I asked Tinder for my data. It sent me 800 pages of my deepest, darkest secrets

The dating app knows me better than I do, but these reams of intimate information are just the tip of the iceberg. What if my data is hacked – or sold?

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At 9.24pm (and one second) on the night of Wednesday 18 December 2013, from the second arrondissement of Paris, I wrote "Hello!" to my first ever Tinder match. Since that day I've fired up the app 920 times and matched with 870 different people. I recall a few of them very well: the ones who either became lovers, friends or terrible first dates. I've forgotten all the others. But Tinder has not.

The dating app has 800 pages of information on me, and probably on you too if you are also one of its 50 million users. In March I asked Tinder to grant me access to my personal data. Every European citizen is allowed to do so under EU data protection law, yet very few actually do, according to Tinder.

With the help of privacy activist Paul-Olivier Dehaye from personaldata.io and human rights lawyer Ravi Naik, I emailed Tinder requesting my personal data and got back way more than I bargained for.

Some 800 pages came back containing information such as my Facebook "likes", my photos from Instagram (even after I deleted the associated account), my education, the age-rank of men I was interested in, how many times I connected, when and where every online conversation with every single one of my matches happened … the list goes on.

"I am horrified but absolutely not surprised by this amount of data," said Olivier Keyes, a data scientist at the University of Washington. "Every app you use regularly on your phone owns the same [kinds of information]. Facebook has thousands of pages about you!"

As I flicked through page after page of my data I felt guilty. I was amazed by how much information I was voluntarily disclosing: from locations, interests and jobs, to pictures, music tastes and what I liked to eat. But I quickly realised I wasn't the only one. A July 2017 study revealed Tinder users are excessively willing to disclose information without realising it.

"You are lured into giving away all this information," says Luke Stark, a digital technology sociologist at Dartmouth University. "Apps such as Tinder are taking advantage of a simple emotional phenomenon; we can't feel data. This is why seeing everything printed strikes you. We are physical creatures. We need materiality."

Reading through the 1,700 Tinder messages I've sent since 2013, I took a trip into my hopes, fears, sexual preferences and deepest secrets. Tinder knows me so well. It knows the real, inglorious version of me who copy-pasted the same joke to

match 567, 568, and 569; who exchanged compulsively with 16 different people simultaneously one New Year's Day, and then ghosted 16 of them.

"What you are describing is called secondary implicit disclosed information," explains Alessandro Acquisti, professor of information technology at Carnegie Mellon University. "Tinder knows much more about you when studying your behaviour on the app. It knows how often you connect and at which times; the percentage of white men, black men, Asian men you have matched; which kinds of people are interested in you; which words you use the most; how much time people spend on your picture before swiping you, and so on. Personal data is the fuel of the economy. Consumers' data is being traded and transacted for the purpose of advertising."

Tinder's privacy policy clearly states your data may be used to deliver "targeted advertising".

All that data, ripe for the picking

Tinder: 'You should not expect that your personal information, chats, or other communications will always remain secure.' Photograph: Alamy

What will happen if this treasure trove of data gets hacked, is made public or simply bought by another company? I can almost feel the shame I would experience. The thought that, before sending me these 800 pages, someone at Tinder might have read them already makes me cringe.

Tinder's privacy policy clearly states: "you should not expect that your personal information, chats, or other communications will always remain secure". As a few minutes with a perfectly clear tutorial on GitHub called Tinder Scraper that can "collect information on users in order to draw insights that may serve the public" shows, Tinder is only being honest.

In May, an algorithm was used to scrape 40,000 profile images from the platform in order to build an AI to "genderise" faces. A few months earlier, 70,000 profiles from OkCupid (owned by Tinder's parent company Match Group) were made public by a Danish researcher some commentators have labelled a "white supremacist", who used the data to try to establish a link between intelligence and religious beliefs. The data is still out there.

So why does Tinder need all that information on you? "To personalise the experience for each of our users around the world," according to a Tinder spokesperson. "Our matching tools are dynamic and consider various factors when displaying potential matches in order to personalise the experience for each of our users."

Unfortunately when asked how those matches are personalised using my information, and which kinds of profiles I will be shown as a result, Tinder was less than forthcoming.

"Our matching tools are a core part of our technology and intellectual property, and we are ultimately unable to share information about our these proprietary tools," the spokesperson said.

The trouble is these 800 pages of my most intimate data are actually just the tip of the iceberg. "Your personal data affects who you see first on Tinder, yes," says Dehaye. "But also what job offers you have access to on LinkedIn, how much you will pay for insuring your car, which ad you will see in the tube and if you can subscribe to a loan.

"We are leaning towards a more and more opaque society, towards an even more intangible world where data collected about you will decide even larger facets of your life. Eventually, your whole existence will be affected."

Tinder is often compared to a bar full of singles, but it's more like a bar full of single people chosen for me while studying my behaviour, reading my diary and with new people constantly selected based on my live reactions.

As a typical millennial constantly glued to my phone, my virtual life has fully merged with my real life. There is no difference any more. Tinder is how I meet people, so this is my reality. It is a reality that is constantly being shaped by others - but good luck trying to find out how.

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