



The Danger of the Intelligence Revolution

By Russ McGuire - russ.mcguire@gmail.com

Over the past few months I've introduced the Intelligence Revolution and put it in the context of the broader Information Age. Two months ago I provided this working definition: The Intelligence Revolution will help us better understand the world around us; will improve our decision making to enhance our health, safety, and peace of mind; and will enable companies to better serve us based on the correlation and analysis of data from the interrelation of people, things, and content. Last month I identified the “power” of the Intelligence Revolution - ways in which having more information enables better decisions and creates value for the customer being served.

Every new technology introduces new capabilities that enable us to do things that previously weren't possible or practical. As technologists, our job is to capture this new power for our organization. But every new technology also creates new potentials that represent risk to ourselves, our families, and the organizations that we serve. As technologists, we are also called on to manage this danger. This month I'd like to discuss the dangers introduced by the Intelligence Revolution.

Grey Areas

A friend of mine recently asked for my advice. He is pursuing a new career path and faced

a decision. Taking one path would position him for systems development opportunities. The other path would position him for big data analytics opportunities. Because I believe that the Intelligence Revolution is happening, and I anticipate that there will continue to be a shortage of data scientists who can work with big data, and because his personal background and strengths are well aligned with data analysis, I told him that the big data analytics path would be one that could create tremendous value for him personally.

But I warned him that pursuing that path may be a challenge for him as a Christian. I believe that it is a path that will pass through many “grey areas”

where his moral standards may be challenged.

What do I mean by grey areas? When we're dealing with information, it's easy to think of types of information that we should have no problem using (e.g. the user tells us they want us to use that data for our application to personalize results for them), and it's easy to think of types of information that we know it would be wrong to use (e.g. secretly capturing the keystrokes when a user enters their credit card number and then using that information to make unauthorized charges to the user's account).

But in reality, there's a lot of information that falls in between those extremes. Those of us that run websites rely on log data to optimize our sites. We want to know (on an aggregate basis) which pages get the most views, what pages cause people to leave our site, what external links brought them to our site, and any problem areas that might be causing a bad user experience. Our users want our website to work well, and our privacy policy (hopefully) clearly explains that we're going to use this information in this manner, so this type of information usage is probably just barely creeping from the "white" into the "grey." But what if we use log data to zero in on one user and track their page by page journey through our website? In some ways, if our motives are pure, and if our published privacy policy allows it, this is just like the above example, but it's starting to feel a little creepy, isn't it? Especially if we take the next step and attach the user's information (their login id and account information) to this usage pattern, it starts to feel a lot like spying, doesn't it?

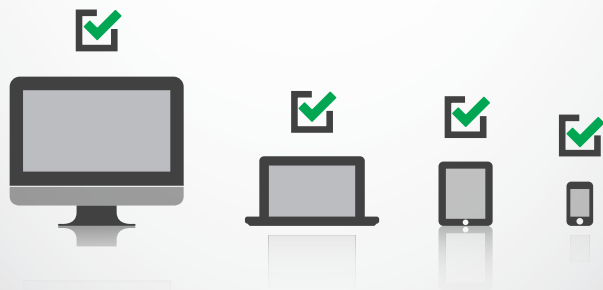
Well some companies do exactly what I've described and their customers applaud them for it. When I

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log onto my Amazon account, I'm presented with recommendations based on what I've bought in the past, and even based on items I've simply browsed in the past. Sometimes it feels creepy, but most of the time I'm thankful for the recommendations and it helps me to find products that will meet my unique needs.

Other companies have been strongly criticized and their customer loyalty has suffered because of their use of similar customer usage information that they were using to improve the customer experience. For example, in 2011, the mobile phone industry suffered a serious black eye when someone discovered that virtually all smartphones had software that collected information about usage and reported it back to the mobile operators. The operators wanted this information because it provided precise location information and information about how well their network worked in each location. That told the operators where their customers went (and where they needed a network) and how well the network actually worked in those places. This enabled better investment decisions so that the operators could provide a better experience for their customers. Unfortunately, the software company (Carrier IQ) that the operators used was collecting information that didn't seem necessary for the stated goal, and customers weren't informed about the information being collected and how it was being used. Carrier IQ also didn't respond well to the situation, all of which forced the mobile operators to remove the software from all their customers' phones and made it much harder for the operators to provide a good network experience.

What Does That Mean for Us?

Hopefully those examples spell out the danger for us, both as consumers, and as technologists that are tasked with helping our organizations to lever-

age technology to best serve our constituents.

As consumers, we have to realize that businesses (and governments and others) have more and more information about us - not just what we do online, but in every transaction that we perform with anyone. How that information will be used will not be limited to the ways that we've explicitly requested and not even to the ways that companies have told us they would use the information. In a way, I guess, that may serve as encouragement to be "above reproach" in everything we do and perhaps may be a help in restraining sin. We know that God sees everything we do and even knows our heart, which should be motivation enough, but perhaps knowing that companies and men see our actions as well may cause some to act in a more Godly and honorable way. But it's also rather scary, knowing that, unlike God, men are sinful and companies don't always act in our best interests.

As technologists, we must view ourselves as wise stewards of the information that we have. Either explicitly or implicitly, those we serve have entrusted us with it and we must protect it and deal with it in an honorable manner, with right motives and a servant's heart. But, just as Christ explained in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25), we shouldn't just bury this treasure, we must maximize the value of it for the benefit of those that have entrusted us with it. We must capture the power of information to the good of those we serve and to the glory of God. Key to this will be right motives, transparency, security, and trust.

It is my hope and prayer that these articles will encourage you in your daily walk with Christ. As 1 Peter 4:10 teaches us "*As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.*"

Russ McGuire is a trusted advisor with proven strategic insights. He has been blessed to serve as an executive in Fortune 500 companies, found technology startups, be awarded technology patents, author a book and contribute to others, write dozens of articles for various publications, and speak at many conferences. More importantly, he's a husband and father who cares about people, and he's a committed Christian who operates with integrity and believes in doing what is right. Learn more at <http://sdgstrategy.com>



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