

Avoiding Social Media To Protect Your Privacy? Your Friends Still Put You At Risk, Study Finds



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Researchers find that by examining the tweets of those close to someone, they can still predict a person's behavior — even if they're not on social media.

BURLINGTON, Vt. — “There’s no place to hide in a social network,” warns Lewis Mitchell, co-author of a new study which found that even if you don’t have a Facebook or Twitter account, your behavior can still be predicted with the online behavior of people you know.

Many people haven’t signed up for Facebook or Twitter, or privacy fears pushed them to leave the social media platforms because they didn’t want their data tracked. But Mitchell and a team of scientists from the University of Vermont and the University of Adelaide in Australia [liken privacy](#) to secondhand smoke, suggesting it’s controlled by the people around you.

The researchers found by gathering 30 million public posts on Twitter from nearly 14,000 users that they could use information in tweets posted by eight or nine of a user’s contacts to predict that user’s own future tweets just as accurately as if they were viewing that user’s actual Twitter feed. In other words, the [online behavior](#) of those close to you on social media can be just as predictive of future behavior as your official, recorded social media activity.

The research also revealed that those who abandon their Twitter or Facebook profiles and those who never signed up for the

social media platforms to begin with can still have their future behavior tracked and predicted with 95% accuracy using the online activity of their friends.

This means that advertisers and other forces can piece together a detailed profile about you, even if you've never signed on to Facebook before. Such information can be especially valuable to companies that manufacture products you might be interested in using, or, as we learned in the 2016 election season, to political candidates and campaigns.

"You alone don't control your privacy on social media platforms," says lead researcher and UVM professor Jim Bagrow in a [media release](#). "Your friends have a say too."

The [study](#) was published in the journal *Nature Human Behavior*.