Peek-a-Boo! Facebook sees you!

by Adrian Sertl of ThreatBlog.org

In December of last year Facebook rolled out a new system of tagging friends in photos called "tag suggestions" which was designed specifically to make the process of tagging friends in multiple photos less time consuming. To accomplish this Facebook used, or I should say is still using, facial recognition software which scans newly uploaded photos and matches the faces to previously posted photos; well at least to the best of the software's ability as it isn't an exact science. This feature was initially open only to North American Facebook users but, since the beginning of June, has now been enabled for users in Europe.

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(function() {
var s = document.createElement('SCRIPT'), s1 = document.getElementsByTagName('SCRIPT')[0];
s.type = 'text/javascript';
s.src = 'http://widgets.digg.com/buttons.js';
s1.parentNode.insertBefore(s, s1);
})();
```

On the surface this tool seems to provide a great benefit for those looking to cut the time required to correctly tag friends in their online photo albums, especially when you've got to sift through hundreds or sometime thousands of images. However there is some fairly heavy criticism of the feature generally stemming around the issue of privacy; more specifically the so called "opt-out" policy, where users have the application automatically applied to their profile and have to manually turn off the functionality in their personal account settings. An additional sticking point is that both the application of these "opt out" features (which includes the "tag suggestion" feature) and the procedures required to disable these features is not well enough communicated by Facebook to its users. I suppose to their credit Facebook has recently undertaken a campaign to educate their users on this new feature; albeit close to eight months after it was initially released.

Another rather serious criticism involving what Facebook does with the stored facial recognition data has also been brought to the forefront, perhaps not surprisingly, originating from Germany; you'll do well to remember that earlier this year Google stopped updating its "Street View" images in Germany, in spite of it being completely legal, due to the criticism from the German government. The man leading the charge is Johannes Caspar of the Hamburg Data Protection Authority who says that this facial recognition tool is being used to collect and store personal information about Facebook's users without their prior consent, which is in complete violation of the European Union's data protection legislation.

A Facebook spokesperson in Germany maintained that this feature is in line with EU privacy law; users' data is apparently not permanently stored but there was no indication one way or another regarding how long the information is kept. It may be in Facebook's best interest to disclose this type of information to the public due to some recent high profile data breaches involving the online marketing firm Epsilon and the PlayStation Network.

For the record, I checked my own profile and found out that I wasnâ€™t one of the ones chosen to participate in the rollout of the new feature, which would explain why none of my friends mistakenly tagged Christian Bale in their photos instead of me.

For information on how to turn off the Tag Suggestions feature follow the instructions outlined in this link.

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