Several months ago I put on my futurist hat and I wondered, "What is the worst thing that could happen with social media?" Maybe it's because I was reading way too much cyberpunk at the time but this is what I came up with. This is the blog post I don't want to write in 10 years. I don't really think this will happen but I think it's important to remember that it is possible.

www.newcommbiz.com Tac Anderson 2010

The Cloud Opened Up and Rained Marketing Data [Social Media Dystopia]

Looking back now I feel so foolish, so naive. Social media was supposed to be different. Social media was supposed to change things. It did.

Social media was supposed to make things better. It didn't.

Should we really be that surprised with the outcome? Every form of marketing started off trying to add value, providing something worthwhile in exchange for people's time and consideration. No one goes into marketing thinking "I want to grow up to manipulate people." It just works out that way.

The year is 2020. The last 15 years have been the Golden Age of social media. We live in an "always on" existence. There is no distinction between offline and online. No difference between real, virtual or augmented. Every action has online ramifications; all online activity translates into offline outcomes. We live in the Webbed World.

I think therefore I am. I am therefore I am connected.

Social media was supposed to enable and empower consumers with its powerful content creation tools. At first marketers were scared. The people were empowered. Marketers were supposed to create the content. The content controlled the message. The message controlled the people.

Content is King. Content is the key. Content holds the key to control. Content controls not just the message; content holds the key to controlling the creator.

15 years ago things were different. It was an Age of Enlightenment. Open dialogue across the Web. Real time corporate transparency was rewarded. Consumers felt like they had taken back the Web. Power to the people!

We consumed mass amounts of content. Our appetite seemed unquenchable. Not only did we consume content at an unbelievable rate, we created it at exponential volumes. We filled up hard drives and data centers faster than they could build them.

The problem is; we don't consume content. We interact with content, we change content, we don't consume it. What was being stored on all those hard drives in all those servers in all those data centers was our interaction with content, our behavior. Every comment, every share, every status update, every blog post, every like, every click.

Exponential amounts of content and exponential amounts of interactions with that content, stored, analyzed and algorithmically re-purposed.

We knew this. We all knew that this data was out there but we never imagined that it could be tracked to an individual. Everything you ever said, did or looked at, every person you followed or friended would come back and be used against you. That would be the equivalent of shredding all the documents in the Library of Congress and then reassembling them. It can't be done. And it couldn't. At least not at first.

The easiest way to get a geek to do something is to tell them it can't be done.

At first all those reams of data were used within walled gardens. Amazon knew your preferences and that was a good thing because they made your shopping experience better. Netflix knew that one person's recommendation was 67% likely to be a good recommendation for you, and that was a good thing.

Walled gardens of personal data were okay. It was annoying but safe. That data was very powerful for the company that controlled the walls. We hated that we didn't control our own data so we railed and complained to set our data free.

But outside the walls in the wild, things weren't that clear. User behavior began bleeding outside the walls. Not because the companies wanted it, but because we demanded it. How dare they try and keep my information locked up? How dare they? I want my data free. I want to take that with me wherever I go. But we're lousy about keeping track of our own stuff. We lose our house keys how could we be expected to keep track of our data?

Begrudgingly companies opened up their walls. Our data, our preferences, our behavior ran amuck. It was spread so far and wide and so intermingled with everyone else that there was little fear of anyone making sense of it. Sure at an aggregate level companies could watch trends and harness feedback and sentiment, but it was impossible to tell anything relevant about me.

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In the business world customer service found themselves moved from the bench to the front row. No longer was customer support seen as a cost center, it was now a point of competitive differentiation. They were the new marketing. But marketing always has and always will exist to drive sales.

At first we began building out personas. We could group like activities into certain buckets. We knew users who exhibited these behaviors were also likely to behave in like patterns given certain circumstances. But to scale that more than just a handful of generic personas didn't make sense.

Once the box was opened there was no turning back.

As mesh networks became pervasive and companies started to build their own systems on top of that mesh, soon all your activity, location and off line behavior could be tracked with your online behavior.

This was a boon for marketers. Pretty soon I could tell if you clicked on my ad and bought something right then or went to the store the next day to buy it. Your work, personal and mobile browsers were all connected.

The cloud opened up and rained marketing data.

Then we created the Internet of Things. It wasn't just enough that our phones were smart, soon everything became smart and connected. My devices and all the objects around me were aware of my presence.

Even at the first signs of enslavement things weren't all bad. They weren't scary. Social media brought about a lot of good. The World had a voice finally. Social change swept through every culture. But all that good came with a price.

Customer service was better. I only saw ads that I cared about, and only when I cared about them. Not only could we target you with ads exactly when you wanted, we could target ads exactly when you were algorithmically most susceptible.

We began to build algorithms that tracked what you were searching for. How many times did you have to perform that search? How quickly were you searching, clicking?

What time of day was it? What day of the week?

What locations were you visiting? What locations had you visited? Were you traveling alone or with a friend or family member?

What items had you picked up while in the store, but not purchased?

What was the tone of your status updates that day? Were you in a good mood or a bad mood?

Which of your friends did you call, email or message?

Which of your friends are influencers to you about which category of products? What have your friends purchased lately?

How quickly were you traveling through the store? Were you in a hurry or taking your time? Were you in a good mood susceptible to messages of reward or in a bad mood susceptible to messages of comfort?

Have you been sticking to your diet lately?

Did you just break up with your girlfriend/boyfriend?

Which of your favorite brands have a new product or sale going on?

The list goes on. The list fills data centers. And those data centers process that information in real time as you move through the Webbed World. It recalculates your personal algorithm with every click and new event, with each bit of new information you shared on Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, your blog, your online and publicly available offline behavior.

There aren't many other options really. Most people don't think about it. They refuse to believe the degree of accuracy these machines have. You could do as some have done those who radically removed all convenience from their lives. You could be anti-social.

Even still most people don't realize the level of slavery they are in. We know exactly what to offer you, when and at what price. We know how often to advertise to you, in what sequence and what frequency is most effective for preparing you to buy, vote or convert.

We can't change who you are, but we can convince you that people like you behave a certain way.