Facebook and Google "listening" is more pervasive than you think

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Yet another consumer is disturbed by the sketchy algorithms deployed by Facebook. Here's how the app knows what you're talking about and what to do about it.

Image: Chesnot / Getty Images

This past weekend, my mother-in-law came for a visit. During her stay, something happened to cause her great concern.

Let me set the stage.

Everyone was gathered around the dining room table, having a grand time. One of the kids brought out a new product she uses at her salon. My mother-in-law, being a stylist herself, asked me to look up the price for the product, so I snatched up my phone and commenced to look it up. With the task complete, I put down my phone and didn't think twice about it.

The next morning, my mother-in-law found herself quite disturbed when she opened Facebook on her Samsung Galaxy phone to see an advertisement for that very product in her feed. At breakfast, she was convinced either (both?) Facebook or Google was listening to her the previous night. After all, how would either have known she was curious about the product? She didn't search for it on her phone.

This set the entire family on a rather conspiratorial trajectory until I intervened to explain what had happened. Here's my explanation.

Facebook is very good at a few things (some of them we approve of, and some of them we don't). One such thing Facebook is exceptionally good at is making connections. I'm not necessarily talking about the type of connection that brings two people together to share their lives' stories but, rather, connecting the underlying dots between people.

You see, Facebook knows my mother-in-law and I are friends on the platform. They also know how to track us. So when Facebook "saw" that we were in the same location, it connected those particular dots. And when I looked up the product on my phone, Facebook's algorithm decided it was smart to place an advertisement on both of our phones for the product I'd searched for.

But it's a bit more complex than that.

Facebook (like so many other companies) are so good at tracking our behavior that its algorithm was able to put a very particular puzzle together that went something like this:

- I searched for a salon product.
- My mother-in-law and I are friends on Facebook.
- My mother-in-law has searched for salon products on her phone.
- Ergo, my mother-in-law would benefit from seeing an ad for the product I researched.

That could have gone two ways: Facebook could have run the algorithm on every friend associated with my Facebook account or it could limit it to only the friends I'd been in close contact with over X days. Either way, it shows the depths at which the company is willing to go to mine information from users and use it to gain an advantage.

But as we saw in this example, those types of targeted ads can easily backfire on Facebook (and any company). When my mother-in-law saw the ad, she immediately became concerned that Facebook was "listening to her." Because of that, there was no way she'd dare click on that ad, for fear it might be some kind of scam.

Good for my mother-in-law for having just the right amount of knowledge to not trust everything she sees on the internet.

A problem with a solution no business wants

This is where the real issue comes into play. The business of such deep algorithmic tracking is hurting and helping businesses. It's helping because it makes advertising much easier. Companies no longer have to spend days or weeks trying to figure out where best to spend their advertising dollars or who to target.

At the same time, it's seriously hurting the level of trust consumers place in advertisements. Consider this: Most consumers do not like ads. They don't. This is especially true for online ads. They are intrusive, loud, often irrelevant (no matter what the algorithm says), and can even lead to malicious attacks. To make this even worse, when situations arise as I witnessed over the weekend, it spooks consumers to the point they believe companies are using their devices to listen in on them.

Those consumers aren't far off the mark.

All of this adds up to the average consumer wanting nothing to do with ads. Unfortunately, most big businesses are neck-deep in the algorithm game and aren't willing to pull away from it (no matter how it could harm their reputation).

The best way to solve this problem is to get rid of algorithms, and that's not going to happen. It's the solution no business wants. And no matter how good an algorithm is, it will still lead to such problems because, although machine learning might be faster than humans, it lacks certain qualities (empathy, reason, common sense) that make human interaction crucial to the connection between businesses and consumers. An no matter how widespread algorithms become, they will never be as good as their human counterparts. Never. They might be faster, they might be cheaper, and they might be more quantifiable, but they'll never be as qualified.

Unfortunately, companies like Facebook will never understand or learn from a situation such as the one I experienced over the weekend. They don't get how most people are actually frightened by the idea that a company might be "listening" in on their lives and making decisions based on what they "hear."

Companies like Facebook do themselves no favors in making it very challenging for users to gain even a semblance of privacy with the platform. The mobile app doesn't make it clear how to prevent tracking. To do so you have to go to Settings & Privacy | Off-Facebook Activity. Within that page, you need to tap Clear History and then tap More Options. Next, tap Disconnect Future Activity (**Figure A**).

← Off-Facebook Activity

Off-Facebook activity includes information that businesses and organizations share with us about your interactions with them, such as visiting their apps or websites. Learn More

Recent activity

🌐 You have no available activity to show at this time.

Privacy tips

What is off-Facebook activity? >
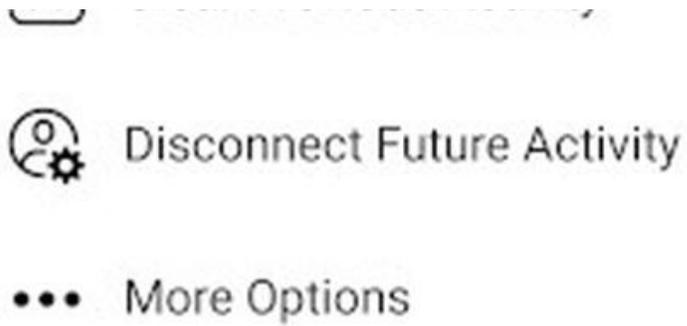
● ● ● ●

Activity Controls

Options to view or disconnect activity shared with us by businesses and organizations you visit off of Facebook

🔍 Explore Activity

☒ Clear Previous Activity

Disconnect Future Activity

••• More Options

Locating the section to prevent Facebook tracking isn't easy.

In the resulting window (**Figure B**), tap the On/Off slider for Future Off-Facebook Activity. You will then have to verify the setting by tapping Turn Off.

Figure B

← Manage Future Activity

Future Off-Facebook Activity

Keeping your future off-Facebook activity saved with your account allows us to personalize your experience.

Activity You've Turned Off

View and manage the apps and websites whose activity you've turned off.

Learn more about your off-Facebook activity and how it is used.

Turning off Off-Facebook Activity.

There's one caveat to disabling this feature. When you turn it off you won't be able to log in to apps and websites using Facebook. That's fine if you don't use your Facebook account to log in to certain services. But if you do, it will break that ability.

Facebook does not want you to break this connection. The company wants its algorithm to feed you ads because it's how they profit. But that dark and dirty little non-secret secret is pretty actively doing the company in. Fewer and fewer people are willing to trust Facebook and especially the ads they promote. Personally, I've been burned twice by ads on the platform. Once, I never received the product I order and the company refused to return my communications and another time the product I was sent was absolutely nothing like the product advertised. Since those two incidents, I refuse to click on or be tempted by an ad I see on Facebook. From the many people I've spoken to on this, that sentiment is growing rapidly. People aren't clicking on Facebook ads the way they used to, and situations, like the one I experienced over the weekend, are fueling that fire of mistrust.