

OPINION

We are being exploited for our data, and we need to take back control

SAAD HAMMADI

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Saad Hammadi is a human rights advocate and researcher.

Last month, Air Canada introduced voluntary facial-recognition technology in Toronto and Vancouver, a pilot project in line with many airlines and airports around the world to screen passengers despite concerns about privacy violations.

The technology allows Air Canada passengers to complete airport check-in or enter a lounge without a physical piece of ID, by instead taking a selfie and uploading a photograph of their passport or driver's licence on the Air Canada app. The airline assures that there will be minimal privacy risk, and claims that both the airline and the technology provider delete the biometric data 36 hours after a flight's departure. And in exchange, we can "say goodbye to hands full of passports and boarding passes at the airport," Air Canada promises.

However, if data-privacy violations by Big Tech, with similar features, have set any precedent, it is time that governments set out regulatory compliance focused on assuring that companies are transparent in their usage policies, and accountable for data, privacy and human rights protections. Otherwise, the accelerating creep of technology is exactly the kind of scenario that creates the condition for data exploitation outside the users' knowledge.

Couple fear they could be saddled with Air Canada's legal bill for court challenge over \$2,000 compensation

Over the past two decades, technology companies such as Alphabet and Meta have developed products and services in a vacuum of rules and regulations, allowing them to entrench data collection into our lives and homes, often through a range of smart devices with embedded cameras, microphones and GPS. The data, which enable companies to predict human behaviour, can then be sold to business

customers ranging from commercial brands, political entities to security and other government agencies, which use the behavioural data to achieve desired outcomes.

It's a vicious cycle where platforms claiming to provide free speech and convenience collect our data to use against us. The scheme seems to be working, however, as users don't really have any alternative. This is where people and governments must work together to resist Big Tech efforts to bypass privacy and other human rights.

“Surveillance capitalism is now a global institutional order fully entrenched not only in our economy, but it has the audacity and the confidence to go head to head with ... governments over who will control the future of knowledge, the future of society and the future of our information civilization,” said Shoshana Zuboff, the author of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, at an event jointly organized by the Centre for International Governance Innovation and Balsillie School of International Affairs last month.

A common misperception is that technology users have real control over the data they share with companies through their platforms, and that the data they share are the only pieces of information that these companies have access to. But that data can be easily extrapolated upon. The 2018 Cambridge Analytica scandal, for instance, revealed that Facebook likes could be used to categorize people according to their sexual and political orientation.

Your vending machine might be scanning your face, and this is not okay

That's true of facial recognition data, too. A 2021 study in Scientific Reports showed that faces alone can predict political positions from images with an accuracy of higher than 70 per cent. And this technology is far from perfect: On top of privacy violations, misidentification and errors from facial recognition software have also led to the arrests of innocent people – disproportionately Black people. The growing number of ways that our data can be collected – including, increasingly, in airports – shows that we have less control than we think.

In the age of surveillance capitalism, data is all that matters. Understanding why businesses ask for certain types of personal data, what they do with it, and who decides who should have access has never been more important.

The privacy and data-collection concerns raised by human rights advocates about a high-tech smart neighbourhood in Toronto by Sidewalk Labs helped push the Google subsidiary to abandon the project in 2020. It revealed the power that people possess in resisting Big Tech's invasion of privacy and other human rights.

The fight today is not against technology companies alone. Governments – including those in the Global South, such as [India](#) and [Bangladesh](#) – are now designing rules and regulations that give themselves access to private data, which can be used to censor and target users online and offline and crack down on civil and political freedoms. Given the significant market of users that technology providers have in some of those countries, we are also seeing strict compliance policies for platforms, resulting in [content takedowns](#) and free-speech restrictions in those regions.

The struggle for people all over the world is now about having rules and regulations that hold both governments and private companies accountable for data and privacy violations. That begins with reclaiming privacy rights, without giving in to exploitation under the guise of convenience.

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