

Agenda

YOUR SAY

“A CHILD SHOULD BE ABLE TO BE SMACKED, A TEEN SLAPPED, BUT NO ONE OF ANY AGE SHOULD BE HIT

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CAN WE TRUST FACEBOOK?

It's a frightening thought - Facebook uses cookies to track user behaviour and collect an individual's data after they have logged out. All that information of more than 800 million users in the hands of the world's dominant social network. MITCHELL TOY reports



Australian blogger Nik Cubrilovic exposed a massive privacy breach by Facebook. Picture: MELANIE RUSSELL

NIK Cubrilovic knew something was wrong when he noticed Facebook was leaving tracking files on his computer even when he logged out of the site. A handful of the files, known as cookies, were left on his machine even though they should have been deleted as soon as he logged out of his Facebook account. What came next was scarier. When Mr Cubrilovic visited sites that integrated with Facebook — featuring a “like” or “share” button — the hidden files in his computer became active and started feeding information

back to Facebook. With further investigation and analysis he found out Facebook was able to tell the exact pages, images and links he was looking at on the external website, without him being logged in. The Wollongong resident, 31, a self-proclaimed hacker, knew his discovery was important, but at the time had little idea he had found one of the biggest and most embarrassing privacy flaws ever exposed in the 800-million strong social networking goliath. “I first noticed something was going on with their cookies in November last year,” he said.

“At that time I notified Facebook and asked for an official response, but no action was taken. In January I sent emails to contacts of mine who work at Facebook and to the general Facebook security address.” But it wasn't until the revelations were made public on Mr Cubrilovic's blog in September that Facebook took notice. Within an hour of the blog post going online, it had spread around the world and a US Facebook worker emailed Mr Cubrilovic directly. They worked through the night, with help from Mr Cubrilovic and

his team of code writers in Australia, to disable the most intrusive cookies. The blog post followed months of cross-checks and testing to make sure the tracking was not a browser glitch or other computer fault. “It took a lot of work before I was confident enough to make those accusations in public,” Mr Cubrilovic said. “I knew there was something going on, and that was a way to get it out there — to make sure people knew about it.”

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MIRANDA DEVINE

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The discovery laid bare the way the giant of web interaction gathers information about its users beyond the obvious name, friends and birthday.

The scope, complexity and unrivalled reach of the Facebook machine was seen publicly for the first time.

To crack the cookie code, Mr Cubrilovic drew on a two-decade-long computer career. In 1990, at age 10, he started programming on early home computers.

In 1993, when most were still getting used to the keyboard, the 13-year-old Cubrilovic was accessing the internet and connecting to early bulletin boards.

He studied telecommunications engineering for two years

cookies) gone entirely," Mr Cubrilovic said.

"I do believe the (remaining cookies) are for security purposes but, from a privacy perspective, it's not ideal."

The find has thrust web privacy further into public consciousness and has brought the site under more intense scrutiny.

A spokeswoman for Facebook confirmed this week the site did not track users using its "places" feature when users did not "check in" at locations. Nor does Facebook pass information to third parties, except when co-operating with law enforcement agencies.

But the spokeswoman said Facebook could gather limited information about web users, even if they had

"I would like to see (the cookies) gone entirely . . . from a privacy perspective, it's not ideal."

after high school, but he dropped out.

"When you (teach) yourself, you have to find out a lot of things on your own," Mr Cubrilovic said. "You take more risks."

He describes himself as a hacker, but insists the tag is not sinister. "The true meaning of that word is anyone who works with (online) security systems to find faults," he said.

Mr Cubrilovic works primarily as a consultant on online security, which means he has to know how a site or system can be penetrated maliciously from the outside. He now believes the Facebook cookie problem is far from fixed. His team continues to liaise with Facebook, which is co-operating to make the tracking files less intrusive, but has said some undeletable cookies need to remain for security purposes.

"I would like to see (the

never created a Facebook profile. The "like" and "share" buttons are described as "a little piece of Facebook embedded on another website", which can, at times, collect the same information as the main site.

"We do receive the web page you're visiting, the date and time, and other browser-related information," the spokeswoman said.

"We record this information for a limited amount of time to help us improve our products."

Mr Cubrilovic said broader knowledge of Facebook's techniques meant greater accountability.

"One blogger recently wrote, 'This stuff freaks the hell out of me'.

"On a few occasions, I have wondered how they get away with it."

Updates on the cookie discovery are available on Mr Cubrilovic's blog at nikcub.appspot.com.

EVERY CLICK YOU MAKE, WE'LL BE WATCHING YOU

WHAT IS FACEBOOK?

An online social networking tool. Founded by four Harvard University students in 2004.

Originally a social profile site accessible only to university students.

Now has more than 800 million users worldwide.

Gives each user a personal profile and allows them to connect with friends.

Allows photos, comments and digital links to be shared publicly or privately.

Total revenue could reach \$4.3 billion in 2011.

CEO Mark Zuckerberg (right), 27, has a net worth of more than \$17 billion.

Was the subject of a lawsuit in 2004 after twins Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss claimed Zuckerberg stole their idea.

YOU CAN LOG OUT ANY TIME ... BUT YOU CAN NEVER LEAVE

WHAT does Facebook know about you? Anything you tell it, plus a bit more.

Your date of birth, your full name, your workplace, your colleagues and your relatives are all known by Facebook if you enter that information in your profile.

But Facebook also keeps track of whose photo albums you look at, whose profile you visit, who you talk to on Facebook Chat and, in some cases, which websites you view outside Facebook.

It knows what you search for on Facebook and your location at work or home (through your computer's unique IP address), and it calculates which friends you interact with the most. It even keeps tabs on where you are out and about when you "check in" using Facebook Places.

Facebook can get information about your web browsing even if you have never started a Facebook account.

The social network does not sell personal information to third parties, so why does it meticulously hoard data about how its users live?

Social media consultant

Lucio Dias Ribiero, of The Online Circle, says it is all about money.

He explains that the mass of information Facebook holds is worth more to it when kept in its own hands because it is used to tailor-make advertisements for its users.

"In my opinion, Facebook would never sell data to a third party, or let anyone else see it," Mr Dias Ribiero says. "Advertisers go to

The advertising model helped Facebook revenue approach \$3.8 billion this year, but the technique is not new.

"For years, Gmail has been doing a similar thing," Mr Dias Ribiero says.

"I send an email to my relative overseas about a wedding, and all of a sudden I'm getting ads on Gmail for wedding dress-makers. Essentially, Gmail is scanning through my

feed information into the Facebook database.

"If you're logged out or don't have a Facebook account and visit a website with the Like button or another social plug-in, your browser sends us a more limited set of information," the spokeswoman says.

"We do receive the web page you're visiting, the date and time, and other browser-related information. We record this information for a limited amount of time to help us improve our products."

Most websites accrue data about their visitors through IP addresses and cookies, and can tell who visited which pages.

Dan Svantesson, of the Aust-

ralian Privacy Foundation, says Facebook is a trap for inexperienced web users, who can inadvertently share sensitive information through their profile.

"Facebook hasn't taken privacy seriously," he says.

"You have to be very careful how you go about adjusting the (privacy) settings. Default settings in this type of product are often set to the public setting, and making them private is not always easy.

"Privacy laws (in this area) in Australia are very weak. One of the key problems is that we have Facebook sitting in the US, so there are some problems from a cross-border perspective."

Mr Dias Ribiero says Facebook users

should assume everything they do on the social network can be stored and recalled for advertising and security purposes.

Even when a Facebook page is deleted, it can remain in a back-up server for months.

To adjust privacy settings, Facebook users can click on the downward arrow next to the "Home" button in the top right corner, and select "Privacy settings".

TO stop people who are not friends on Facebook viewing the profile, the "Friends" icon should be checked instead of the "Public" icon.

Users can click to "Edit settings" link next to the "How you connect" to adjust who can view their wall and send them messages.

Privacy for individual wall posts can now be controlled by clicking the downward arrow next to the "Post" button before making the post.

Privacy settings for posts that have already been made can also be altered by hovering the mouse over the post, then clicking the cog icon that appears in the top right corner.

Facebook can get information about your web browsing even if you have never started a Facebook account.

Facebook, and Facebook is able to place their ad in front of, for example, all 13-year-old users who mention in their profile they like football.

"There is also type-of-profile advertising where, if one person 'likes' a brand, it will tell their friends about that. Consumers are far more likely to engage with an ad and a brand when it is being endorsed by somebody they know."

Information is gathered by Facebook that optimises the advertising process and makes it as persuasive as possible, Mr Dias Ribiero says.

mail to determine what I'm interested in."

In Facebook's new Chat feature, Facebook offers its users a suggested list of their best friends.

The list is based on how many times the user and their friends view each other's pages and photos, and how many times they interact with each other on features such as Chat.

Facebook can also track your movements on the web even if you have never started an account. A Facebook spokeswoman confirms external websites with a "like" or "share" button from Facebook can

WHAT DOES FACEBOOK KNOW ABOUT YOU?

■ Anything you enter into your profile, public or private, including age, hometown, telephone number, colleagues and friends.

■ Anything written in private messages and Facebook Chat.

■ Who you chat to on Facebook, the photos you view and the profiles you visit.

■ The advertisements you view through Facebook.

■ Certain websites you visit outside Facebook when those sites use a Facebook "like" or "share" button.

■ Your location at home or work through the unique IP address in your computer.

■ Your location out and about when you or your friends "check in" using Facebook Places on mobile devices.

■ The number of computers or devices you use to access your Facebook account.

■ The people you interact with the most through the site.

■ Anything you enter in the Facebook search bar.

