You may enjoy a personal data control opportunity if Project Bali blooms
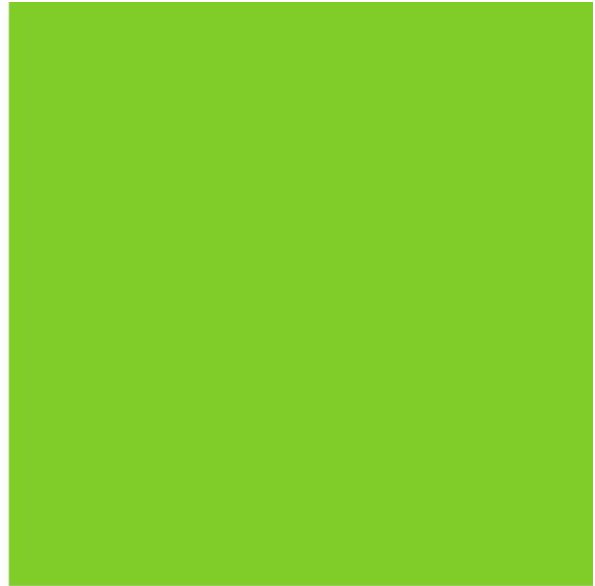
January 7 2019, by Nancy Cohen

Winter souls among the world's computer users have regrets, with I-give-up resignation over the lack of ownership of one's personal data. Now news of a Microsoft project is raising interest and doing the rounds of tech-watching sites for its attempt to address the situation, well, in its own manner.

There are few details about the project, but the very idea of addressing data collection sparks talk and even hope.

Microsoft Research is testing Project Bali, which seeks to hand a kind of control of online data over to (gasp) users. Their idea looks at providing the user with a personal data bank.

What does "bank?" mean in this context? It means data collected about you. Martin Brinkmann, founder of *Ghacks*, said, "All data that belongs to a user should belong to that user according to the Project Bali description."

Well, Michael Kan in *PCMag* had this to say: "Not everyone may like the idea of Microsoft or another third party mining your personal information. But living in ignorance about your digital footprint isn't a great solution either."

Trying to make sense of this project, you might have the idea that it is to make your access to a vast amount of data far easier, under the project codename of Bali.

Kan offered some history behind the project, footprints Microsoft left some year back where its scientists discussed digital privacy. Kan said,

"Often times, people have no idea what data websites and businesses have on them, nor do they have a convenient way to find out, the authors wrote at the time."

Any concept touching upon user power to control personal data has resonance in the aftermath of past headlines regarding user data. One can express satisfaction that Microsoft scientists are spending time on this, but toasting Microsoft may be premature.

BetaNews described a privacy focused tool as "a new control panel which could enable users to manage the data the company collects about them." Mark Wycislik-Wilson said "It promises to not only give users the option of managing and controlling the data collected about them, but also—intriguingly—the ability to monetize it."

Mary Jo Foley in *ZDNet* described the project as a "Microsoft Research incubation effort" and said it seemed to be in private beta testing at this point. Kan in *PCMag* similarly reported that the website for Project Bali stated the effort was an "incubation project" from Microsoft Research.

Dipping into the project's About section, Martin Brinkmann, founder of *Ghacks*, approached the topic with information he could thus far gather about this project. "According to the description there, it is based on a privacy concept called Inverse Privacy...Inverse Privacy refers to personal information that is private to an individual but out of control of that individual."

Anthony Spadafora, *TechRadar*, similarly explained inverse privacy. He said that some examples of organizations that create inversely private data include healthcare providers, the police and employers.

Kelly Sheridan in *Dark Reading* offered a summary of what little is known about Project Bali. She clarified what it tries to do differently.

Those you may interact with such as employers, township, or doctor, have "legitimate reasons for collecting inversely private information (receipts, prescriptions, etc.). Over time, technology has allowed them to record and store that information better than you would. As a result, more of your data has become inversely private, yet difficult to access."

Sheridan further wrote that "inversely private information," may allow the institutions to serve you better, but access to that information, especially if presented in a convenient form, "would do you much good."

So, the project appeared to be talking about an approach where the data is not locked away. *Dark Reading* said that "The idea behind Project Bali is to decrease the amount of inversely private data and give users more control over information."

Luke Jones in *WinBuzzer* also provided a clear take on what the project appears set to achieve: "The solution would allow individual users to aggregate their personal data across websites and services into a single location. Microsoft does not detail which websites are supported currently. However, the goal is clearly to allow Project Bali to act as a single area for data from multiple services."

Kan noted the paper on which Bali was based, in which the authors proposed creating an ecosystem "that would allow consumers to see the data a given company had on them. Businesses actually have a good reason to do this, the authors wrote. Customers prefer dealing with companies that handle their personal data with transparency, rather than those that keep it confidential and shrouded in secrecy."

"Ideally," said Kan, "the same access will also let you correct, rescind, or delete your personal information from a business or website. But time will tell if Project Bali can actually act as an antidote to today's privacy woes."

Reactions in the comments section of *BetaNews* appeared to be from many world-weary computer users who sought to comment on information-hungry business models.

Said one comment: "one of the best jokes is that you'll have to create a Microsoft account—confirming more details about yourself—in order to go in and delete all the stuff they had no honest reason to collect in the first place."

Another comment: "What I'm still not seeing, however, is the thing people want most: the ability to turn off the data mining at the OS and application level entirely. Until we get that there is still no real privacy."

Brinkmann offered his take about Project Bali: "Whether Microsoft's Project Bali will become more than a research project remains to be seen. There is certainly demand from users when it comes to control over user data. A centralized option to view, manage, and delete all data that companies have on users would certainly be appreciated by many."

It is still uncertain if the project will become part of the technology giant's ecosystem. While projects may or may not see their way into real product developments, on the other hand, Kan also reminded readers that Microsoft Research "has historically come up with technological innovations that were later offered as actual Microsoft products."

Wait and see.

More information: ip-dev.cloudapp.net/home/about

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