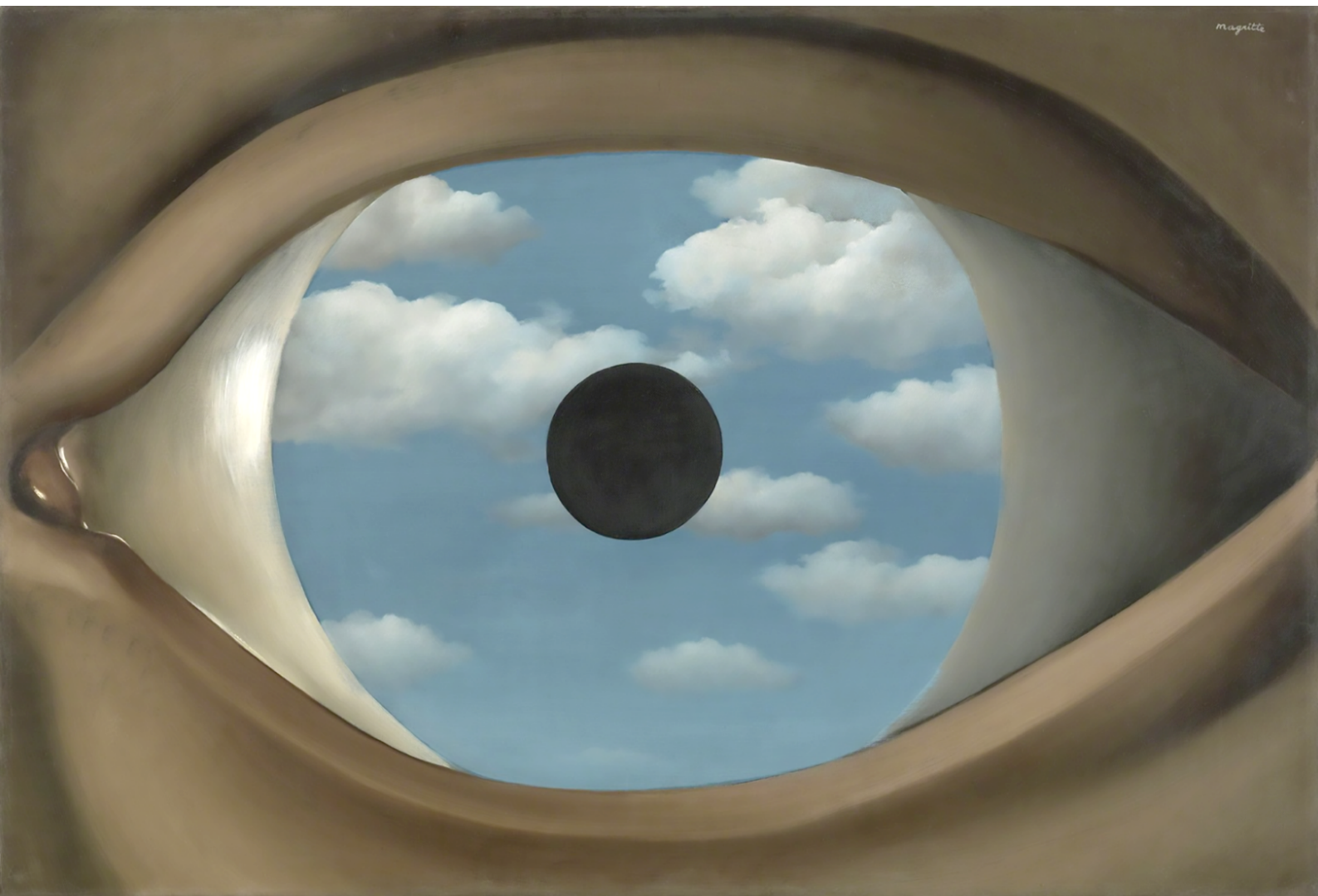

Privacy and independence of thought in the 21st century



René Magritte, Le Faux Miroir, 1928

Here at Punkt. we have, from the outset, sought to present technology that is good to own. Products designed to do a single job well. Devices that serve their owners, not the other way round. In the last couple of years, concerns about issues like tech addiction and permanent distraction have finally become mainstream. Now people's focus is shifting to privacy – or to use the more appropriate term, data *security*.

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But does privacy really matter? The answer depends on how human we want to remain. Having the data brokers know all about us means so much more than occasionally buying something we don't really need. A few years ago, concern about their effectiveness was minimal. The usual refrain was "I'm not doing anything wrong, so I've got nothing to hide". But gradually an initially intuitive sense of unease has developed into an evidence-based realisation that we are being owned.

At the moment, most people are aware that the data security situation is a) "kind of weird" and b) "difficult to control". In the coming months we will be developing a new section on this website that addresses both of these issues. We will be exploring in more detail a few of the ways that the data brokers affect all of us, and how it is possible to retain personal and social autonomy in the face of their project of inveiglement.

The reason data brokers (a.k.a. social media companies, search engines, etc.) exist is so that any user (i.e. client) with the necessary funds can adjust people's brains from the inside. Remove that process, without replacing it with a new reason for them to exist (e.g. fees from people who are currently the product), and they would disappear overnight. It is true that some people may get a net benefit from interacting with data brokers (until we factor in eventual social unrest, cyberwar, conventional war, economic collapse, the normalisation of insanity, etc.), but that's certainly not what makes their business model work.

Even in the age of post-truth, the greatest lie on the Web remains "I have read and understood all the Terms & Conditions". Fancy reading the T&Cs of everything you have ever signed up to? You will need to book yourself a couple of weeks off work. In the early years of the data explosion, it was easy for Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg to write off identity volunteers as "dumb fucks", because there was no pressure to opt in. Nowadays, in order to maintain identity autonomy one needs to adopt an activist mentality in order to opt out. The opposing forces are strong.

Making a stand

The first step is to make careful decisions about how much of one's life is to be based on high-powered invisible technology, recognising that apparent convenience always comes with hidden consequences. This means things like reducing screen time, limiting use of social media, buying a dedicated alarm clock, talking to people, etc.

Secondly, we really do all have to get to grips with those privacy settings and other aspects of data security. It's not the most exciting process, but it needs to be done. Here at Punkt. we are building a team of volunteer on-line security specialists, and over the coming weeks we will be developing a guide to creating healthy digital boundaries. (More contributors are very welcome.)

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Thirdly, in addition to addressing these issues as individuals we need to work collectively. Partly at a societal level, for example by lobbying elected representatives, but also at a community level – gravitating towards cafés, bars and other venues where smartphones are banned (or suggesting to places that they take that step), gently nudging friends who feel the need to reflexively photograph everything of note that they encounter, etc. It's actually very similar to the campaign for action on climate change (not least because the total CO₂ footprint of computers/smartphones is the same as that of the fuel used by the aviation industry).

And finally, we at Punkt. would like to know how *we* are doing on all this. In order to remain effective in the commercial world we need to strike a balance in terms of finding out how people use our website. But as an independent company, we don't have in-house data specialists and have had to rely on external contractors. We are very keen to receive feedback, so please email us at hypocrisy@punkt.ch if you have any comments or suggestions.

Footnotes

¹Mark Zuckerberg, quoted in Business Insider

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