Paying With Your Data

Tom

Hi, I'm Jack, and this is Tom.

Tom graduated from high school in the 80s and wanted to be a biologist, but he had to work full time to support his family and could not finish his degree.

Now he works as a call center representative in healthcare. Tom is proud of his job. Tom's job is to help people understand their healthcare benefits and options. In his job, he has access to all the information he needs to help his clients and he's very good at it. Helping others with what he knows matters a lot to Tom. That's why he likes to stay informed about all kinds of things.

Tom enjoys how technology helps in his life, like connecting with family and friends without having to pay long distance calls. Besides keeping people connected, social media companies make it easy for people to access what they like by recommending products and services. Staying connected and receiving recommendations has been very convenient, but in many ways, Tom is not aware of the compromises to his privacy.

Consumer data is the currency of social media. Tom doesn't pay for the services with money. He pays with his data. Is it reasonable for Tom to receive a free service like Facebook in exchange for sharing his data?

If you are like Tom, you may be thinking "it depends." Are we talking about sharing all his photos? Who gets them? What about his posts? Does someone read them? What happens with that information once he is not using the application?

The data collected by social media companies is called consumer data, and Tom needs to know how his data is likely to be used before answering that question.

Facebook and the other social media platforms generate advertising money by collecting and selling information about consumers, like Tom, and compiling profiles of millions of people to offer advertisers a way to target people who are more likely to be interested in their products.

Tom enjoys Facebook and YouTube the most. He uses them to get informed of current events and news, stay up to date with what his friends are doing, and to find memes and funny videos that he shares with his friends.

Like other social media platforms, Facebook keeps Tom interested through an ever-updating "News Feed" and he is invited back by the many push notifications he receives. YouTube keeps him hooked by a never-ending list of suggested videos.

For some people, social media can be addictive. Tom spends about 2.5 hours using social media every day; sometimes he is on his phone browsing even when he is watching TV or doing something else. And during those 2.5 hours he creates a lot of "consumer data".
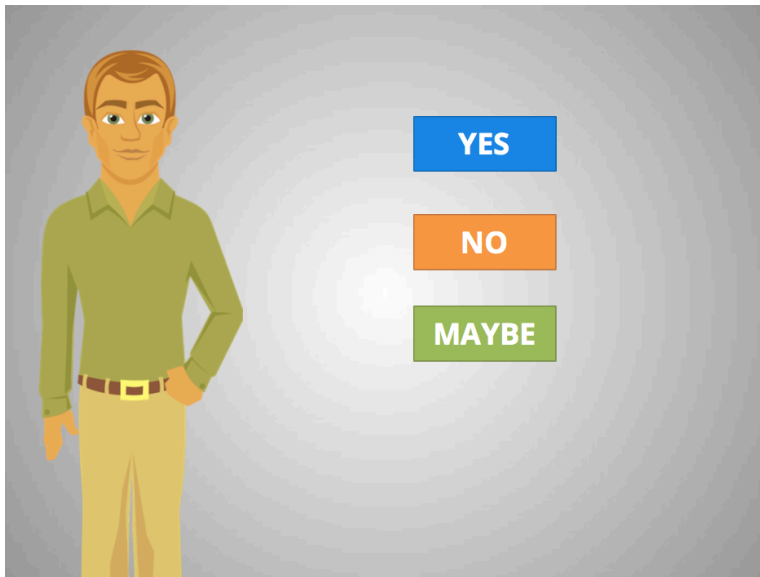
Considering the time you spend on social media, do you think that two hours and thirty minutes on social media is too much?

According to Broadbandsearch.net, on average, we spend two hours and thirty-three minutes on social media

Tom wants to stay connected with his friends and family and if he accepts that privacy is not possible with social media, he wonders what level of control he should reasonably expect as a consumer.

Tom went back to the library to find out more about how social media works. At the library, he learned that social media companies sell consumer data they collect from its users, not as individual users, but rather groups of "similar" like-minded people.

How do social media companies create those groups? Tom thinks about the time he spends on social media and what he does.

Collecting data is what social media is all about.

Every time Tom clicks a link on Facebook, YouTube, or searches the internet, a set of instructions running in the computer gather data to make decisions about what to present to Tom next. Those instructions are what's called an algorithm – a series of instructions that computers understand and do something with. This includes classifying people's likes, shares, mentions, purchases, sites visits, posts - in other words, everything that Tom does while using social media.

Every time Tom clicks, the algorithm captures information that's crucial to learning more about the content he is interested in. Over time, that information makes up his online behavior. Each person that uses social media and other online services has a unique online behavior.