Digital Norms and Ethics

Something is rotten in the state of Facebook…

I'll never forget reading Mark Zuckerberg's opinion of his earliest customers, calling them "dumb f*#ks" for entering all their personal data into his software.

Under the pretext of fun and entertainment, social media companies are gathering our data for resale to desperate advertisers and other intermediaries. Only under the threat of legal action or government regulation do these companies announce their terms and conditions and levels of permissions. Sorry, they say, we didn't mean to harm you.

Think about the experience of entering a store: what if before we walked in we had to strip naked and hand over the contents of our wallets or purses. Would we do it? Not likely. Even TSA doesn't go that far at airports…

No. Social media companies are lucky that we bother to use them. They are lucky we bother to enter their store. And, believe me, they are simply ecommerce stores. Nothing more, nothing less. And they need to be treated as such.

There are longstanding norms of behaviour and ethics demanded of retail stores, based on the premise that they are interacting with the general public. The stores have to be safe, comfortable, attractive, and conveniently located. They have to abide by the laws of the land. The same norms and ethics should be demanded of social media stores.

For example, you can watch us in person or on security videocams and learn from what we do. You can offer to help us and tell us about what is on sale. We know if we step inside your store that it is your building and that you will watch us. But you don't know exactly who we are or any personal information about us. We are anonymous.

In a physical store, you don't ask for our personal private data until we get to the checkout and then only through the use of opt-in loyalty cards, using your point-of-sale system to link the actual sales to the loyalty card data. The burden of privacy and security should sit on your shoulders, not our shoulders. We are trying to enjoy shopping, not avoid your creepy data hunger.

The default on the internet should be privacy and anonymity. Anonymity is freeing. It makes the internet fun. It makes mobile phones fun. The more you watch us and make our every move a commodity for sale, the more you put a chill on internet use and ruin the fun of being online. We will eventually react by avoiding you like the predator you've become.

Yes, you have written some useful code. Yes, you are clever at monetising that code. Bravo. But remember: your best customers are natural friends. They want to associate with you, to friend you, to tell you and others what they bought and why. They want social status. They are your influencers. But not everyone feels that way.

For today it is like the Wild West on the internet. And like the days of the Wild West, fortunes are being made unethically. The stories are everywhere. You know this to be true: that's why you crave respect and credibility. You won't achieve mainstream acceptability without changing how you view our privacy and anonymity.

It is time for digital norms and ethics.