

# Big data, big business, Big Brother?



portrait of hacker and laptop meaning safety data

**Editor's note:** [Gerd Leonhard](#) is futurist, keynote speaker, strategist, author and CEO of The Futures Agency. Follow him on [Twitter](#). [Mobile World Congress](#) is the world's largest mobile tech trade show looking at the current state of mobile and where it might go next. Watch CNN International's coverage live from Barcelona on 24 February to 28 February. Get the latest live updates from the event on [CNN's liveblog](#).

(CNN) -- Let me start on a humorous note that surfaced on Facebook recently: "Big Data is like teenage sex: everyone talks about it, nobody really knows how to do it, everyone thinks everyone else is doing it, so everyone claims they are doing it."

I think this is wrong on both counts, actually: just ask anyone who has teenage kids, or ask any Google user that knows how to spell 'NSA'.

For the purpose of this discussion let's define 'big data' with my 5V's (expanded from Gartner): the exponential growth of data-velocity, -variety, -volume, -virility and -value. In other words, a lot like before but vastly larger, faster, more varied, more

viral and massively valuable - and in the aggregate of these 5 trends lies its mind boggling potency. IMHO, Big Data's economic and social importance will rival that of the oil economy by 2020 - and mobile devices are already the key driver of big data, globally.

The global adoption of smart phones and tablets (and soon, wearables and the IoT) is the reason that 'Big Data Companies' such as Google can now go way beyond data that is merely observed (tracked) or volunteered (as in social media) to incorporate data that can be cross-referenced and inferred, and thereby become much more intelligent. If infused with deep learning approaches and artificial intelligence the concept of "Google knowing you better than your wife" just might not be too far off.

It recently struck me during one of my keynotes: now that we are quickly heading towards 5 Billion connected people, globally, by 2018, and towards an 'Internet of Things' that may add another 50 Billion devices (sensors, wearables, smart homes etc), and towards artificial intelligence that may bring the cognitive computing juice of 100s of IBM Watson's to the party, our opportunities as well as the challenges are increasing in truly exponential ways.

## **The 6 memes defining our future**

In 2013, 'big data' surpassed 'social media' and 'mobile first' as the leading meme, soon to be trumped by 'artificial intelligence', the 'Internet of things', and 'wearable computing'. I call this the 6 Memes because they make a perfect cocktail when blended craftily. Their allure is irresistible, their use is utterly convenient and often deeply empowering, their habit-forming power seriously addictive - and all of them combined are making us digitally naked, whether by design or simply through chains of unintended consequences.

## **The question is not IF but WHY and WHO**

The reality is that our personal data footprint is now becoming unfathomably wide, deep and large because it has become (technically speaking) entirely possible for everyone and everything to be tracked, recorded and...mined. Soon, the question will

no longer be whether we have the technological skills and horsepower to do something, but why, when and where we should do it (never mind the thorny issue of 'who').

Sophocles said "Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse" - and I believe it is those curses that we need to be more aware of, along with all the benefits it brings. Who is in charge of all this data? Who controls where it goes? Who controls those that control? Who actually governs the Internet?

### **Living inside 'the machine'?**

I am hoping this is not the case but maybe this is what the leading digital super-nodes such as Facebook, TenCent or Google ultimately have in store for us: their worlds become so powerful, beautiful seductive and sticky that we can't even find the exit door any longer (and it's well hidden, too). We may thus end up living inside their machines, or even worse, their machines live inside of us, like some kind of cochlear implant loaded with big data (ask Ray Kurzweil).

But surely, you say, one cannot even exist in today's world without 'being digital', without partaking in the global sharing frenzy of data, images, videos and updates - not even if you live in the mountains of Switzerland or on an Amish farm. I think this is a very correct assumption as there seems to be no exit-door in this 'networked society' and clearly technology does not have ethics - but where does this leave us mere mortals?

I believe that we, as 'users' aka consumers, should not be solely responsible for maintaining our privacy or preventing our increasing 'digital obesity'. 99% of us cannot and will not be able to do this; PGP and Tor lies beyond for most of us.

### **Data-Oil and Data Spills: norms, laws, technology, markets**

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personal data footprint is  
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wide..."**

## **Gerd Leonhard, CEO of The Futures Agency**

But if data is indeed the new oil, should we not have similar or hopefully much more effective global policies, regulatory frameworks and business ethics that apply to it? Should we not strive to agree on a global framework that might even prevent a 'deepwater horizon'-like big data spill in the future?

Berkman's Larry Lessig nails it when he says that we need norms, laws, technology and markets to deal with this tremendous power the '6 Memes' are giving us. Yet right now, most users are like kids toying with handguns, and BigDataCo's are acting like kids in a candy-store.

Can we really trust those new data-oil companies, those behemoths of smart-data-mining to not fall prey to the temptation of instrumentalizing us, to not use their armies of servers and their powerful algorithms for the most nefarious 'monetization' purposes, and to not use that very same information to tacitly or otherwise support the creation of perfect surveillance states?

The answer is: probably not - and this is not just a consequence of their capitalism-native obsession to maximize profit, but also of the fact that national laws supersede any rights that any of their global users may actually think they have. Let's remember that some 90% of the Internet's key infrastructure (search, clouds, hosting, portals etc) is US-based, and thereby subject to near-Orwellian laws such as the PATRIOT Act and FISA, which makes compliance with the laws (and norms or cultures) of users from other territories such as Europe, Brazil or India next to impossible. Next in line to want a piece of Internet control is China and Russia; clearly this does not bode well for 'the people formerly know as consumers' who simply must be able trust providers before truly adapting E-commerce, digital money, e-health or online education.

The bottom line is this: Big Data has enormous potential for everyone, and along with the other 5 memes it could be hugely beneficial for everyone on this planet. But if Big Data equals big brother sharing the spoils with big business, then it will amount to Big Rip-Off for the rest of us.

The time to tackle these issues is now.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Gerd Leonhard.