
THE A-HED

You Weren't Born in 1905? Why People Lie to Facebook

Users build false online identities—with social media, retailers and other data collectors—to throw off advertisers and muddle databases.

By Heidi Vogt

WASHINGTON—When news of an enormous Facebook breach broke last month, Chris Wellens couldn't help feeling a little smug. After all, nearly all the information the technology executive had given the social media giant was false.

Consumers, wary of how their information is being used, lie about everything from names to birth dates to professions when companies ask for personal details online. Some are worried about identity theft, some just want to protect their privacy and some hope to fool advertisers by intentionally mucking up the databases used to target ads.

While Ms. Wellens does use her real name on Facebook, she lies about nearly everything else: “It says that I graduated from Trinity College in Dublin. I’ve never been to Ireland. It says my undergraduate degree is in gymnastics. Anyone who knows me knows that is laughable, because I’m not very physically flexible.”

Ms. Wellens, who is 65, put 1910 as her birth year with the idea that advertisers don't tend to bother with people more than 90 years old. The result? She sees a lot of ads for slippers.

“They won't find out anything very useful about me,” says Ms. Wellens, the co-founder and chief executive of California-based computer networking company IWL. After news of the Facebook incident, “that was my first thought. If my data has been breached, I’ve now polluted another database.”

Facebook says “authenticity” is key to the social

Facebook says “authenticity” is key to the social network and rigorously policed, and that false information violates the terms of service agreement. “Each day, we block millions of fake accounts at registration,” says a Facebook Inc. spokeswoman—who declined to be named. “Our systems examine thousands of account attributes and focus on detecting behaviors that are very difficult for bad actors to fake, including their connections to others on our platform.” The online fibs can create awkward moments. Ms. Wellens remembers the time a somewhat distant relative reached out to share reminiscences about her supposed hometown of Naples, Fla. She had to admit that she had never actually been there.

Mike Denison, a British security analyst, once received a wedding invitation addressed to “Mike

Denisaurus”—a Facebook pseudonym he chose years ago when he was a university teaching assistant trying to avoid friend requests from students.

Pernille Tranberg, a journalist and digital privacy consultant in Denmark, says a friend of hers once mistakenly called her by her Facebook pseudonym, Pia, in person. They laughed it off, but Ms. Tranberg says it was clear the friend had completely forgotten the moniker wasn’t her real name.

Many also intentionally provide false information to other companies that keep personal data, from the cable company to their grocery delivery service to ticket vendors. Computer engineer Ryan Barrett fills in online forms with 0000s whenever a number is required and uses dashes for words. He says it is mostly out of principle: he wants to be in control of his information. Also, it’s fun to try to fool the marketers. He has used a dozen different spellings for John Doe rather than entering his name. He even misspells his name when reserving airplane tickets and says it has never created a problem going through security. As technology has advanced he has had to up his game. “Before, more often you’d be able to type in nonsense,” he says. Now online systems have more sophisticated checks.

He says he has friends who work at companies that look at multiple services to link up and cross-reference data on individuals—data gleaned from mobile phones, social media, grocery store loyalty cards and more. When those friends searched for him in their systems, they found little to no information. “There’s a small feeling of satisfaction,” he says.

A recent survey of U.S., French, German, Italian and British consumers found that 41% had intentionally falsified personal information when signing up for products and services online. Most common was providing a fake phone number, according to the survey conducted over December and January by RSA

Security LLC, a maker of digital security products. Respondents also said they have provided a false birth date, made up a postal address, lied about a name or selected the wrong gender.

Dating sites including Tinder and Hinge import data

from Facebook to fill in profiles, and false information could lead to mismatches. Mark “Jaymo” James, a television security consultant, says he gives a fake birth date to Facebook, which then means dating apps show him as 10 years younger. That may put him on dates with younger women—but he says he doesn’t mind.

Websites often use personal details to verify identity when a user forgets a password. If you can’t remember the false phone number you gave or the mother’s maiden name you made up, you could be out of luck.

Dan Hastings, a software engineer in Ireland, says he almost lost a decade of gaming history and thousands of euros of purchases when he was locked out of the Sony PlayStation Network after forgetting his fake birth date. Mr. Hastings first called customer service, to no avail.

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“Ten years of my business to them and they weren’t even willing to listen to my complaints,” he says. Then Mr. Hastings discovered a loophole—tweaking the recovery website address to leapfrog the birthday question. His post explaining the process is one of the most popular on his gaming site. Sony PlayStation didn’t respond to a request for comment.

All the lying does seem to foil advertisers. It is “a much bigger problem than people are aware of,” says Nick Baker, director of research and consulting of U.K. market research company Verve, which conducted a 2015 survey showing a large amount of fake information on website registrations and the like. Incorrect birth years, he says, are particularly nefarious because advertisers are often trying to match up habits or buying patterns with a specific age group.

But some companies that provide data to marketers say they are depending less and less on biographical information. Preethy Vaidyanathan, the chief product officer of New York-based marketing technology company Tapad, says they track much more valuable information from phone and web browser use.

Still, Ms. Vaidyanathan sees the value in hiding identity online. She says she uses a second email address with a fake name that she gives out to companies she doesn’t want to bombard her inbox.

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