Explain Behavioral Profiling Like I'm 5

Digital Profiling and Forecasting

Draft Version: This paper is preliminary and has not yet been peer-reviewed.

James J Kalafus
September 16, 2024

Abstract:

Behavioral profiling and forecasting may seem like big, complicated ideas, but they're easier to grasp if we compare them to watching animals. Just as someone who observes animals learns their usual behaviors—like how leopards hunt or how turtles hide—data collectors watch what we do online. Data brokers can figure out what "type" of person we are by seeing patterns in our behavior, even if they don't know us personally. With enough information, data miners can make educated guesses about how we might act in the future. This can be helpful, like showing us things we may want to know, but it also raises important questions: why are data collectors observing us? What do they hope to gain from predicting how we'll behave? These are things we all need to consider.

Imagine observing animals at a zoo or in the wild. If you watch long enough, you learn how different animals behave in various situations. You know how a leopard might stalk its prey, how a gazelle senses danger and bolts, or how turtles withdraw into their shells. You may not know exactly what a specific animal will do next, but you've seen enough leopards and gazelles to predict their typical reactions pretty well.

Now, think of **Behavioral Profiling and Forecasting** like this kind of observation. Major data collectors have studied so much information about people—our habits, preferences, and behaviors—that they have a pretty good idea of what "type" we are. When you share your data, it's like offering them a window into your world. They might not know you personally, but based on what they've seen from millions of others like you, they can tell, "Ah, this is a leopard." And because they've seen leopards in so many different contexts, they know what kinds of things will get your attention or what might make you react.

Even if you're more private, only giving some data collector a small amount of metadata—like a peephole view—they might catch a glimpse of something, maybe just a patch of fur, and know instantly they're looking at a leopard. And from there, they can infer a lot, even though they don't see the full picture. They also understand that "private leopards" behave a little differently from the ones that are more open, and they'll adjust their approach accordingly.

Of course, most of us aren't leopards. Some of us are more like gazelles, fish, or ants—each with our own patterns, preferences, and behaviors. And just like in the wild, the data collectors have watched enough to know how to predict reactions from each of these "types."

But here's the thing: Whether this is good or bad depends on **why** someone's doing it. Is a data collector observing to help, or is it for something else? That's a question we all need to consider, and it's up to you to decide what you believe someone's motivations are.

Bibliography

- O'Neil, Cathy – *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (2016)