

The New York Times

The Memories Hiding in My Data Dump

Looking through information stored by Facebook and Google was like reading a diary I hadn't intended to keep.

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July 9, 2018

The first message I saw when I downloaded my Facebook data referenced a long-forgotten encounter. Eleven years ago, two weeks before my senior year of high school, I had — apparently — written an angry note to a guy on a clunky Dell desktop (no iPhones yet) from the bedroom I shared with my sister at our parents' home in Brooklyn.

For some reason, I believed at the time that this person was spreading rumors about the nature of our relationship. The conversation was brief and completely mystifying. It began with me confronting the supposed rumormonger — “... wanna tell me when this happened?” — at 12:45 a.m.

I laughed out loud as I reread the more-than-a-decade-old conversation from my desk at The New York Times, where I work as a visuals producer. I found myself to be the instigator of a confrontational exchange, an uncharacteristic position for me. The safe distance of being behind a computer screen had emboldened me at the time, but now it made me cringe.

As I read our correspondence, I was unnerved to realize that I had no memory of this stranger. I looked up his profile, expecting to understand our connection, but I still couldn't place him. Yet the record of him in my life was clear; it was right here in my downloads folder.

I found myself digging through his Facebook page, only to learn that he had passed away. I immediately closed my computer, feeling I had somehow overstepped my inquiry.

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Since people began downloading their Google and Facebook data in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, much of the conversation has centered around privacy and advertisers. But as I dug into my own data, I wondered more about the personal details of my past that could be

uncovered in my digital record.

It was comical to see the meta-view of my behavioral patterns: There were several months when I went through a spastic cycle of deactivating and reactivating the account, and I could see all the mysterious people I had unfriended in purges. It was also odd to learn that I was categorized by Facebook (for advertisers) as someone who was “interested in” topics like “choir” (I’m not a singer), “complex number” (what?), “life” (true, I guess) and “political prisoner” (I had no idea this could be an *interest*, per se.)

But it was much more interesting to be a voyeur of myself.

At the dawn of social media, I never would have imagined that my youth was being recorded. Looking at the data now is like accessing pages from a diary I didn’t intend to keep — an honest snapshot of my speaking habits, my treatment of other people and their treatment of me, over the course of more than a decade. It was highly telling in the way anything captured by an insentient machine can be.