

Three quarters of US Facebook users unaware their online behavior gets tracked and spied on

- Facebook to be ordered to put an "always visible" banner on every page of its site which says: **"FACEBOOK IS WATCHING YOU AND HARVESTING YOUR DATA"**

You mean they are collecting our opinions to sell ads? Who would have guessed it?

By [Thomas Claburn in San Francisco](#)

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 Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg

Most Facebook users have no idea that the ad biz compiles data profiles of their online activities and interests, according to research conducted by the non-profit Pew Research Center.

That's not altogether surprising given that Facebook appeals to people disinclined to concern themselves with the minutiae of digital technology, which is to say most people. It's worth recalling that a decade ago, Google representatives stopped people on the street in New York City to ask "[What's a web browser?](#)" and almost no one could answer correctly.

The finding nonetheless underscores the privacy cost, unrecognized though it may be, of relying on an ad platform for media and messages rather than wrestling with the complexity of self-administered comms software.

After surveying 963 US adults last year between September 4 to October 1, Pew researchers [found](#) that 74 per cent of Facebook users said they were unaware the social ad biz tracks their traits and interests.

Facebook makes such data available to users through the "Your ad preferences" page, but about half of the survey respondents didn't like what they saw once they were made aware of their

data trail. Fifty-one per cent of those surveyed said they're not comfortable with Facebook compiling this information.

It seems doubtful however such unease will translate into account cancellation. Expressing discomfort in a survey is easy and doesn't necessarily correlate with willingness to abandon Facebook. A [study](#) published late last year found "the average Facebook user would require more than \$1,000 to deactivate their account for one year."

Don't label me!

The Pew survey says 88 per cent of Facebook users found data about themselves in their ad preferences page. Of these individuals, 59 per cent said the data reflected actual interests while 27 per cent said the data either partially or fully misrepresents them.

The disconnect between Facebook's categorizations of people and the way they see themselves is also evident in the context of the political designations and racial/ethnic "affinities" the social data biz applies to users.

About half of survey respondents had been assigned a political label by Facebook. Of those labeled liberal, conservative, or moderate, 73 per cent agreed with their designation while 27 per cent said assigned political classification was not accurate. Reports of misclassification came more frequently from self-described moderates (36 per cent) than they did from those calling themselves liberals (20 per cent) or conservatives (25 per cent).

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Facebook also puts some users into multicultural affinity groups when users' online activities fit patterns associated with particular cultures. Among survey respondents, about a fifth said they'd been put in a multicultural affinity box.

Whether or not the revelation that ads are made from people proves shocking enough to drive people away, Facebook's demographic slicing and dicing faces pushback from external forces. The ad biz faces court challenges over claims companies have used its ad targeting categories for unlawful [age discrimination](#).

In July 2018, Facebook [agreed to stop](#) allowing advertisers to use its ad targeting tools for unlawful discrimination following pressure from Congress and media investigations.

Facebook did not respond to a request for comment. ®