

Go on, Google me

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Towards the end of his life in 1832, the German poet and philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote that newspapers "publish abroad everything that everyone does, or is busy with or meditating; nay, his very designs are thereby dragged into publicity. No one can rejoice or be sorry, but as a pastime for others; and so it goes on from house to house, from city to city, from kingdom to kingdom, and at last from one hemisphere to the other - all in post-haste."

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Almost 200 years later, the trend is not only for the famous, but all of us. Anything we do or plan that leaves an electronic trace can be dragged into publicity; short news cycles turn an email or a photograph snapped on a phone into a pastime for others, from one hemisphere to the other. We live in an age so fast we are eliminating small talk. A few years ago at a dinner party I was introduced to another guest, but it wasn't necessary. "I know who you are," he said. "I've got a Google alert out on you." He said it as though I didn't, really, need to add anything to the avatar of me that he'd already met, the doppelgänger whose photos, quotes, friends and bloopers were popping up conveniently in his inbox, and which had preceded the flesh-and-blood me, standing there, mute with a drink in her hand.

This is the new normal. More recently, I was on a panel with another writer. She asked me what I wrote. "I used to Google everyone," she shrugged, "but I've stopped." She said it as though apologising for her ignorance but also as if she'd quit an addiction, or stopped steaming open her housemate's mail. While Googling is ubiquitous and convenient and we can't live without it, vestiges of our private selves, mostly the idea that we have them, remain. For now.

We live in an age which has yet to work out whether privacy still exists, or if it does, what it is useful for. We can be physically tracked by corporations and governments through our mobile phones, while our "meditations" and "very designs" can be discovered by Google and others from our emails and online search histories.

Eric Schmidt, Google's executive chairman, helpfully, if unwittingly, encapsulated the death of personal privacy this way: "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place." I've heard that before, word for word, from members of East Germany's secret police, the Stasi. But not even they had a motto as telling as Google's: "Don't Be Evil."

Q: What kind of company has to remind itself of this?

A: A company whose power is virtually limitless.

The tacit agreement that was made to keep the internet "free" (free access and largely free content) meant that the fortunes made online - vaster fortunes than in any other time in history - have been from harvesting and onselling data about us, not from paying for content created by us (just ask any musician who used to be able to sell a CD and now receives 0.47 of a cent per play on Spotify).

The death of personal privacy is a by-product of Google, Facebook and others selling our data to advertisers. It is as if we have (again tacitly, and on undefined terms) decided that the convenience of predictive text on a Google search and tailored advertising in our email inbox is worth giving away our privacy for, for free. (As I type, an email from Amazon arrives offering me items spookily attuned to my age and stage: eye exams, food discounts, local bootcamps, house cleaning, dental cleaning - it feels like psychological short-sheeting, or some kind of sorry consumerist reality check.)

What can we do to reclaim control of our online selves? American tech genius Jaron Lanier, originator of the term "virtual reality", says we could claim back our personal information by charging for it, and so democratise the internet at the same time. One imagines a cookie, an app or a setting on our machines that could allow or disallow our information to be used, track the user and charge a few cents each time.

But in the meantime we need to know how to read the net. I am as addicted as anyone to having the apparent answers to all questions of the universe and local navigation in my pocket. But it is also a world of spinning, unattributed facts and factoids, and unseen, controlling algorithms. This was brought home to me when I tried to correct the inaccurate Wikipedia entry on me. Each time I amended it, the wrong information was put back up. After three attempts I was "barred", by persons or algorithms unknown, from fact-checking my own life.

It is easy to get the impression that a Google search is a neutral sifting of the most relevant sites for our search terms. Not so: it is skewed by an algorithm that seeks out what it "thinks" I want. So when I do a Google search, and when you do one, our results will be different. At the same time as we think our world expanded, we actually have tailored, little worlds, on millions of individual screens, and we are hounded by advertising from the ghosts of sites past.

Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, puts it this way: "A squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to you right now than people dying in Africa." Click click. Like. Poke and Friend and Follow. Actually, clicking might not even be necessary any more. The last word must go to Google's Schmidt: "We don't need you to type at all. We know where you are. We know where you've been. We can more or less know what you're thinking about."

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