Breach raises more Facebook privacy issues

The world's largest online social network says some popular applications sent personal info to ad firms

By Barbara Ortutay
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — The latest Facebook privacy fiasco shows that the world's largest online social hub is having a hard time putting this thorny issue behind it even as it continues to attract users and become indispensable to many of them.

The Wall Street Journal reported Monday that several popular Facebook applications have been transmitting users' personal identifying information to dozens of advertising and Internet tracking companies. Facebook said it is working to fix the problem and was quick to point out that the leaks were not intentional, but a consequence of basic Web mechanisms.

"In most cases, developers did not intend to pass this information, but did so because of the technical details of how browsers work," said Mike Vernal, a Facebook engineer, in a blog post Monday.

In a statement, Facebook said there is "no evidence that any personal information was misused or even collected as a result of this issue."

Even so, some privacy advocates said it's problematic that the information was leaked at all, regardless of what happened to it. Facebook needs its users to trust it with their data because if they don't, they won't use the site to share as much as they do now.

"Facebook has been assuring users for a very long time that their personal information will not be available to advertisers," said Marc Rotenberg, executive director of the Washington-based Electronic Privacy Information Center.

At issue are user IDs, the unique identifier tied to every person on Facebook. These IDs can be used to find users' names, gender and any information they've made visible to "everyone" on the Internet through their privacy settings.

"It's their entire friends' lists, their likes, their biographical information," Rotenberg said. "Facebook gets access to it, and now it's leaking out to advertisers."

The Journal said these IDs could be included in what's known as "referrers." That is what websites send to other sites to tell them where the user came from. Normally, these wouldn't tell the sites who these users are.

"Facebook gets access to it, and now it's leaking out to advertisers," Rotenberg said.

There are some exceptions, though. Users' names, profile photo and gender if they specify it are always public.

Facebook said the knowledge of a user's ID does not give anyone access to that user's private information. But that's not the problem, said Peter Eckersley, senior staff technologist for the digital rights group Electronic Frontier Foundation.

"The problem is that ad companies can know who you are at all," he said.

Eckersley said the "referrer" problem isn't new, nor is it necessarily limited to Facebook.

"I urgently need investigations to determine how many other social networks may be suffering from this type of data leak," he said.

Some, such as media critic Jeff Jarvis, came to Facebook's defense. He called the Journal report an overreaction because the user information was already publicly available.

"The White Pages reveal I use the phone. So?" Jarvis wrote on Twitter. He said in an interview later that traditional media and marketing companies have long exposed far more personal information.