

Techcrunch Call to Make Facebook User Data Disclosure a Data Breach is Misguided

March 20, 2018 - In case you haven't been following all of the outrage in the press on this, depending on whose telling the story a company by the name of Cambridge Analytica supposedly managed to collect user data on anywhere from 16 to 50 million people from Facebook. While that may sound like a huge data breach, it isn't. The data in question was apparently provided voluntarily by about 200,000 people who agreed to participate in a research project by a professor at Cambridge University. That professor then apparently shared his data with Cambridge Analytica without Facebook's knowledge. Then using the rules that all Facebook users are made aware of when they sign up - the ones that say that unless you change your privacy settings, your friends can see each other's profiles - they were able to collect profile information on millions more people. And those people also volunteered to make their information public at the time they signed up for Facebook. It's a little difficult to understand how any of this constitutes a data breach on the part of Facebook.

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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);  
})();
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If you listen to the way the news is reporting this incident, most of the commentators are outraged. But if you listen closely, it quickly becomes apparent that the outrage isn't over the collection of data itself. It is over how that data was eventually used.

Cambridge Analytica was apparently able to develop profiles of its own on those 50 million users. Those profiles were then supposedly used by the Trump campaign to target advertising during the 2016 election. Regardless of what you think of the current administration, that's a perfectly legitimate use of data. It is the same way that corporations use it to target their ads. And very frankly, it is the same way that the Obama campaign collected and used data during the 2008 and 2012 election cycles.

Some of the story doesn't make much sense. Facebook has developed a pretty sophisticated advertising platform that just about anyone can use to target their advertising. Why you would need to develop your own profiles and syphon off information from Facebook on your own isn't clear. You could simply use the platform that's already in place on Facebook and target your ads. Since there are several versions of the story floating around, it is likely that the story will change in the next few days.

Many in the media are now also claiming that this "incident" is what led to the election's outcome. That's a real stretch. No ad for Donald Trump would have swayed a die-hard fan of Hillary. And no ad for Hillary would have swayed a die-hard fan of "the Donald."

We've been telling our readers for years that once you choose to post your information on the internet, it is there forever. That means that just about anyone with some technical knowledge can harvest your information and use it to their benefit.

A data breach occurs when you provide a company with your information and expect them to keep it confidential. Social networks such as Facebook are only useful if your information is shared to some extent. And Facebook, along with most other social networks, gives you the ability to control many of its privacy settings.

Techcrunch has now published an article claiming that this incident should probably be considered a data breach. It isn't. This isn't like the Equifax or Target data breaches. These are companies that had consumer data that was to be used ONLY for very specific purposes. And those companies failed to secure that data. Consumers had absolutely no control of that; unlike someone who posts their name, address and political leanings openly on Facebook.

There are so many critical data breach issues that need to be addressed nationally. This simply isn't one of them and only muddies the water. When you choose to publish your information openly on the internet, you should expect that information to be usedâ€¦ maybe in ways that you don't like. And if you choose to make all of your information public, that isn't a data breach. It's a choice.

by Jim Malmberg

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