



Facebook App Adds Yet Another Powerful Tracking Feature

Facebook has updated its mobile platform to include an ambient proximity tool called Nearby Friends. The tech blog Techcrunch describes the new feature:

It lets you constantly share the current neighborhood where you are and the approximate distance between you and your friends or whoever you authorize. It also lets you share your exact, real-time location with specific friends for a few hours or indefinitely. The feature is designed to make it easy to meet up with friends.



Real-time location tracking? No wonder Techcrunch adds that the new service “has major privacy implications.”

In Facebook’s defense, the location tracking feature is “opt in,” meaning that users will have to activate the service, rather than having to deactivate the service if they didn’t want their location revealed.

This policy decision is likely the result of a penalty imposed in 2011 by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) that requires the social media mammoth to submit to 20 years of privacy audits conducted by the agency. Another provision of the penalty mandates that any new features offered by Facebook must be “opt in.”

Opt-in or not, Facebook’s mobile app (available on both Android and iOS platforms) is becoming a powerful, portable monitoring tool.

As *The New American* [reported late last month](#):

A recent “improvement” to the Facebook mobile app is being praised by tech bloggers, but it seems the bigger, more sinister side of the upgrade is being ignored.

In the “coming weeks,” the social media behemoth will roll out a service that, according to an announcement on its blog, will give users “the option to use your phone’s microphone to identify what song is playing or what show or movie is on TV.”

That means if you want to share that you’re listening to your favorite Beyoncé track or watching the season premiere of *Game of Thrones*, you can do it quickly and easily, without typing.

Certainly, as the company claims, that is a handy little tool for recording the sounds entering into a smartphone’s microphone with nearly no human interaction required.

There is something disturbing in the potential uses of this option, however. The frightening application of the app is, accidentally it seems, explained in a *Huffington Post* article promoting the technology: “Facebook Can Now Listen To Everything You Listen To.”

Since implementing the ambient sound recognition feature, Facebook has seen a significant



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backlash from users wary of having such a powerful surveillance system in their pocket.

This reporter [wrote last week](#):

An Australian news site reports that “the feature has sparked an online backlash, with users mobilising in an effort to get the social media giant to kill off the development.” The petition has over half a million signatures as of press time.

“Facebook just announced a new feature to its app, which will let it listen to our conversations and surroundings through our own phones’ microphone. Talk about a Big Brother move,” the petition reads.

There are hundreds of thousands of Facebook users who fortunately recognize that the ostensible upside of having the social media app scan and record sounds so that you don’t miss out on knowing who sings that catchy song on that commercial you just watched is more than offset by the eery side effect of having all your conversations sucked up and stored somewhere.

“Tell Facebook not to release its creepy and dangerous new app feature that listens to users’ surroundings and conversations,” the petition urges. “Facebook says it’ll be responsible with this feature, but we know we can’t trust it.”

Whether any of the company’s reported 874 million mobile users will similarly resist the location tracking technology that is now part of the ubiquitous app remains to be seen.

One part of the Nearby Friends feature records a user’s Location History, which saves a master list of all the places visited by the user when he’s carrying his smartphone loaded with the app. Facebook records the user’s search history, as well.

Taken together, Facebook is a powerful and pernicious surveillance tool. If that tool was used by a person or group with a nefarious purpose, there is little of an individual’s private information that is not known or knowable.

Facebook has not revealed the number of users that have opted in to the Nearby Friends feature. In reality, though, that is hardly relevant.

A far more important question is how much privacy people are willing to surrender in order to post pictures of grumpy cats and see pictures of their friends’ food.

While history will one day reveal that answer, what is already known is that the world is becoming a global Panopticon where every call, every text, every e-mail, every online message, and every movement is coming under the all-seeing eye of some private or government entity and being recorded on massive servers.

A question that Facebook and all other such social media sites must eventually answer is who has access to the data it sees and stores.

Last year, for example, government agencies — including federal, state, and local authorities — requested user data on between 18,000 and 19,000 account holders.

The remarkable disclosure of government requests for users’ private information follows successful negotiations between Facebook and other tech giants and the federal government.

Beginning last year, Facebook, Google, and other technology companies who were implicated in the revelations of the NSA’s PRISM program have petitioned the feds to allow them to disclose their level of



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participation in surveillance requests received from government entities.

Under PRISM, the NSA and the FBI are “tapping directly into the central servers of nine leading U.S. Internet companies, extracting audio, video, photographs, e-mails, documents and connection logs that enable analysts to track a person’s movements and contacts over time,” as reported by the *Washington Post*.

The joint venture has been functioning since 2007, but came to light only in a PowerPoint presentation that was part of the cache of documents leaked by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden.

Snowden claimed that the program was so invasive that “They [the NSA and the FBI] quite literally can watch your ideas form as you type.”

According to the information Snowden released, Facebook routinely grants the federal government access to the private information of millions of users.

That is not to say that Facebook is a middle man for the federal surveillance apparatus — the NSA — but all users are right to demand transparency in Facebook’s transfer to anyone of any of their private location, conversation, and search history.

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