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The End of Obscurity

Technology, Privacy, and eCommerce



There is comfort in obscurity.

You can search for your name on the Web, but if you're like me, there is not much in the results. In spite of the ease and ubiquity of digital communication, most of our information remains lost in an ocean of online data.

Unless you're famous, there are very few reasons to fear the World Wide Web. Our personal posts and photos are mixed up with trillions of others in the cloud. Even those of us who live their private lives online are largely hidden and unknown.

We hear about the young student whose blog derailed her college application, or the one who lost a promising job prospect when the employer saw his profile on a dating site. But this isn't the norm. Each of us is one of billions on the Web. Even when we try to be cavalier or obnoxious, we remain unnoticed. Only movie stars and politicians need worry.

But this obscurity is starting to disappear.

Back in December, Facebook announced that it had indexed all posts, allowing keyword searching of past messages from your mobile device. It is a wonderfully useful tool and can help you track down photos, information and messages that were all but lost before.

But this new search function also means that part of your obscured, hidden past is now fully accessible.

Facebook has, thankfully, limited search authorization to only those posts to which we have access. Strangers cannot riffle through your timeline. But if you are someone who uses social media to communicate with friends and family on an hourly basis, it means that your everyday thoughts and casual banter are now saved, preserved and fully indexed for future generations.

This is a big deal for some people. Think of all the careless, unintentionally rude or regrettable things you said growing up. All of us, no matter how sensitive, have callous moments. Before 2004 (the dawn of the social networking era), few others could recall your blundering gaffs or cringe-worthy mistakes. But if those embarrassing remarks are posted on an indexed site, your entire network of friends can relive your transgressions on demand.

Bringing search to social media is new, but wholly expected. More and more of our digital lives, once lost, are now accessible.

And while this index does not change the world, it should change the way you think about communication. You may not be famous now, but who knows what (mis-)fortune awaits. Once you become a star the friends you leave behind will have no trouble searching and sharing your most embarrassing moments.

In response, there are now personal services to help anyone manage his/her online reputation. Vendors such as ThinkUp will watch over your accounts, look for poor verbal choices, and send daily email tutorials on how to improve your digital persona.

Once the damage is done, other vendors can try to clean up the mess. They will scour the Internet, looking for prickly references to your most embarrassing moments and do their best to remove or diminish them. There are limits, however. The more tantalizing the sin, the more resilient the record.

Regulators, at least in Europe, have applied a sledgehammer to the problem. Under European data privacy rulings, you now have the right to demand that local search engines delete certain stories about you from their index. As of January 2015, Google in Europe has received almost 195,000 requests and has removed the links for over 60 percent of them.

That is not to say that the information disappears. It is still there, but Google will not provide the links from its European search engine. Once again, obscurity is bliss, unless your nemesis types in your name on a non-European site.

Overall, the indexing of social media posts is a good thing. It makes information more accessible. And it is only one new development in the growing searchable database that is our personal history.

But with access and convenience comes a new risk to reputation. Self-control is the only way to achieve social self-preservation. And if we are as careless today in our online communication as we were in live interactions before, the embarrassment can live forever.

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