

Lawsuit Accuses Facebook of Breaching User Data for Financial Gain

January 6, 2014 - A class action lawsuit filed in the federal courts for the Northern District of California accuses Facebook of mining data contained in supposedly private messages between users. The suit accuses the company of then using this mined data to target advertising to those users; allowing the company to sell advertising space for more money because of increased response rates.

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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);  
})();
```

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(function() {  
var po = document.createElement('script'); po.type = 'text/javascript'; po.async = true;  
po.src = 'https://apis.google.com/js/plusone.js';  
var s = document.getElementsByTagName('script')[0]; s.parentNode.insertBefore(po, s);  
})();
```

The lawsuit cites independent research which determined that Facebook is scanning private messages looking for links to other websites within those messages. Those links are then used by the company to build a profile of its user's interests. And if the link leads to a page with a Facebook "like" button on it, the company can automatically add a "like" to the linked page.

The lawsuit states, "Contrary to its representations, "private" Facebook messages are systematically intercepted by the Company in an effort to learn the contents of the users' communications ... This practice enables Facebook to mine user data and profit from those data by sharing them with third parties -- namely, advertisers, marketers, and other data aggregators."

Facebook users may not like what the company is doing but the lawsuit may be a longshot. And they certainly shouldn't come as a surprise since all users need to agree to their terms of service prior to the company establishing an account. Those terms of service specifically give the company the right to use any content users post to the site for the company's own purposes. This includes photos and written communications. We can't find anything in the terms that specifically excludes links in private messages. Furthermore, the company doesn't appear to be releasing the content of private messages to anyone. Only the links appear to be used to build an "interest profile" on users which is then used for ad

targeting.

Facebook certainly isn't the only company doing something like this. Google has similar practices in place for Gmail and its other internet properties. So do many other online destinations.

The bottom line for users is that before you sign up for any so-called free service, you should read the "terms of service" and "privacy policy" associated with it. If you don't like the terms, then you shouldn't sign up.

On the other hand, if you decide that you do want to sign up for a free service such as Facebook, then you should learn how to manage your account and its privacy settings early on. Most companies will give you some control over how your information is used and shared, but those settings are often difficult to find. A quick internet search using the term "privacy settings" along with the name of the service will usually solve this issue. Once you find the settings, it is up to you to manage them.

by Jim Malmberg

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