

Your apps, search engines and social networks know hidden things about you that even your closest friends might not. To find out just how much, Sophia Smith Galer tries a programme called the Data Detox.

By Sophia Smith Galer
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I was dubious at first when I read about the **Data Detox**. It sounds like a guide to logging off, but as somebody whose job requires me to be online almost all of the time, that could be professional suicide. But that is not the aim of this eight-day programme; it's more about exploring and tidying up your digital life.

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The first day is, essentially, about scaring you

It was designed by the non-profit groups Mozilla and the Tactical Technology Collective to coincide with **The Glass Room**, a pop-up experience in London that invited visitors to look at what happens to their data behind the scenes. They recognise that we can't transform years of online behaviour – instead, the Detox is about trying to help us make more informed data choices in the future.

“In less than half an hour every day, over the course of eight days, people can slim down their ‘data bloat’ with easy, practical steps,” the curators of The Glass Room told me. “We hope that the Data Detox Kit will help people think differently about data collection.”

Intrigued, I decided to give their kit a go, which you can also do yourself [here](#). Here's what I found out.



(Credit: Ramon Paris/Mozilla/Tactical Technology Collective)

DAY 1: DISCOVERY

The first day is, essentially, about scaring you into realising how much of you is online via search engines. As an online journalist – and a millennial – it turns out a lot of my life is online, and it's something I'm generally OK with. By clearing your browsing history, you can Google yourself as if you were a stranger; that way, you can see the sort of images and links that are associated with you online. I'm happy with my results, but that's because I'm responsible for putting almost all of the content on there myself.

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Nothing too alarming turned up until I started experimenting with alternative search engines

Nothing too alarming turned up until I started experimenting with alternative search engines. DuckDuckGo is a non-commercial site, meaning that unlike Google it has no interest in collecting information from your search history or providing you with personalised results (and so using it reduces your data bloat). It does, however, autocomplete your sentences using other sources, notably Yahoo, Bing and Yandex. While Google tried to finish my search entry saying 'Sophia Smith Galer BBC', DuckDuckGo suggested 'Sophia Smith Galer liberal'.

I can speculate fairly wildly about why someone, at some point, searched for that; is it

who I work for, the sort of pieces I write, that one time I got hounded on Reddit? Who knows. But it did shed some light on the influence of what other people's search entries can make on my digital self, and that's quite disarming.



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(Credit: Ramon Paris/Mozilla/Tactical Technology Collective)

DAY 2: EVERYTHING IN ONE PLACE

'Is Google your BFF?', the Data Detox innocuously asks. Look, I know I'm online a lot, but I do have an offline life too, thank you very much.

It turns out that, in reality, Google *is* my BFF. The Detox asks you what information you share with Google, and then asks if you would also share that information with your best friend. I use Chrome, Docs, Gmail, Translate, YouTube and Maps, which means – and this is where you take a deep breath – I'm telling Google where I am, what device I'm using, what I'm curious about, what I'm working on, what I'm emailing people, which bank, doctor and phone provider I use, the sort of words I don't know in other languages, my guilty pleasures, what I'm learning to do, what I like to listen to, where I've been in the past, how often I'm there and my journeys. My best friend knows a lot about me, but she doesn't know that much.

I also don't have an Android phone – if you do, your recorded audio search requests **are also being logged**. So, Google knows what your voice sounds like too.

You can delete the activity that Google stores, **which the Detox tells you how to do**.



(Credit: Ramon Paris/Mozilla/Tactical Technology Collective)

DAY 3: HOW WELL DOES FACEBOOK KNOW YOU?

This day was quite interesting because I realised how much I'm not really posting on Facebook at all anymore. The '**context collapse**' that started to worry the social media company last year has meant that I'm unconsciously categorising what I post and where, and while as 12-year-olds my friends and I were posting everything that we did onto our Facebook walls, I'm now posting pictures of what I did last night or ate this morning to Instagram and posting news articles or observations onto Twitter.

For many, this has left a digital graveyard of embarrassing childhood posts and photographs on your Facebook profile. Is it time to untag yourself, or ask friends to take things down?





(Credit: Ramon Paris/Mozilla/Tactical Technology Collective)

DAY 4: SEARCHING & SURFING

Every time you ‘Like’ something on Facebook and Twitter, you’re letting third party companies know the pages you visit, what you like to click and your IP address through trackers. Those are just the visible trackers, too; there are plenty of invisible ones also monitoring your online behaviour. If a company has trackers across lots of websites, they can get an excellent impression of your browsing habits.

Your default privacy settings aren’t too private to begin with, so the Detox advises how you might adjust them, or instead set your browsing mode to Private, such as on Safari, or to Chrome’s Incognito to stop your search history from being stored. Add-ons and extensions can also be downloaded which stop invisible trackers from spying on you. When visiting websites, starting the URL with ‘https’ rather than ‘http’ additionally makes sure that your communication is encrypted.

The Detox, however, makes one warning: “Private/Incognito browsing just prevents you sharing certain things with trackers and websites; it doesn’t make you anonymous on the internet!”



(Credit: Ramon Paris/Mozilla/Tactical Technology Collective)

DAY 5: CONNECTING

“Your phone’s approach to existence is to broadcast continuously on every available open channel: ‘I’m here! Over here! It’s meeee!’ – and to try and connect to any signals it can,” says the Data Detox Kit.

Our phones are on a constant lookout for wi-fi and Bluetooth networks. If you’ve called your phone ‘John’s Phone’ then imagine how many people you’re already telling your name to? This is where serious fun ensues by renaming your phone.

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Every wi-fi network you connect to sees a list of the other networks you’ve connected to in the past

The other obvious bugbear is location data; as well as turning off wi-fi and Bluetooth when you don’t need them you can also minimise the amount of rich location insights you’re handing away for free to data collectors. Investigating your phone’s location services is a wake-up call because it can show anyone who has access to that information where you live and work, where you go to in your spare time and, essentially, the sort of life that you lead.

Imagine the possible implications for this. For a start, every wi-fi network you connect to sees a list of the other networks you’ve connected to in the past, and most networks are given an easily identifiable name. Your current employer could, theoretically, see that you’ve been secretly interviewing for a job at their competitor; can the person you’re dating see all your other dates’ wi-fi networks? What about your partner?

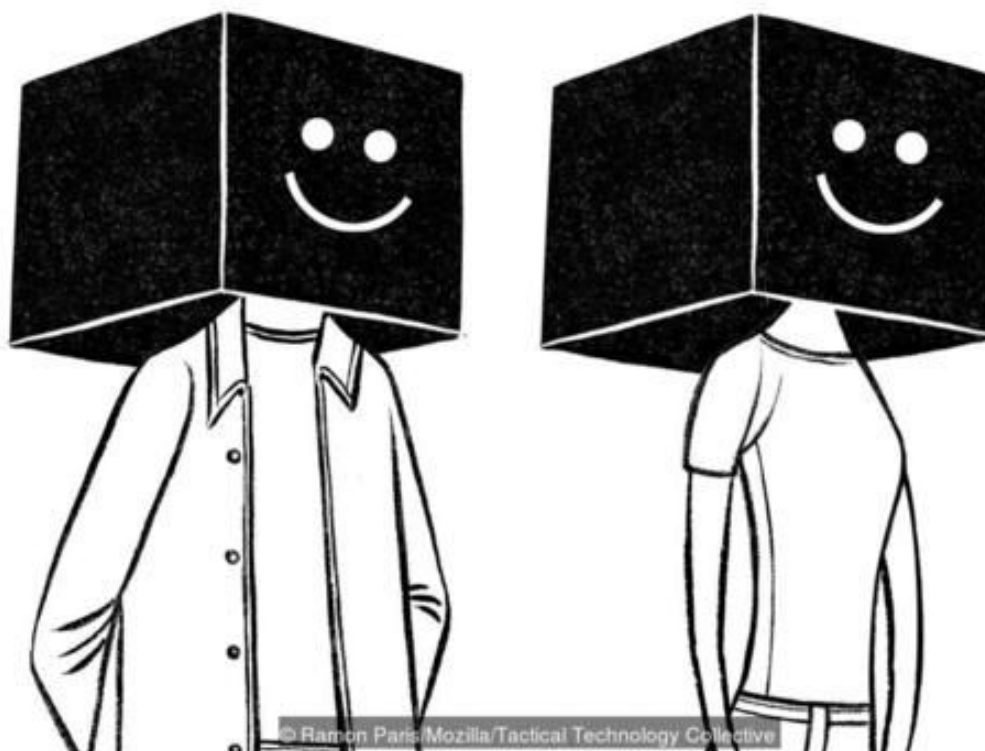


(Credit: Ramon Paris/Mozilla/Tactical Technology Collective)

DAY 6: CLEANING UP

A large contributor to data bloating is the number of apps you have on your mobile in the first place. Anything more than 40 apps suggests that you're quite heavily exposed to data collection, and so a simple way to start a data diet would be to delete the ones you no longer use.

But there are always going to be apps that you feel like you can't live without and, for me, they're my social media apps. Their privacy settings can still be tightened, though. Equally, have you thought about an alternative app that offers the same service but might not make money off your data? One example the Detox gives is Skype. Other apps, such as Jitsi Meet and Signal, would allow you to communicate in a similar way but they keep your chats non-commercial, free and open source.



(Credit: Mozilla/Tactical Technology Collective)(Credit: Ramon Paris/Mozilla/Tactical Technology Collective)

DAY 7: WHO DO THEY THINK YOU ARE?

Facebook and Google have profiles set up based on who they think you are in order to sell you to advertisers, and you can access these profiles by heading to your Ad Preferences. Google knows how old I am and that's about it (or so it seems).

Facebook also doesn't know me as well as I thought it would; I inexplicably work for

healthcare and medical services and I'm also allegedly into car racing and first-person shooter games. It does, however, correctly know about all the devices I own and thinks I'm an early technology adopter and 'engaged shopper'.

This helps Facebook know what to advertise to you – that's why when you update Facebook on milestones in your life, whether it's a new job, new partner, new baby – you're telling them that your spending habits are about to change.

There's something darker about this data collection, however. Psychometric profiling uses this data to gauge how you might vote or feel about certain members of society. Facebook has allowed **advertisers to reach 'Jew Haters'** or exclude **users by race**. In 2016, car insurer Admiral worked on an **app to predict people's driving styles** by how many exclamation marks they used.

Maybe it's wise to think a little bit longer next time you tap 'I agree'?

DAY 8: CREATING A NEW YOU

If you don't want to get data bloated again, the Detox suggests setting weekly or monthly goals for yourself. You could have reminders to change your passwords, clear your browsing history and assess your social media use. They also offer a list of **alternative apps** to use, or splitting up email accounts for the different parts of your digital life.

Those who want to try the Data Detox for themselves can find the programme **here**. "Try to get your friends and family on board," says the Detox. "It's a crucial part of making your new digital lifestyle work, and their actions online matter. Every time they tag you, mention you or upload data about you, it adds to your data build-up, no matter how conscientious you've been."

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