

What social media websites already know about you

On most social media websites, you're not the customer, you're the product. Think about this for a moment -- the pages you like, the links you share, the friends and places you mention -- they're all just data that can be mined and sold (with or without information that identifies you personally) to businesses and organizations that are intensely interested in what motivates you. The more you share in public (and, sometimes, in private), the more these sites, and their advertisers, can learn about you.

It's good to make friends, right?

Think about how social sites offer to connect you with your friends. They invite you to share the login and password to your email account, which gives them the names and email addresses of everyone you talk to -- fellow teachers and students, co-workers, family members, friends, places where you've shopped online, and much more.

Many email accounts automatically add the addresses of anyone you've messaged to your Contacts -- not just your close friends and family, but *everyone* -- unless you change your settings. Think about that too, especially if you've already shared your contacts with that great new site you just joined. An advertiser looking at these connections can now make a pretty good guess about your lifestyle, shopping habits, and even income level -- all based on what they already know about your friends.

You may be sharing more than you realize

Mention someone's name in a status update, and there's now another connection between you, your interests, and your friends. "Tag" someone in a photo, and you've now provided a face to go with the name. Now the real data mining starts: Look at the site's recommendations for people and pages to like, friend, or follow. Did you find a long lost friend, or someone you'd rather not see again? Are you and your "Likes" now showing up in *their* recommendations?

Let's say you're okay with sharing that information because you feel you have nothing to hide. What about your friends? Do you know someone who is a victim of crime or abuse? The database of shared connections may have just helped connect a victim with their abuser. Do your friends have strong opinions about controversial subjects? Their "likes" and connections are also now part of your digital profile, whether you agree with them or not.

So what's the harm?

What's the result of all this sharing? First, let's look at the obvious things -- as you browse the web, you see ads that seem to reveal a lot about you and your interests, including things you would prefer to keep private, such as health conditions. You may find yourself turned down for jobs or college admissions, based on what people

can see about you online -- your "digital footprint." Your online profile can even affect your credit score, as this [recent news story](#) reported.

Why My Big Campus is different

So what does this have to do with My Big Campus? It's simple, really. We want My Big Campus to be a safe place where students can learn and practice good digital citizenship in private, with the guidance of their teachers and My Big Campus staff. What happens here, stays here -- it's not for friends of friends, strangers, or advertisers to use in ways that are not in your best interests. There's no anonymity -- each of us is accountable for what we post, and we monitor the site for behavior that could be harmful to students. We hope that the lessons you learn here on My Big Campus will help you protect your privacy (and the privacy of your friends and family) as you make your way onto the open Internet.

If you have thoughts about sharing and privacy, or suggestions to help people stay safe online, let me know in the comments. Until next time, I'll see you around Campus.

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