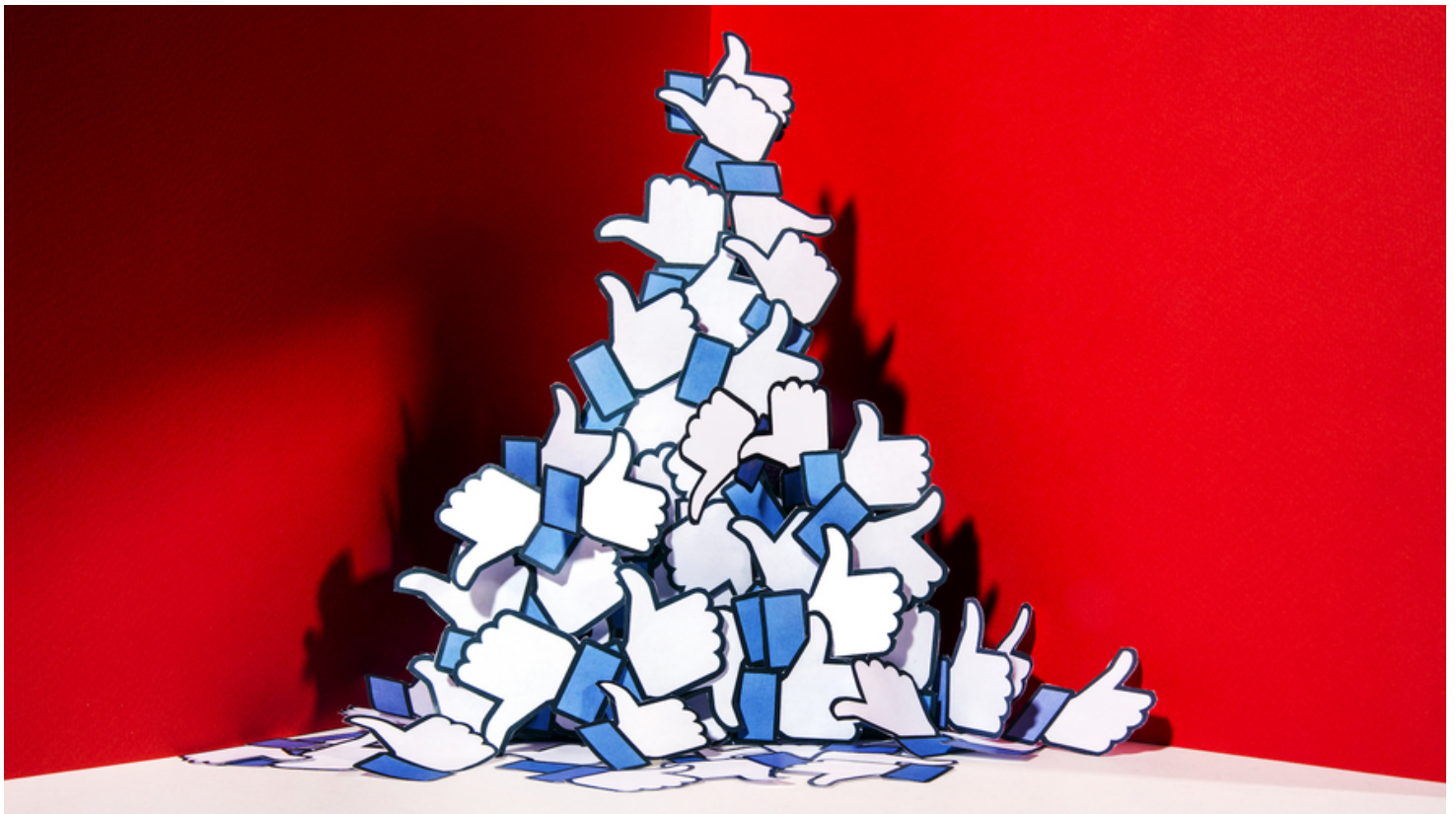


Facebook and others peek at your unposted messages

By Washington Post, adopted by Newsela staff on 02.06.19

Word Count **669**

Level **820L**



Facebook got in trouble recently for saving copies of deleted photos that users posted, then decided to delete. Photo by: Washington Post/Getty Images

Sometimes a Facebook user starts to post a photo then decides to stop. Perhaps the person decides it isn't a good idea to share the photo on social media. Facebook still keeps a copy of the photo.

On December 14, Facebook announced it had saved unposted photos. That fact surprised users. Facebook also announced it mistakenly shared many users' photos with a huge group of apps it partners with. Facebook shared the photos of roughly 6 million users.

Yet it's not just Facebook holding onto our Internet past. Many websites save the typed words or photos we start loading. They save it before we share it. In some cases, they save it even after we choose to get rid of it by hitting delete.

Cookies Keep Track Of Data

Many online users know they're being tracked online. They know about "cookies," pieces of data saved to users' computers. Cookies are also saved on a website's server, which runs the site. The

cookies help keep track of usernames, passwords and websites visited.

Browsers also save search histories. These forms of tracking create a long-lasting trail. They show where users have been online. The saved data can help. It speeds up web surfing. Yet it also allows websites to search people or sell ads to them based on interests.

Some websites go further. They see what users are currently typing. LiveAgent is an online chat service companies use for customer service. LiveAgent employees can see everything a customer writes before sending a message. The company says this allows its workers to prepare a quick response.

David Cacik works at Quality Unit. The company develops LiveAgent. Cacik said companies can choose whether they want to tell people their typing is being watched.

Companies Don't Educate Users

Few people know their words are being watched or saved. Experts say privacy-minded users are already anxious. They also say companies aren't educating users about what they're leaving behind.

People "don't realize that apps can track not only what you post, but any activity on the app," said Tiffany Li. She's a lawyer and scholar at Yale Law School's Information Society Project. "And if people don't know the risks, they haven't been well-informed. That's on the companies."

This data can help website designers. They can discover what might have caused a user to get distracted or annoyed enough to not finish their work. Yet there is another result as well. Users might unknowingly offer information they weren't fully ready to share.

It's hard to know how many websites keep this stuff saved. Yet Princeton University did studies on it last year. The studies showed that hundreds of websites recorded all users' mouse movements and typed words. The websites saved the data in such detail a site could "replay" everything the users had said or done. The websites didn't tell the users about it.

Important Private Data

Princeton's studies were a warning. Websites can share users' important data. Sharing a user's medical conditions, credit-card details or passwords could help criminals. With this private data, criminals can scam users.

Software that recorded people was found on popular websites such as WordPress, Spotify and LiveJournal. However, its presence didn't mean everything was recorded.

Facebook said its users can benefit when it saves unposted photos. Users might want to finish posting the photos later.

Facebook does make users agree to its rules when getting an account. However, users might not read all the rules on websites. They are dreadfully long and complicated. Some rules are also unclear. They do not say unsent data will be saved.

Facebook's rules say, "We collect the content, communications and other information you provide when you use our Products." The rules do not specifically mention unsent photos or messages.

Users can permanently erase deleted data from Facebook. They have to end their accounts. That's the only way. "We store data until it is no longer necessary to provide our services and Facebook Products, or until your account is deleted," the rules say.