

Podcast Transcript

Abridged Transcription of NPR’s Note to Self Podcast Episode: “The Search for Your Identity”

Original recording can be found at t-t.site/note-self.

Suggested pausing points with teacher instructions are noted in **bold**.

Manoush Z I’m Manoush Zomorodi. [This episode is] called the Search For Your Identity. You know who you are, but who do the algorithms think you are? How do they see us? Today we’re going to dig into online advertising, and how our identities get sorted, defined, and tracked. ... Our goal is to help you understand more about where your information goes, to weigh the trade offs, and then make digital decisions that you can feel better about...

Let’s get on with today’s challenge, and the search for your identity.

Joseph Toro Americans shop like crazy, that’s what we do.

Manoush Z Joseph Toro is a professor of communications at the University of Pennsylvania. He’s studied the marketing and advertising industry for decades, and he has a new book out called *The Aisles Have Eyes: How Retailers Track Your Shopping, Strip Your Privacy, and Define Your Power*.

Joseph Toro If we go back, say, before 1840, most of the shopping activity, if we want to call it that, had to do with peddlers.

Manoush Z Peddlers. Guys who went door to door. They’d come right to your house with something just right for you. Fabric, a pocket knife, the Bible. And of course, it was at a just right price. Think of it as the original direct marketing.

Joseph Toro They would know the people, they would often give them credit based on what they knew of them. And their dealings with them were based on their stereotyping of them. What they thought they made, what they thought they lived like, what they thought they wanted, and they would only show them certain goods and not other goods.

Manoush Z Fast forward a couple decades, and the department store begins to take over the American shopping experience. Everything was laid out for people to see, all at the same price no matter who you were.

...

- Joseph Toro There was a kind of mercantile democracy. People went into stores, they saw these incredible [displays] ... These stores were like cathedrals, new religions.
- Manoush Z And then, just before the turn of the most recent century, the peddler is back, sort of.
- Joseph Toro Beginning around 1995, and that's really the beginning of the commercial internet, we're back to the future. More and more we're beginning to see prices like what the peddler did.
- Manoush Z But now, instead of a guy with a wagon full of dry goods sizing you up, it's the algorithms doing it.
- Joseph Toro As a result of your being profiled in ways that you don't have any clue about, OK, that you may not even want, based on sometimes thousands of data points that you have no awareness of, you are getting different prices sometimes. Certain kinds of ads, certain kinds of opportunities that other people aren't getting, or other people may be getting the ones that you're not getting.
- Manoush Z Our friend Julia Angwin at ProPublica calls this mass customization. She did an investigation as part of ProPublica's project called Breaking the Black Box. She wanted to find out more about how that profiling happens, particularly on Facebook. Last time you were here, Julia, you told me and our listeners about this digital tool that you and your team at ProPublica built. And what it did, you put it into your browser on your computer, and you could use this tool to pull up Facebook's ad preferences page.
- Julia Angwin We got a huge amount of data that people contributed to us. More than 52,000 different categories that Facebook assigns people to.
- Manoush Z Did you know that there were that many different thousands of categories?
- Julia Angwin No, we had no idea how many categories there were. ...
- Manoush Z And can you just give us an example of maybe a couple of the categories that struck you? I mean like, soccer moms? That seems like that must have been on there somewhere.
- Julia Angwin I mean the one that was totally weird to everybody was, "[people who] pretend to text in awkward situations".
- Manoush Z That's a category of person?
- Julia Angwin That is a category that Facebook has, that people are in. People were creeped out about the ones where they said, "you're away from family," or "you're in a long distance relationship." So clearly they knew things that you might not have meant to reveal.

- Manoush Z So, 52,000 people use the tool that ProPublica built. They reveal, coincidentally, that there are also over 52,000 different classifications that Facebook puts them in. Is there anywhere else where they get the data from other than what we're doing on Facebook then?
- Julia Angwin The thing is there are two other places that we know Facebook gets data. One is when you travel around the web, and you click on websites that contain some Facebook code. Also we know they buy data from third-party data brokers. Back in the old days, they were the ones selling mailing lists for junk mail, and they buy a lot of data about you. For instance, they might find your property records, which are public, your DMV registrations, your voting records, and compile a dossier about your mortgage, your house size, your income levels. They buy that.
- Manoush Z OK, so who cares? What's the big deal?
- Julia Angwin It's not necessarily a big deal. I think that the big deal is, what level of transparency are they providing for you about what they know about you? What also occurred to us, though, when we saw that they were using ethnic affinities, which are affinities for race, [is that it] can be sensitive.
- Manoush Z Before we go any further let's just take a minute to define this term. Ethnic affinity. Julia and her colleagues saw that Facebook was categorizing people based on which race they had an affinity with. Like for example, let's take Note To Self producer Kat Aaron. Kat is white, but Facebook categorized her as having African-American affinity. It could be because Facebook thinks she likes hip hop music, maybe it's because many of her Facebook friends are black. We don't know for sure. But the point is, advertisers can use these ethnic affinity categories to then target or exclude certain people from seeing certain ads.
- So after learning this, ProPublica thought, well let's do an experiment. And they bought a Facebook ad for an event that they happened to be having about housing. And they specifically clicked to exclude anyone with African-American, Asian-American or Hispanic affinity from seeing this ad.
- Julia Angwin And our ad was approved.
- Manoush Z No problem?
- Julia Angwin No problem. I think it took a few minutes, 10 minutes. We asked a fair housing lawyer, who litigates on this issue all the time, about the fair housing laws, which are the most strict, about not having prohibitions by race. And he said, "Oh that's crazy, it's totally illegal."
- Manoush Z The fair housing lawyer thought the ad was illegal because blocking people from seeing ads for housing or credit or loans by race is illegal. So ProPublica went back to Facebook, who said, "Well, you're not actually advertising housing, just an event about housing, so it's fine." But other people did not think it was fine.
- After facing a lot of pressure from Congress and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Facebook said it would build a new system to make sure advertisers stay in

line when it comes to those ad categories. But that doesn't mean that advertisers can't use ethnic affinity to advertise other things. Things that aren't illegal.

- Julia Angwin** That's a level of sophistication that is Facebook's greatest strength. That's why people buy ads there ... because you can pick tiny little categories and target. And they have so many people that you can probably find people. If you want people who wear alpaca sweaters and ski and wear a certain kind of boot, you probably can find them on Facebook, right? And so that's their key to success. They don't see it as making moral choices.
- Manoush Z** The U.S. is one of the only western nations that doesn't have a law requiring commercial data brokers to give us access to our own data, and the right to opt out. One listener told us she really wished she'd had that right recently. She asked to stay anonymous. ...
- Speaker A** I felt recently that I've had some problems with drinking a little bit more than I should. I don't know if it's a huge problem, but this morning I was actually just kind of Googling to see what my options were and if I could talk to someone. And then I logged into Facebook and the first ad that I saw was for my local liquor store. And there's just something so inherently offensive in that, I don't even really know how to react to that.
- I mean, it wasn't like I was getting ads for therapy or something helpful. They just took this information that was so shameful and exploited it.
- Manoush Z** Joseph Toro, our U Penn professor, says that most people's reaction might be well, this is what advertising is.
- Joseph Toro** And that's what I hear all the time from people. It's just marketing, it's just advertising. All of this gets put into databases, which then create profiles of us, which in the end, have an impact upon how you're defined in your life. Without your, at all, having any idea what that definition is.
- Manoush Z** So you're saying, that's awesome that you've got a great pair of shoes. But what about your civil liberties? What about the fact that you are contributing to the degradation of privacy in our society.
- Joseph Toro** Exactly, we're moving into a world where people will begin to see the shopping experience as corrosive. We're also, in our shopping behavior, rehearsing the idea that it's OK to give up your information. And this is setting a pattern for a future society in which surveillance will be totally taken for granted.
- Manoush Z** Joseph says we should try to turn this creepy situation into a merely crappy one.
- Joseph Toro** Even people in the Senate, in Senate hearings I've been [at], have called it creepy. To me, what creepy means is it's something we don't like but also don't understand. We have to go from creepy to crappy.
- Manoush Z** ... I learned that yes, my browser was blocking ads and invisible trackers, but it was not protecting me from something called digital fingerprinting.

Digital fingerprinting is all the little special things about your browser like, the time zone, the font, the screen resolution. Combine all those things and an advertiser can figure out exactly who you are and track you. Even if you've deleted cookies or turned off other trackers.

So that's it, we are asking you to go from creepy to just crappy today. To knowing a little more about that thing that you spend so much of your time on. Understanding how it actually works.