

# Social Media, Technology and Privacy during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Abbott J Haron<sup>1\*</sup> and Dalia Habil<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Deputy Director of Research, Excelsia College, Sydney Australia

<sup>2</sup>Master of Business Research Supervisor, Excelsia College, Sydney Australia

## Abstract

Uncertainty and change are two main contestants in life. However, with both comes “fear”. Fear of the unknown, fear of the different, fear of obsolescence, fear of the new and fear of the uncomfortable. These are some of the fears the authors of this editorial are familiar with. With the invasion of the Covid-19 pandemic, governments, organizations and individuals changed their mode of operations. A heavy reliance on technology and social media developed and thus fears of security and privacy escalated. This article discusses the impacts of social media and technology on privacy during the Covid-19 pandemic. The article looks at the evolution of social media and its trajectory from its humble beginnings to its current worldwide influencing authority. This will be achieved by addressing the impact social media is having on major aspects of human life. The paper will additionally have a brief look at the evolution of technology in general and the technologies utilized in social media in particular. The paper will deliver a brief overview of privacy in the world from different perspectives. The changing needs related to security and privacy and how technology supported those changing needs followed by the authors' own opinions and conclusions.

**Keywords:** Social Media • Technology • Security • Privacy • Covid-19 • Pandemic • Information • Data • Big Tech • Google • Facebook

## Technology, People and Covid-19

Privacy is a concept valued by many modern and ancient societies [1]. It represents one's desire to carve-out their own space. A space for one to hide and protect their identity, desires, and secrets [2]. Privacy can be viewed as a basic human need like air, food or water [3]. Unbound by culture, race, or gender [4]. Even animals value their privacy when giving birth [5]. One can argue that animals do this to protect their young at their most vulnerable. However, it is still an act of safeguarding something or someone valuable from someone else or a perceived threat. Therefore, it is safe to assume that privacy is part of nature [6]. Just look back throughout history, theology, and mythology; you can find several examples of the need to have privacy and the need to fight and even die for it [7]. Kings and Queens protected their privacy to protect their thrones [7]. Prophets protected their privacy by climbing a mountain top, hiding in a cave, or using secret tablets [7].

Prior to conducting this research and writing this article, the authors' views on privacy were murky to say the least. Many would believe that “If you have nothing to hide, why worry about your privacy”. This was the mantra many people lived by, however, this mantra is based on the weakest of evidence. It is mainly based on anecdotal data the authors collected during their life-long experiences including living in the Middle East where there is a clear correlation between the cramped, overpopulated cities, paternalistic culture and the views on privacy [8]. As a young child, one of the author's life was never his own; he was part of a collective. The collective is a strong part of Middle Eastern culture [6]. One could identify the collective as family, society, culture, or religion [9]. No one dared to question authority; hence no one could cultivate their own ideas and views on life. This led to a complete apathy towards privacy, at least in the author's view. The author spent more than two thirds of his life travelling between his place of birth in Amman, Jordan to New Zealand, the United States of America, Europe, South East

*\*Address for Correspondence:* Abbott J Haron, Deputy Director of Research, Excelsia College, Sydney Australia; Tel: +6104824367568, E-mail: [abbott.haron@excelsia.edu.au](mailto:abbott.haron@excelsia.edu.au)

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Asia, and the Middle East. This helped the author see the contrast between individualized and collectivized cultures and their impact on the perception of privacy. In those cultures, the erosion of the self for the benefit of the collective is a slippery slope which has led in many places, cultures and countries to the corrosion of other human rights [9]. It is simple to imagine why the author was attracted to the notion of researching privacy. The area of the individual vs. the collective will be further examined in future work.

## Technology and Information

Witnessing the negative effect of technology in general and social media specifically on privacy in the modern world ring alarm bells in the psyche of both individuals, organizations [10]. Zwitter [11] argued, that people in Western societies have been resisting many efforts to threaten their privacy for generations in a justified reaction to government overreach or at attempts to monitor and control the population [12]. One only needs to examine at how quickly people from around the world are currently more than willing to give up their right to privacy and many other civil rights in the name of fighting the Covid-19 pandemic which took place late 2019 and with no end in sight as of the date of this publication [13]. Looking at the data of how many people around the world have offered their information either through phone applications or websites reflects the striking change in behavior which confirms the shift from the self to the collective to protect the self [2].

It would not be possible to cover all the great things technology have brought humanity in this article. However, in this paper, the author will examine some of the negative impacts of technology and social media on privacy. This will lay the foundation for future work and future updates. As it is well known; the only constant in life is change, and technology is one of the main catalysts to change in the world [14]. Furthermore, the speed of technology-driven change is always increasing [15,16]. Social media technology is a tool, like a car or a gun; both can be used for good or evil. However, it is hard to discern the difference between the two these days [17]. The world is awash with misinformation and the authors suppose that this is an intentional phenomenon to distract and confuse humanity [16].

Information nowadays is available at a click of a mouse. Unlike the old days when it took hours to find sources in libraries to seek knowledge. For instance, it took hours just to find references a professor would use during his lectures to be able to include them in his work. Experts and professors seemed like a guide to knowledge, because knowledge was relatively scarce, and one

needed a good guide to find it [18]. However, with so many advancements in data mining, information sharing and search engine technologies in the past forty years; students can pull out their smartphones and Google what the teacher is saying in a matter of seconds [19]. This did not guarantee the student will fully understand it, although it did close the knowledge gap between students and teachers [19]. Acerbi [20] argued that there is so much misinformation, bad information, dangerous information, and fake information on the internet nowadays; it feels like a dense jungle where anything has the potential to kill you. Still, the earlier question remains. Who decides what is good or bad information?

## Social Media, User Information and Privacy

From cave paintings depicting the life's and tribulations of our ancestors to books, stories and legends shared for thousands of years. The idea of sharing your life with others or leaving a piece of you for others to read, view or learn from is not a new one [10]. This was information that was shared with others to warn of a danger, celebrate a victory, tell a story or just good old fashioned "showing-off" [21]. This remained the norm for thousands of years until social media came along to weaponize information and use it for data collection, monitoring of populations and marketing purposes [22]. Furthermore, social media data is being used to manipulate elections, influence policy and not just to design or sell products [23]. However, it is not all bad news; social media has given a voice to the voiceless [16]. Social media turned anyone with camera into a potential reporter in times of war and peace [24]. Nevertheless, some questions come to mind; does everyone's voice deserve to be heard? Does every opinion matter? How can one filter what is considered genuine versus manipulative information?

In the authors opinion, social media allowed people to remove any type of social filters one needs to have to function in a civil society [25]. All of this is driven by the allure of anonymity which seemingly protects a writer from any traditional social or legal ramifications [26]. Social media is a two-edged sword, which has been wielded by weaker groups in many societies and has been used to target and tarnish people with opposing opinions in other societies [27]. Social media has challenged many industries and replaced some [10]. Traditional media like televisions, radio and news have all been affected fundamentally by social media [28]. The main driver of all of this is user information or user data [29]. Companies like Google, Facebook and others use and sell user data to all categories of organisations for all types of uses [19].

The search for and capture of user and corporate information is the new "gold rush" of the twenty first century [19]. User data is collected by technologies called "Smart Bots" which are small programs platforms use to capture user information [30]. That same data is fed into super computers which use artificial intelligence to finds patterns impossible to discern with the human mind because of the sheer speed, volume, and variety information [30]. On the surface, this seems harmless if it delivers us "utopia" which we were promised by the tech giants like Google, Facebook and others [19]. However, this information collection has moved away from just knowing what we want to shop for before we think about it [30]. Collection of user information has led to many new age problems like misinformation, fake news (also known as propaganda), deep fakes, identity fraud, hacking and overall information security amongst many other things [10]. With the rise of the COVID 19 Pandemic, corporates realized the wide range of threats induced by the work from home policies and the remote access of corporate information systems. Cybercriminals exploited organizations through using malware inside news packs to obtain access of confidential information and customer databases. This information was traded against hefty ransoms that some organizations had to pay to ensure business continuity. The author is not implying that the tech giants are the only ones responsible for this or that this was their intention all along, Rather, the author is suggesting that the ubiquity of social media platforms, the rising risks of cyber-attacks, the sheer size of those companies and the fact that they cannot guarantee that the information or user data will be used for the wrong reasons [24]. After all, the technology is just as good as its programmers, this includes artificial intelligence (AI) [31]. Imagine an AI programed by a benevolent

entity; one would assume that the AI will pose the prejudices of that entity [31]. Now, flip the picture, what if the AI were programmed by an evil entity, would it be fair to assume that it will share the same prejudices?

The prejudice of the programmer goes into the heart of this paper. The fact that we are infallible and imperfect creatures ensures that we will have imperfect creations. This is something theology has been looking at for thousands of years [32]. At the core of most religions, is the need to expose and control the follies of man [33]. Yet many in this world think we have evolved beyond the need for God to give us hope and guidance and that we are able to tell right from wrong on our own without the need for a higher power [34].

Technology has immensely improved our daily lives [35]. Our homes, offices, cars, streets, buildings, and everything else has been impacted by technology [19]. This impact has been overwhelmingly positive. However, once we infuse more of us into the technology; we start to see our flaws magnified due to the speed of technological transformation [31]. This is the case against social media in the authors opinion. The fact that the entire argument for social media depends on people sharing their views on all matter of life, is quite problematic in the author's opinion. Humans have a rich history of interpreting their surroundings through narrow lenses [28].

The information produced by most social media platforms with its aforementioned flaws, is being used nowadays to help track people movements and behavior in an effort to curb the impact of the Covid-19 virus [36]. Many people around the world who were always opposed to sharing their private data in fear of compromising their privacy are more than happy to give it all up in fear for their lives [37]. On a medical and human level, this makes a lot of sense especially in countries like Australia where this information is used for tracking the movement of infected individuals [13]. However, the million-dollar question is, will governments and big-tech surrender this power once the virus is under control? If history has taught us anything, is that power, once acquired, is hard to be given up [2].

## Conclusions

As a passionate supporter of technology and a believer in protecting the sanctity of human life through the proper use of user information and user data; the author is still wary of the negative implications of the technologies used to collect and analyze user information. The majority of discourse around the topic, is seemingly coming from a western centric point of view. However, many countries, cultures and societies around the world in recent years made the leap from underdeveloped or third-world countries to digital economies in record time without having the need to deal with or discuss privacy related issues because privacy was not a bit part of their culture to begin with. This also, fills the author with fear and trepidation about future uses of new technologies. Will current and future generations accept things as they are? Will anyone have the resources or stamina to stand up and question big tech as they become bigger than most economies?

However, let us not forget that western culture is one of many around the world and there are always shifts in the world's economic and political environments. These shifts could force us to reevaluate how technology and social media impacts our privacy locally and globally. The outcome might be an adoption of all best practices or it might be the opposite. Especially, if information and privacy are weaponized and utilized for geopolitical reasons. In the author's opinion, privacy is an indication of how civilized a culture is. If people valued their privacy and still manage to be good human beings; they deserve their privacy and should fight for it. However, if privacy is used as way to cover their prejudices and cruelty; they probably never deserved it in the first place.

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