'The Eyes of other People are the Eyes that ruin us. If all but myself were blind, I should want neither fine Clothes, fine Houses nor Fine Furniture.' Letter to Benjamin Vaughan, 1784.

If Algorithms were Blind, I should want...?

Benjamin Franklin ended his 1784 letter to Benjamin Vaughan with a cautionary musing that was at once about the tension between wants and needs, as well as the dynamics of privacy. He articulates a truism about his culture and our own: that many of our anxieties are caused by an acute awareness of the judgements of others, and that we medicate this anxiety by crafting an image for ourselves. Whether the image is made of fine clothes, furniture, or gadgets, it inevitably requires our money, and potentially our ruin. Would this be necessary in a world of extreme privacy; the hypothetical blindness of others?

Franklin wrote these words 70 years before Henry David Thoreau would write in *Walden* (perhaps the greatest experiment in privacy committed to paper) that "[n]o man ever stood the lower in my estimation for having a patch in his clothes; yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable […] clothes, than to have a sound conscience." Franklin and Thoreau loom large in America's literary history, and both pointed towards the same flaw in human character: that how we appear socially (or at least, outwardly) has the ability to trump much of what truly matters in our short lives, or to use Franklin's term, to bring about our "ruin." For both writers, it would appear that the agents of ruin are "The Eyes of other People." If this were true in the era before the telephone saw widespread use, then how much more difficult is mediating others' perception of us in the Internet Age? Surely it has become harder than either Franklin or Thoreau could have envisaged. If you choose to create for yourself any sort of public online account (particularly on social media websites), then you sign up to a social game that has certain rules about your image. You make a statement about yourself by which photographs you upload to represent yourself, as in a profile picture. (Equally, you make a statement by what you choose *not* to upload.) Image curation is the name of the game. The fine clothes and fine furniture that Franklin wrote of persist as loci of social anxiety (remember the lockdown home-makeover craze?), but they now exist within a matrix of other image-based social cues online. We're not only worried about being judged for what we wear, but also about where we shop, what we watch, and what we think. In an age where

social media has become ubiquitous, there is little reprieve from "The Eyes of Other People," no chance to develop an aesthetic, or more importantly, an intellectual self-reliance.

This problem is an amplification of the interpersonal difficulty Franklin describes — how observation by others skews and influences our judgements. However, in the Internet Age, this is only one side of the coin. In our digital lives, the eyes of algorithms and internet cookies are observing us much more closely than our fellow "users." Where the cost of fine clothes and furniture is a slice of your monthly wage, the cost of free internet accounts is your privacy. There's a price for everything, but we have conditioned ourselves to value our data less than money. Algorithms on "free" internet services can claim a much clearer insight into our behaviour than any of our friends or neighbours could, because they monitor what types of content we pay the closest attention to, approximating our interests, fears, and anxieties to maximise the amount of time we spend online, and therefore increase the amount of time that we can be advertised to, puppeteering us into more and more clicks. There's no malevolent scheme behind all of this, but rather it represents a natural evolution of an economic model (For a clear, informed explanation of this, see Jaron Lanier's *You are Not a Gadget*). We want everything to be free (or, not to cost money), but the engineers who develop these softwares need to make *some* money. We live in a time where advertising has become almost intelligent, predicting what videos and news headlines to show us. We may not mind seeing advertisements for items we're interested in, but are we as relaxed about this when we know that our experience online has been shaped around our personalities for this purpose? As an example, if you and I bought the same newspaper, we would see the same stories, and the same advertisements. This wouldn't be the case if we logged into our social media accounts, or even accounts we have on news websites. What we think about is increasingly mediated by impersonal algorithms designed to market products to us, but which (by nature) have no thought or care for our wellbeing. What are we, if not our thoughts?

It's inescapable that the perceptions of others can ruin us — social anxiety appears to be a constant in human existence. It's here to stay, whether in the form of social judgement about our appearances, or our opinions. The "eyes" of algorithms, on the other hand, are an extremely recent development in culture, but mark a development with a disproportionate impact on human thought and interaction. As fraught with difficulties as human interactions are, and as judgemental as the eyes of others can be, we need them more than we need to have things sold to us at the expense of our privacy. It's worth bearing in mind, that Franklin's

statement was a thought experiment that related to social judgement. We *need* the perception of others, or else we would live in a prison of our own mistakes, with nobody to correct us.

We need to not just see and accept the eyes of others, but to look into them, and see someone else in the same position looking back. The eyes of others, which we may perceive as judgemental, or as gatekeepers of social acceptance belie the same paranoia and anxiety that we all feel — if the words of this essay have resonated at all with you, as a reader, then this is sufficient proof of this truth. In the digital age, what we must do is distinguish between the individual and the algorithm. The medium of our interactions is what makes us more paranoid and more anxious, not the interactions themselves. The unprecedented opportunity of interacting with other human beings from across the world should be a source of great joy, but I don't hear users of Twitter (especially in the past month), Facebook, or Instagram, describing using these "services" in such terms. Why did we let this happen to us? We sign away our privacy when we join such platforms, and it is this lack of privacy that leads us to addiction and open to having our thoughts, behaviours, our very character altered. I think that Thoreau was being quite harsh, pious in his own way, when he looked at others and saw a lack of concern for a "sound conscience" — this kind of discourse makes for many an ugly exchange online. It would not, however, be harsh to say that the companies we have let monopolise our time, attention, and data at the expense of our privacy lack this soundness of moral decision making.

As this essay concludes, this matter of "sound conscience," should bring us back to Franklin, the inspiration for this essay. Franklin pursued "moral perfection" for his whole life, and according to his daily schedule (which you can see for yourself in Mason Currey's *Daily Rituals*), asked himself each evening: "What good have I done today?" I do not wish to negate all the positives that internet technology and social media have brought and have the potential to bring to our lives, but it would seem to me that in this matter of privacy and observation, those who deal in our personal data would do well to ask themselves this same question Ben Franklin did on a daily basis. Indeed, while they were asking themselves this question, we would do well to remember one of Franklin's proverbs in *Poor Richard's Almanack,* every time we agree to another set of terms and conditions, or every time we click "Accept all cookies"*:*

"To whom thy secret thou dost tell,

To him thy freedom thou dost sell."