

# Facebook spies on us but not by recording our calls. Here's how the social network knows everything

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

It's a given that Facebook is listening in on our conversations, right?

That's how the social network can follow up on our real-world conversations about products with ads that show up in our News Feed.

Wrong, says Gennie Gebhart, a research director for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, who has studied Facebook's targeting efforts.

"They don't have to listen," she says. "For Facebook to use voice detection, to find keywords and then map them onto ad preferences, that's Stone Age targeted advertising technology. There's much more nefarious and evasive methods and much more invisible methods available to them."

She mentions [location](#) tracking as a case in point. This is the feature in which Facebook "can tell who you are and what you've recently purchased," she says.

"Maybe you're in an airport, lingering in front of an ad, and that signals to an advertiser that you might be interested in the product. Or you're in a bar, watching a TV show and you get an ad for the TV show. Location services knows you're in a bar where that show might be popular."

## **It's all about Location Services**

Location services is technically an opt-in feature that pops up after you've downloaded the Facebook app to your phone. The social network asks for your approval, one of those pop-up windows that most people don't read and automatically click yes.

Facebook's pitch: Location Services allows it "to provide more relevant and personalized experiences, like helping you check in, find local events and get better ads."

Note the "better ads." Those are the personalized ads that show up in your News Feed that are so cannily on the money many mistake it for Facebook listening to them.

Facebook has routinely denied that it records users' conversations in order to come up with personalized ads. CEO Mark Zuckerberg was asked point-blank about it during a 2018 Congressional testimony, and he flatly said, "No." He followed up by calling it a "conspiracy theory" that so many think Facebook does so.

Users are "creeped out" by the monitoring, seeing it as their privacy being "invaded" Gephart says. "Imagine if you opened the Facebook app, a little version of Mark Zuckerberg popped up on the phone and started talking to you. 'Oh, I see you've lingered on this website. Because of that, you'll see an ad for it immediately.' People wouldn't be happy."

## **Your thoughts about Facebook**

Indeed, a 2019 study by the Pew Research Center showed that 51% of the people surveyed said they were uncomfortable with being tracked and categorized by Facebook.

But it's clearly great business for the company. Facebook generated \$21 billion in revenue in the most recent quarter and now has 2.5 billion members, up from 2.45 billion in the previous quarter.

It didn't get there by recording people's [phone calls](#).

Instead of the little Zuck on your phone, it's just all those hidden signals that Facebook picks up, without having to record audio and listen.

Every time you click Like, share a post, look up directions or reviews of a local business, Facebook learns more about you, says Gebhart.

There's also basic life. You're in your 20s, you order a U-Haul at the end of the month and plan a move. Facebook knows your demographic, income level, where you live and the people you spend time with, and senses you might want a new mattress to go in the new apartment since that fits the pattern.

Gephart calls it demographic targeting. Based on that info, "it's remarkably easy for an eerily accurate targeted ad to make its way to you."

## **Facebook Pixel knows all**

Facebook knows your searches outside of the Social Network because it tracks you even when the app is closed.

The "like" and "share" buttons on other websites follow you on the Web, whether you have a Facebook account. Once clicked, you are inviting Facebook into your life. It can figure out with those clicks who you are, where you live and what device you use to access the network.

Meanwhile, Facebook's tracking pixel "allows Facebook to be a silent third-party watching whatever you're doing," she says.

The pixel is described by Facebook as a "piece of code for your website that lets you measure, optimize and build audiences for your ad campaigns." With the pixel sitting, undetected on websites, ads can be created that show visitors "the products they viewed on your website—or related ones."

In a nutshell, when a product is purchased from the website, Facebook gets a notification about the transaction, and from there, "Facebook gets better at delivering your ads to people who are more likely to take certain actions."

The social button allow other third parties, like advertisers, marketers and data brokers, to watch what you're searching, visiting and clicking, "and use that information to target ads to you on Facebook," she adds.

What Facebook does admit it monitors are your interactions on the Portal video chat device. Facebook knows who you call, where those persons live, their ages and demo information and how long you speak.

## **How to turn off Facebook Location Services**

So what to do if the location tracking creeps you out?

Turn it off.

It won't keep Facebook's fingers totally out of your life, but it won't hurt.

How to do it. With an iOS device:

Click the three lines at the bottom right, scroll down to Settings and Privacy, select Manage your location settings. Make sure Location Services (allow Facebook to access this device's precise location) and Location History are turned off.

On Android:

Click the three lines on top right, select Settings and Privacy, then Privacy Shortcuts, then Manage Your Location. Click Location Access and turn it off, then turn off Background Location.

Finally, Gebhart recommends using ad blocker apps like Mozilla's Ad Block Plus or the EFF's Privacy Badger to help "minimize" third-party tracking.

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