shift voter intent and increase favorability” for US Senate candidate Pat Toomey.

Then in February this year, Facebook’s data science team examined people going through breakups on Facebook. They analysed the behavior of people in five different countries and noticed that people tend to take a little time between breaking up in the real world and changing their relationship status to “single”. This was deduced based on the language used in posts - terms like “healing”, “drowning sorrows” and “suffering” - and the 40% increase in accepting invitations from friends.



Mark Zuckerberg at the annual Facebook F8 developers' conference in San Jose in April. Photograph: Stephen Lam/Reuters

For Facebook, this represented an opportunity for advertisers. In a blogpost about the research, there’s a subsection titled “what it means for marketers”, which says: “People who have just gone through a breakup want to invest in new experiences” (the newly single make 25% more travel-related purchases a month after the breakup) and could be targeted with “messaging that empathises”.

Facebook has denied creating tools to target depressed or vulnerable teens with ads, but there's clearly a link between understanding the emotional states of Facebook users and creating messaging that can target them, even if proxy behaviors, such as an increased interest in travel, are used.

"We know they track and target us, but we don't know to what extent," said Irina Raicu of the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. It's only when reports like this are leaked that people find out. "Most people don't know this level of analysis is being done on them and there's an imbalance of power coming from an imbalance of information," she said.

When users do find out, as happened with the teen research, they experience something web psychologist Nathalie Nahai refers to as "psychological reactance": the "aversive emotional state we experience in response to perceived threats to our freedom and autonomy". In other words: we are creeped out.

Raicu said studies showed Facebook knows people better than their own family or friends. "I find that totally dystopian. The reason your friends or parents don't know everything about you is because they respect you and have some boundaries."

Raicu would like Facebook to be more transparent about how it processes people's data so members of the public can debate whether they are comfortable with it. "It's hard to have that when it's kept so secret that most people don't know it's going on."

Luke Stark, a postdoctoral fellow in Dartmouth's sociology department, said Facebook is "constantly running behavioral experiments". It's how rapidly evolving digital platforms make decisions about new features - they introduce different versions to small groups of users and see how they perform.

He said the extent of Facebook's data collection warrants new consumer protections.

"Facebook data collection is approaching something much more akin to medical data or psychiatric data than advertising data," he said, citing a 2016 study at Harvard that claimed to predict depression in Instagram users from the filters and color content of their images.

It's a view that's echoed by the Pew Research Center, which has surveyed Americans about their views on data and privacy.

"People would like the laws to be tightened up," said Lee Rainie, Pew's director of internet, science and technology research. "There's a palpable hunger in public for more oversight, more clarity and more availability of opportunities to amend the record."

Ben, a teacher and father of four, wanted to know what Facebook was doing with the information. "If they are using it to target vulnerable teenagers for commercial purposes, then that is simply unacceptable," said Ben, who like Jess did not want to give his last name. "Parents have a reasonable expectation that Facebook is not exploiting their children," he said.

"The only saving grace is that, as far as teenagers are concerned, Facebook is rapidly declining in popularity, but where one social network goes, others will follow."

Topics

**Facebook**

