



# LAST WORD

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## The Facebook secret service

It started off as an innocent university paper. Austrian law student Max Schrems, 24, thought it would be interesting to find out how much information Facebook had stored about him over the past three years. Facebook's European headquarters is in Ireland and, under European privacy laws, which are stricter than in the US, the company was obliged to disclose the data. Schrems was surprised to receive a CD containing 1,222 pdf files.

He was alarmed to discover that information he had removed from his profile, including deleted messages, had been retained by the social networking site.

"If the post office opened, scanned and analysed every letter that came through and never deleted it, everyone would freak out," says Schrems. "That is what Facebook is doing with our messages. I have read their privacy policy but, after a year investigating, I still have no clear idea of what they use this data for."

Schrems set up an online campaign group called Europe versus Facebook. To date, it has lodged 22 complaints with Ireland's data protection commissioner. All Facebook users outside the US and Canada—about 600 million people, including users in India—have a contract with Facebook Ireland Ltd.

Schrems is concerned that the data will turn into "life archives". These, he claims, could fall into the hands of advertisers or intelligence services. I have had a look at the complaints and Schrems is definitely on to something. I don't believe that Facebook has any hidden, malicious agenda. "The assertion that Facebook is doing some sort of nefarious profiling is wrong," Facebook spokesperson Andrew Noyes recently told Fox News.

I do think we have no idea how much personal information we are agreeing to share online and how it might potentially be used. Schrems's allegations are based on the assumption that Facebook is not only hosting data, but also processing it without our control. It also stores all deleted posts, photo tags and pokes.

More seriously, Schrems alleges (in complaint no. 2) that Facebook is compiling "shadow profiles" of peo-

ple who have not even joined the site. They keep a record of names that have been searched for on Facebook. When someone then joins up, they are alerted to anyone who has been searching for them. Facebook encourages users to hand over data about users and non-users, including email addresses, telephone numbers, addresses and work information. It asks us to synchronise our Facebook account with our email address book contacts.

"Facebook Ireland is creating extensive profiles of non-users and it is also enriching existing user profiles," claims Schrems. "This means that Facebook Ireland is gathering excessive amounts of information about data subjects without notice or consent.... This information might be embar-

assing or intimidating or constitute sensitive data such as political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs and sexual orientation."

Another complaint (no. 17) concerns the "like" button. Many web sites feature this "social plugin" and you and I might think that Facebook only knows that we have visited the site if we choose to like it. But, as Schrems points out, Facebook starts gathering data the moment

we land on the page, including date, time, URL and your computer's IP address, browser and operation system. If you visit Facebook even as a non-user, a cookie is placed on your browser, allowing your internet activity to be tracked. Facebook says it only keeps the data for 90 days and it is used solely for security purposes, but it is still worrying.

Facebook claims it is committed to transparency and it is not alone in trying to gather information about its customers. There is also much that the savvy user can do (such as turning off cookies). My fear is that the majority of users outside the US are unaware of the extent that our internet activities are being tracked and recorded. Ireland's data protection commissioner has just finished its audit of Facebook and its findings will be eagerly awaited.

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