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APP. 250

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Facebook auto-liking pages for users without permission [updated]

Oct 4, 2012

Craig Lloyd
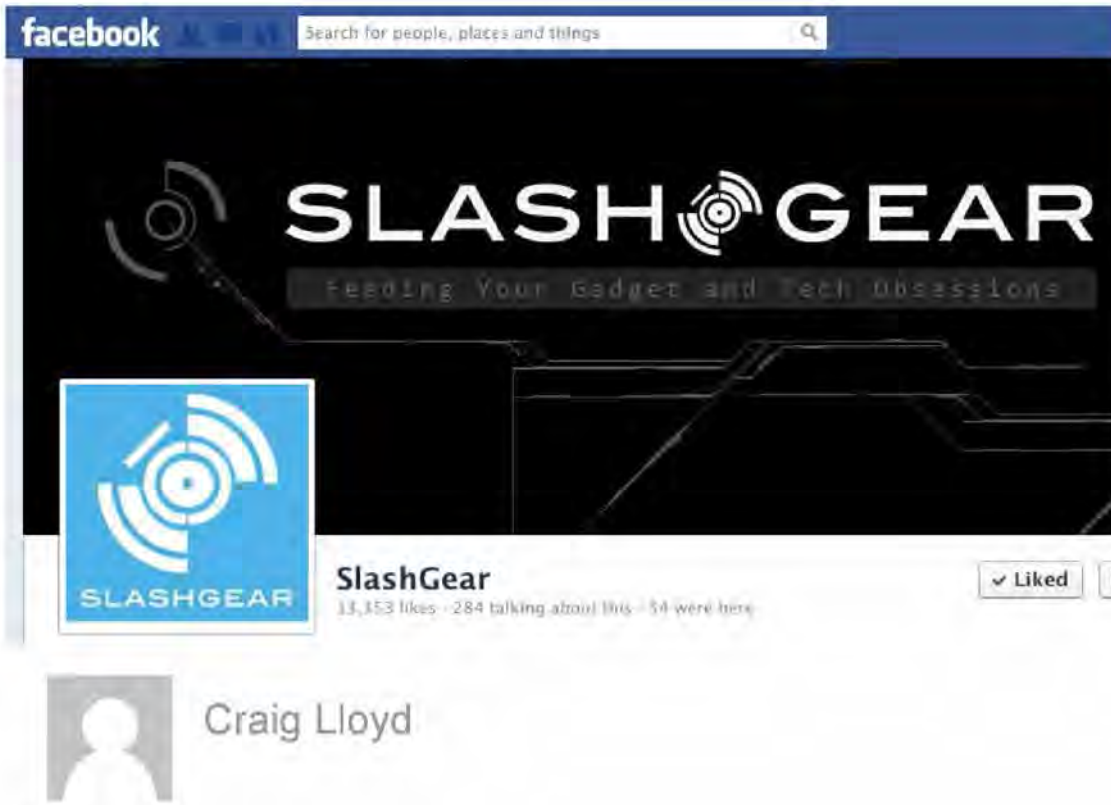
Some more bad news has hit the Facebook front today. It's being reported that Facebook is scanning its users' private messages and searching for links to Facebook fan pages. Once it finds these links, Facebook supposedly automatically likes the pages for you without asking for your permission to do so.

This could either be a bug or a deliberate feature, but the scanning of messages is said to increase the Like count for a fan page just by talking about it. However, it only seems that it increases the Like count of a page, and doesn't actually "like" the page on your behalf. Then again, some users are reporting that it actually does like the page for you without your permission.

Obviously, this can be a huge problem if you're talking to a friend about something specific,

APP. 252

like how much you hate a certain band's music. Mentioning the band and linking to its fan page in a private message to a friend could lead to you liking the page without you even knowing.

Scanning itself is nothing new. Gmail does it to provide its users with targeted ads, but this auto-liking debacle takes it to another level that's a little over the line and unnecessary. Then again, a lot of users are reporting that it works and others are saying that it's not truly liking the page for you, so it actually might just be an unfortunate bug on Facebook's end. Either way, hopefully Facebook addresses the issue and brings order to chaos.

UPDATE: Facebook has reached out to us and commented about this issue: "Absolutely no private information has been exposed and Facebook is not automatically Liking any Facebook Pages on a user's behalf...Many websites that use Facebook's 'Like', 'Recommend', or 'Share' buttons also carry a counter next to them. This counter reflects the number of times people have clicked those buttons and also the number of times people have shared that page's link on Facebook. When the count is increased via shares over private messages, no user information is exchanged, and privacy settings of content are unaffected. Links shared through messages do not affect the Like count on Facebook Pages."

JUKING YOUR FACEBOOK 'LIKE' STATS IS AS EASY AS SENDING A MESSAGE

FOR THOSE LOOKING to artificially inflate their Facebook stats to impress people or drive sales, there's a new alternative to begging or bribing people for "Likes." Now you or your friends can just simply send a raft of private messages that include a link to your page, and Facebook will add +2 to your page's "Like" count for each message.

It's long been known that Facebook scans internal messages for spam and security risks — and that it blocks users from sending links to torrent sites such as The Pirate Bay. But Facebook has never been clear how much data-mining its doing of users' private conversations. It turns out, at least some is provably going on.

The Wall Street Journal's Digits Blog, with the help of researcher Ashkan Soltani, reported on a video showing the "Like" pumping and reproduced it:

The video, which was posted this week on Hacker News, showed a person who sent links in Facebook messages in order to inflate the number of "Likes" a page had received. Each time the link was sent, the page's "Like" count went up by two, something that the Hacker News poster said allows people to "pump up to 1,800 'Likes' in an hour."

In addition to raising privacy questions, then, the video points to potential problems with "Like fraud."

"If [you're] visiting an online store and you see a lot of likes under the product then this might cloud your judgement," one commenter wrote.

The video has since been taken down for violating YouTube's restrictions on the depiction of "harmful activities," but the behavior was also confirmed and recorded by Digits. There's also a page that you can use to test this yourself. As of this afternoon, sending this link in a Facebook message boosted the "Like" count by two each time.

That's a pretty great little hack, but evidently, it's not a bug. It's something actually noted in the documentation for developers.

Still, faked stats are better in my book than the bought ones – where companies give discounts or hide music/videos behind a 'Like' wall. But given that Facebook is now letting brands and even people pay to flood their messages onto others' walls, it's way too late to be crying that Facebook is supposed to be a genuine social space.

Update: Facebook's PR firm writes in to add comment:

Absolutely no private information has been exposed and Facebook is not automatically Liking any Facebook Pages on a user's behalf.

Many websites that use Facebook's 'Like', 'Recommend', or 'Share' buttons also carry a counter next to them. This counter reflects the number of times people have clicked those buttons and also the number of times people have shared that page's link on Facebook. When the count is increased via shares over private messages, no user information is exchanged, and privacy settings of content are unaffected. Links shared through messages do not affect the Like count on Facebook Pages.

We did recently find a bug with our social plugins where at times the count for the Share or Like goes up by two, and we are working on fix to solve the issue now. To be clear, this only affects social plugins off of Facebook and is not related to Facebook

Page likes. This bug does not impact the user experience with messages or what appears on their timelines.

That said, user demographics of those who share via Facebook messages are included in the stats seen by page owners, according to Soltani.

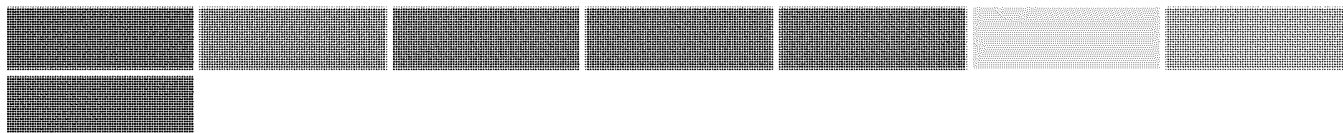Here's a screenshot of what that looks like:

APP. 256
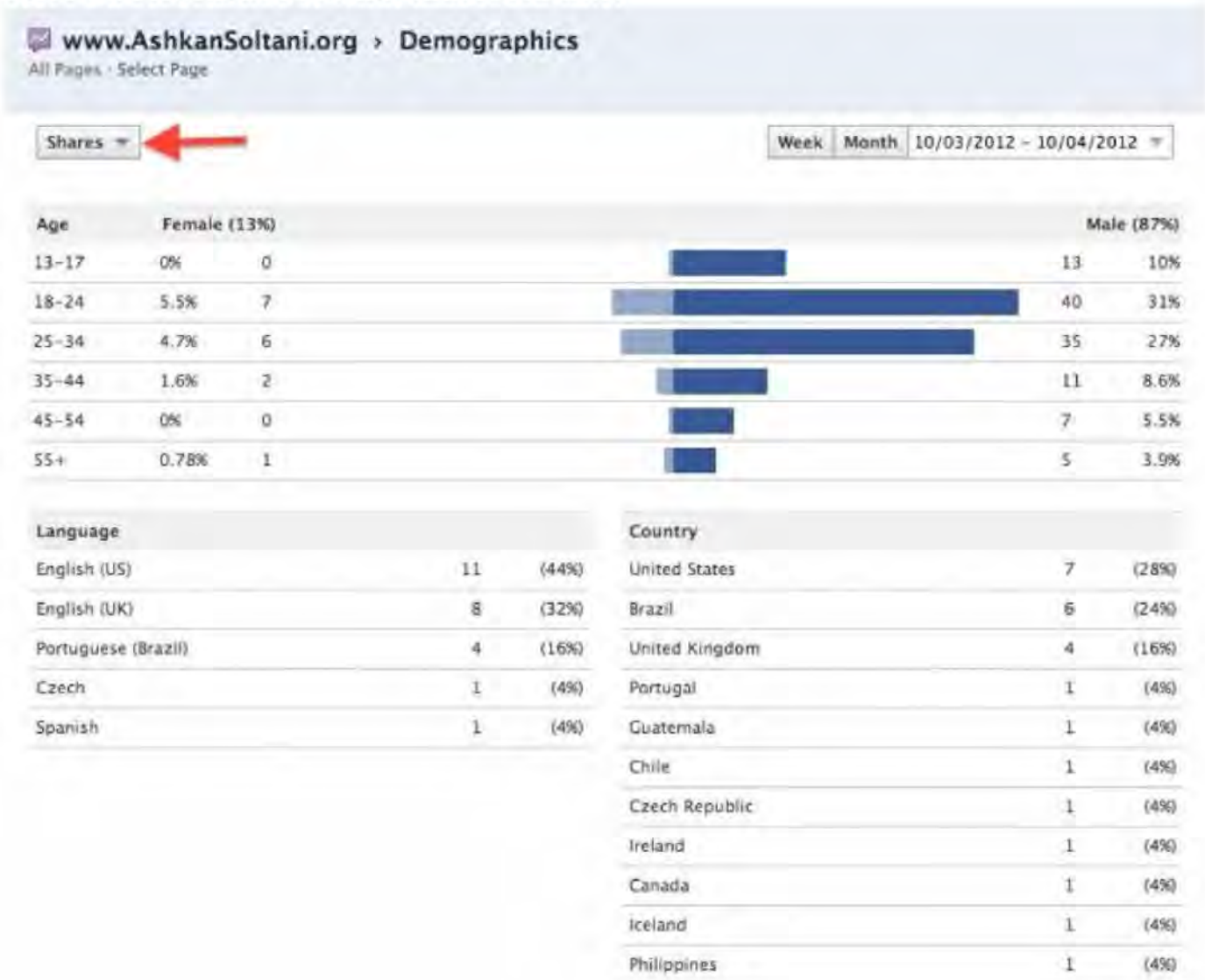
Facebook Confirms Peeking At Private Messages

| Posted By: Paul Shea | Posted date: October 04, 2012 04:48:28 PM | In: Technology | No Comments |

In a surprise announcement today, Facebook Inc (NASDAQ:FB) confirmed that it scans private messages between users. The statement from the Menlo Park company comes in response to a video released yesterday, which showed the effects private messages containing links had on the Like counter of the linked content.

Facebook, which today announced it had reached 1 billion users, has been battling with privacy concerns even more fervently since its IPO in may. The company today announced it would allow users to pay to have some of their comments appear higher up on the website for the first time. The news was first reported bythenextweb.com today.

The video, released by a Polish start up company, called Killswitch.me, was removed from Youtube, because of some objectionable content. anybody who would still like to view it in its entirety, it's just over 2 minutes long, can see it on Vimeo.

In a rare move toward openness, Facebook Inc (NASDAQ:FB) has taken the initiative and confirmed that it does in fact read the private messages that are sent from user to user. It is these scans that caused the likes of linked content to increase.

Facebook Inc (NASDAQ:FB) is using a series of bots that scan private messages for links to content that contains "Like" buttons. If a Like button is detected, however, a bug is activated, whereby the linked content has its likes increased by two.

A tutorial on how to activate the glitch, and thereby artificially increases the Likes of specific

content, appears in the video. It is unlikely that this will lead to an extended period of "Like" inflation however. It appears from the video that the process is time consuming and repetitive.

The glitch acknowledged by Facebook is not in the increase in "Likes", or the scanning of messages. It is, in fact, in the magnitude of the increase in "Likes". According to Facebook Inc (NASDAQ:FB), when a link is shared in a private message it should increase the "Like" counter by one, rather than two.

This may be news to some long time Facebook users. The company's famous "Like" counter measures not just clicks on a Like button, but takes into account sharing of the content, as well as comments on the content, and now private messages.

Emil Protalinski, the writer at thenextweb.com who originally picked up on this story, rightly points out that the scanning of private messages for data on content is not the same as scanning for the same data on comments, or public declarations of "Like".

This is not the first time a company has been indicted for scanning the content of users' private messages. Google Inc (NASDAQ:GOOG) and other web mail providers have been scanning users' emails for years, in order to pick the advertisements best suited to them.

Facebook responded quickly to privacy questions, sternly asserting that no user information was shared, and summarized a definition of a "Like" that left it beyond any user's ownership. In the following quote, Facebook essentially claims ownership of the "Likes" of a user through distribution control.

"Many websites that use Facebook's 'Like', 'Recommend', or 'Share' buttons also carry a counter next to them. This counter reflects the number of times people have clicked those buttons, and also the number of times people have shared that page's link on Facebook. When the count is increased via shares over private messages, no user information is exchanged, and privacy settings of content are unaffected. Links shared through messages do not affect the Like count on Facebook Pages".

Facebook Inc (NASDAQ:FB) has certainly not crossed a line with this latest news, any more than they have on hundreds of other occasions. Because of the nature of the business, the company will be dodging privacy issues for as long as it operates. A satisfactory solution to who owns what, and who gets to read what, is unlikely to be formed in our life times.

APP. 260

FACEBOOK (/SOCIALTIMES/CATEGORY/FACEBOOK)

Facbook clari fes how Like plugin works, addresses privacy concerns

3
SHARES

By Brittany Darwell (http://www.adweek.com/socialtimes/author/brittany-darwell)
on Oct. 4, 2012 - 2:51 PM

Comment (http://www.adweek.com/socialtimes/facebook-clarifies-how-like-plugin-works-addresses-privacy-concern)
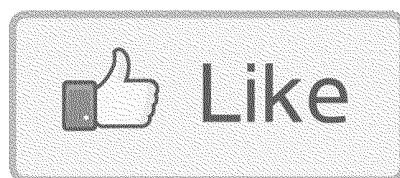
Facebook responded to reports (http://gizmodo.com/5948948/facebook-is-reading-your-messages-and-liking-things-for-you) today (http://thenextweb.com/facebook/2012/10/04/facebook-confirms-it-is-scanning-your-private-messages-for-links-so-it-can-increase-like-counters) that alleged the social network was scanning private messages and Liking pages on users' behalf.

The company clarified that the Like count of an article or webpage will increase when users share the link via direct messages, however no private information is shared. URLs sent through private messages are not shown publicly on user profiles and users will not see a friend's name or photo next to a Like button if the person shared the article privately.

When publishers implement social plugins such as the Like, Recommend, Share or Send buttons, they and site visitors can see a counter of how many actions have been made related to that link. It isn't completely clear to outsiders that the total includes actions that were made by clicking the button

APP. 261

directly, as well as the number of times the link was copy-pasted into a Facebook post or message, which is why some users thought the social network had a security flaw. However, Facebook explains this in the FAQ about the Like button plugin (https://developers.facebook.com/docs/reference/plugins/like/).

Sending link via Facebook message increases Like count
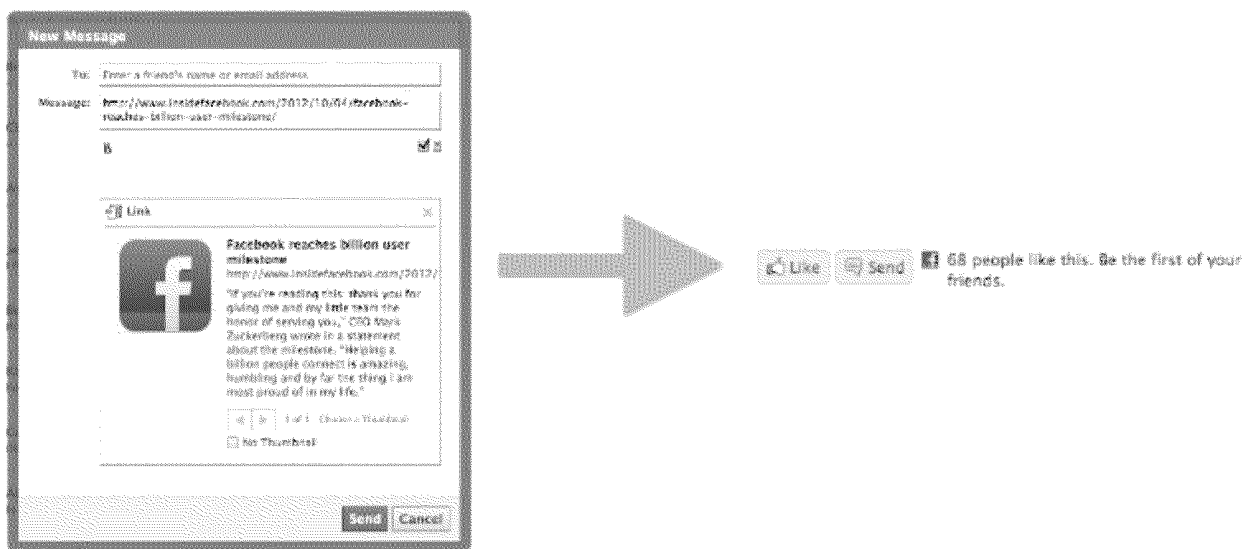
But doesn't lead user to Like the link or share it publicly

Facebook notes that no human is reading users' private messages. Its systems parse the URL being shared in order to render the appropriate preview and to ensure that the message is not spam. In the process, it also adds to the link's share total. The company admitted that the feature recently had a bug that led the count for the Share or Like plugin to occasionally increase by two instead of one, but it is working on a fix so that publishers have accurate metrics for their sites. This does not apply to Facebook pages, only to third-party sites that have implemented social plugins.

Some people taken issue (http://techcrunch.com/2012/10/04/theres-a-fine-line-between-private-and-public-and-facebook-might-have-just-crossed-it/) with Facebook adding private shares to the public total for a link, though we

APP. 262

see this as similar to site visitor widgets, which increase whenever a user visits a webpage but do not reveal who visited. Even if the privacy implications are minimal, there is the matter of all these actions being combined under the "Like" or "Recommend" wording, which suggests positive feelings, even though some users might have shared a link that they disagreed with wanted to talk about for reasons besides recommending it. This might look good for publishers but doesn't necessarily reflect the true sentiment about a post.

APP. 263

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APP. 265

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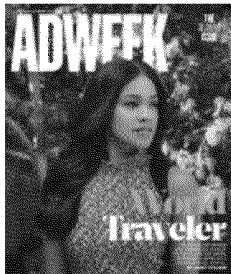joid=178364&utm_source=adweek.com&utm_medium=customjobswidget)
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APP. 266

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APP. 267

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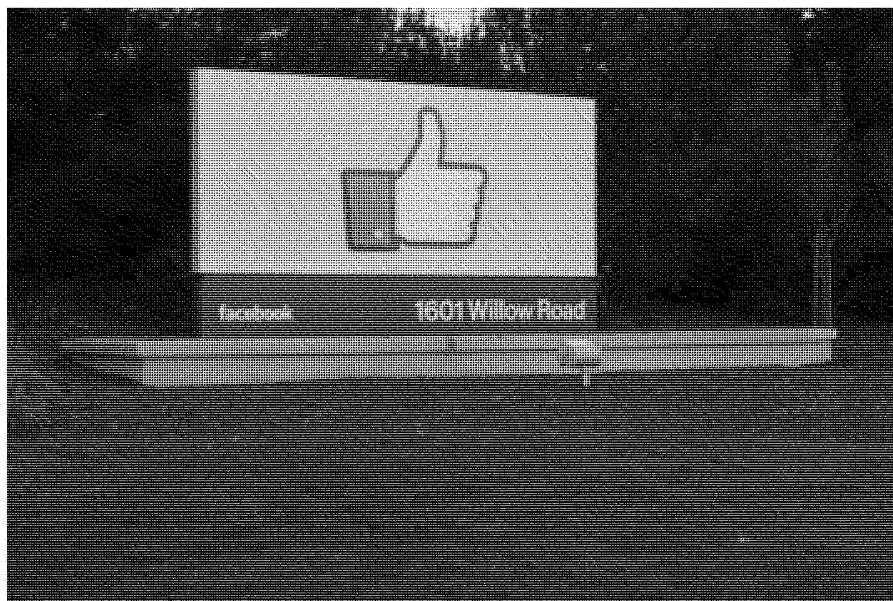
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To Facebook, a shared link is as good as a Like

The company's social plug-ins automatically count links you share – on your wall or through Facebook messages – as a "Like" for that page.

by Donna Tam 🐦 @DonnaYTam / October 4, 2012 12:42 PM PDT

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Facebook

Like it or not, Web pages can count your Facebook shares as a "Like."

A Facebook Like multiplier bug going around highlighted a feature of the social network that may seem unfair to some: If you send a Web site's link to a friend via a Facebook message or if you post it to your Facebook wall, that Web page's Like counter ticks upward.

First noticed by The Wall Street Journal, the feature may rankle some users who don't want to be a part of an overinflated count for some Web site tracking its visitors, or users may feel violated that Facebook knows what you're sending a Friend via "private" messaging.

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The count is for any site that has social plug-ins -- those social-media counters usually sitting next to articles or products. Facebook has confirmed that this is all true, and says this method of counting Likes has been in place since Facebook made it possible for Web sites to add Like buttons to their pages. In fact, the social plug-ins counter also counts comments posted in response to a story, in addition to the actual number of Likes and the shares. A recent bug adds two Likes to the count instead of one, and Facebook said it's working to fix that.

But, Facebook says, this feature doesn't affect Like counts on Facebook pages and it's not an invasion of privacy since the Likes on the plugs-ins are anonymous:

> Absolutely no private information has been exposed and Facebook is not automatically Liking any Facebook Pages on a user's behalf.
> Many Web sites that use Facebook's "Like," "Recommend," or "Share" buttons also carry a counter next to them. This counter reflects the number of times people have clicked those buttons and also the number of times people have shared that page's link on Facebook. When the count is increased via shares over private messages, no user information is exchanged, and privacy settings of content are unaffected. Links shared through messages do not affect the Like count on Facebook Pages.
>
> We did recently find a bug with our social plug-ins where at times the count for the Share or Like goes up by two, and we are working on a fix to solve the issue now. To be clear, this only affects social plug-ins off of Facebook and is not related to Facebook Page likes. This bug does not impact the user experience with messages or what appears on their timelines.

Facebook does scan any links that pass through the network to look for spam, according to a Facebook representative. This includes links you send to a friend through messages -- Facebook automatically reviews the links before generating a link preview.

This still leaves the issue of an inflated Like count for links -- even if you were sharing a link to show a friend something you don't like, you'd still be adding to the page's Like numbers. The lesson here? If you don't have anything nice to share, don't share it at all.

Tags: Internet, Privacy, Facebook

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donna Tam / 🐦 📘 🔵

Donna Tam covers Amazon and other fun stuff for CNET News. She is a San Francisco native who enjoys feasting, merrymaking, checking her Gmail and reading her Kindle. See full bio

APP. 269

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2 Tech News

Facebook adding likes on users' behalf, says report

By Mark Langshaw Friday, Oct 5 2012, 4:59am EDT
21Shares

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Facebook is adding 'likes' to pages on behalf of its users when a URL is shared via private message, research suggests.

A US security expert discovered that sending a web address to a friend automatically adds two likes to that page, suggesting that the social network is scanning private messages.

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APP. 270
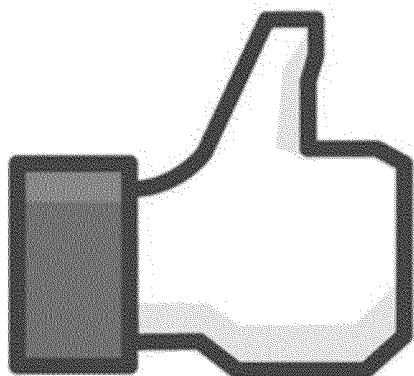
Adding a comment to a story within Facebook also adds to the tally, regardless of whether the written remark is positive or negative.

Facebook has responded to the report's findings and issued a statement denying that privacy information has been exposed.

"Absolutely no private information has been exposed," they told _TechRadar_ in a statement. "Each time a person Shares a URL to Facebook, including through messages, the number of Shares displayed on the social plugin for that website increases.

"Our systems parse the URL being shared in order to render the appropriate preview, and to also ensure that the message is not spam.

"These counts do not affect the privacy settings of content, and URLs shared through private messages are not attributed publicly with user profiles."

> Facebook clamping down on 'fake likes'

Although Facebook also stressed that the addition likes are anonymous and will not appear on users' timelines, critics have pointed out that people who share pages to highlight negative content are making the site appear more popular.

The revelation follows Facebook's announcement that it now reached 1 billion users worldwide.

APP. 271

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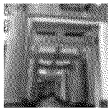Next: 'PocketWarwick' preview: Warwick Davis unveils mobile game - video

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  I'd really like to see a "Dislike" button.
  October 7th 2012 at 5:17am

- Britter
  'Shares', not 'Likes'. They're two different things. See that little 'recommend' button that you have up there above your article? That's what they're talking about.
  October 5th 2012 at 1:02pm

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