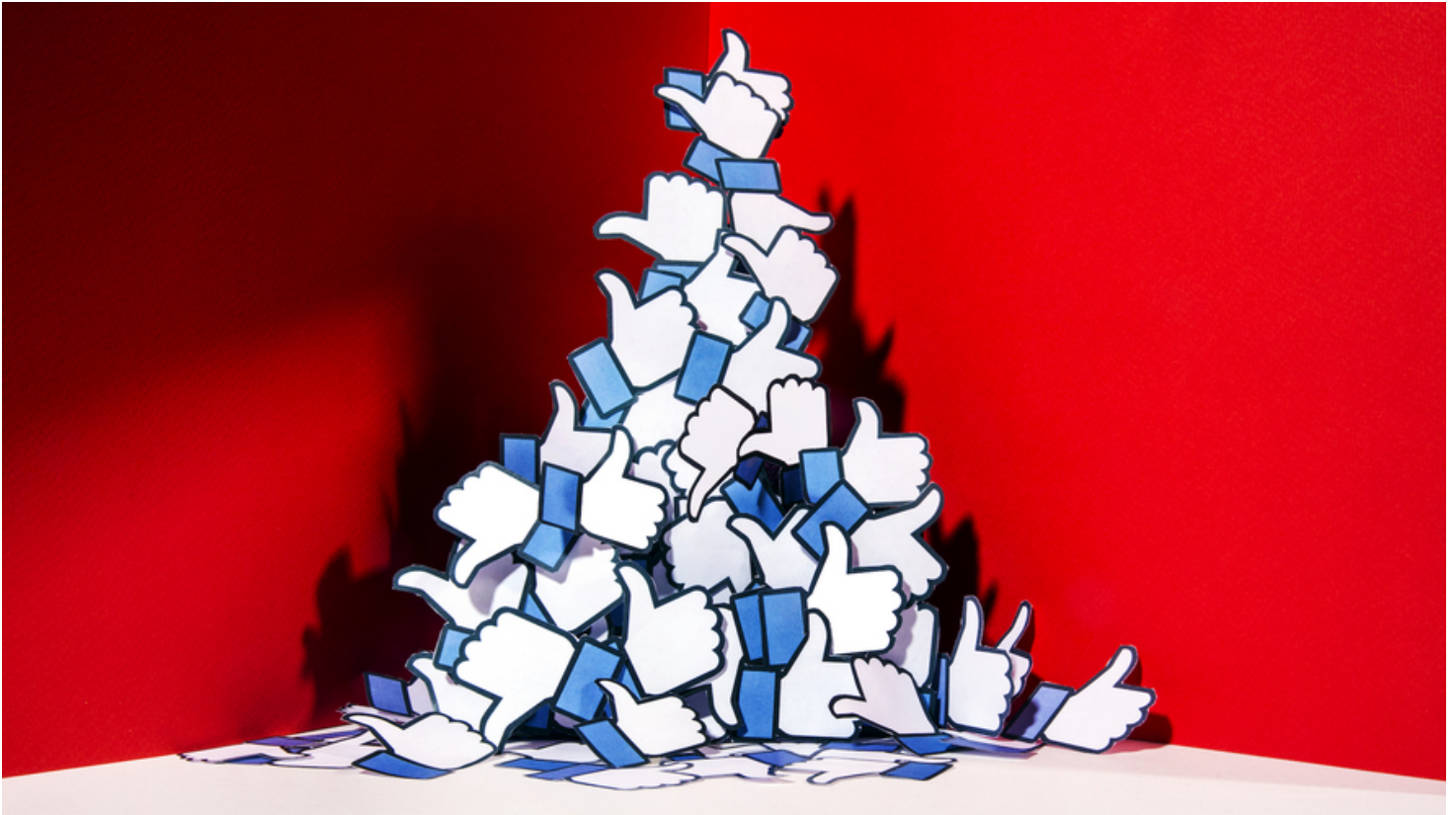


Facebook and others hold onto ghosts of our Internet past

By Washington Post, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.06.19

Word Count **864**

Level **1050L**



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

When a Facebook user starts to post a photo, but decides to stop, the social media company still keeps a copy. Facebook always saves a memory, even if the person decided it was best not to share it.

That fact surprised users. On December 14, Facebook announced it had saved those unposted photos. It also announced that, for up to 6 million users, it accidentally exposed them to a huge group of apps that it works with.

Yet it's not just Facebook holding onto the ghosts of our Internet past. Many websites save the text, photos or other information we start loading. They save it before we share it with a click of "Post," "Enter" or "Submit." In some cases, they save it even after we choose to get rid of it by hitting delete.

Many online users have a general sense they're being tracked online. They know they're creating a long-lasting trail of browser "cookies," website log-ins and search histories. These forms of

tracking can follow them while online. The data can generally help speed up web browsing. It also allows websites to more precisely track a person for searching and advertising purposes.

Watching While You Type

However, some websites go further. They allow the company to see what its users are currently typing. LiveAgent is an online chat service that companies use for customer service. It offers a "real-time typing view" of everything a customer writes before hitting "Send message," saying this will allow a LiveAgent representative to prepare a quick response. "Customers will appreciate your quick and precise answers," the company's website says.

David Cacik is an official at Quality Unit, which develops LiveAgent. Cacik said companies get to choose whether they want to alert people their typing is being watched. He said it's "up to them to inform their users."

Fewer people know about this special kind of "undead" data, or data discarded by the user but still saved by the site. Experts say companies aren't doing enough to educate privacy-minded users already anxious about what they're leaving behind.

People Not Well-Informed

People "don't realize that apps can track not only what you post, but any activity on the app," said Tiffany Li, a lawyer and legal 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 and engineers. They can pinpoint what might have caused a user to get distracted, discouraged or annoyed enough to not finish their work. Yet it also opens the possibility users will unknowingly offer information they weren't ready to fully share.

It's hard to know how many websites keep this stuff saved. Yet Princeton University researchers last year found that hundreds of websites recorded all users' mouse movements and typed text in such detail a site could "replay" everything the users had said or done. And the websites did so without telling the users about it.

This type of software was found on the websites of WordPress, Spotify, LiveJournal and others. However, its presence didn't mean everything was being recorded. Websites also had a choice in saving the data. The tracking, researchers wrote, could expose users' medical conditions, credit-card details, passwords and other private information to scams.

Facebook said it saves unposted photos to benefit users. It allows users to finish posting the photos later. Some social media sites and apps like Twitter automatically save "drafts" of what people typed for later use.

Still, officials from Twitter and Instagram say they don't upload messages, photos or videos onto their servers until they're posted. The drafts are saved on the person's phone. Only that person can view the data.

Shopping websites have for years stored similar data on unused online shopping carts. This happens when users went to buy something but ended up not finishing the purchase. The sites will often send reminder emails to nudge users into sealing the deal.

Peeking at unposted messages is not new territory for many companies, including Facebook. In 2013, two workers collected data from 4 million users. They called the data "last-minute self-censorship." These updates, posts or comments were written then deleted.

Interfering With Self-Censorship

About 70 percent of monitored users, they found, had deleted data over a period of about two weeks, and that rate changed based on many factors, including the makeup of their friend groups. The focus of the research was all business. With too much self-censorship, they wrote, Facebook "loses value from the lack of content generation."

Users might read the privacy agreements for websites, which are dreadfully long and technically complex. However, it's still not always made clear their unsent thoughts will be saved and stored. Facebook's data policy, or regulation, says, "We collect the content, communications and other information you provide when you use our Products." However, it doesn't specifically mention unsent photos or messages.

Users can end their accounts. Otherwise, there's no way to permanently erase what they've already deleted. "We store data until it is no longer necessary to provide our services and Facebook Products, or until your account is deleted — whichever comes first," the policy says.

Quiz

1 Which section from the article BEST explains why it is dangerous for websites to track everything people do online?

- (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-4]
- (B) "Watching While You Type"
- (C) "People Not Well-Informed"
- (D) "Interfering With Self-Censorship"

2 Read the selection below from the section "Interfering With Self-Censorship."

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Which conclusion is BEST supported by the selection above?

- (A) Websites have complex privacy agreements in order to better protect users' private information.
- (B) Facebook has failed to clearly inform users that the company saves users' unposted data.
- (C) Website users can read a website's privacy agreement to learn exactly which types of data are saved.
- (D) Facebook users can ask Facebook to permanently erase any unposted data that the company has stored.

3 Which of the two following sentences from the article include CENTRAL ideas of the article?

1. *When a Facebook user starts to post a photo, but decides to stop, the social media company still keeps a copy.*
2. *Experts say companies aren't doing enough to educate privacy-minded users already anxious about what they're leaving behind.*
3. *Still, officials from Twitter and Instagram say they don't upload messages, photos or videos onto their servers until they're posted.*
4. *Users might read the privacy agreements for websites, which are dreadfully long and technically complex.*

- (A) 1 and 2
- (B) 2 and 3
- (C) 3 and 4
- (D) 4 and 1

4 Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?

- (A) Some companies provide an online chat service for customers on their website.
- (B) Most Facebook users delete some data over a period of two weeks.
- (C) Facebook says that users benefit when it saves their unposted photos.
- (D) Apps can track everything a user posts and does on the apps.