"I am looking into a black box," admits Fitzgerald. "I have no idea about the thought process behind this. All I can do is describe what I observe." Unfortunately for educators and students, what he observes could be a collection of data that creates a user profile for advertisers unbeknownst to vulnerable users.

> We talk about this in terms of URLs and tracking, but what we are tracking is bits and pieces of people's lives being sent off into black boxes to be used in ways that we don't know

Bill Fitzgerald

Since Fitzgerald's blog post went up on Saturday the company has removed the tracking code. Representatives from Edmodo told EdSurge the code was meant to "serve ads about Edmodo on other sites to potential new teachers for a brief period of time." The company also says that its policies forbid the behavioral targeting of ads to their users, but they are investigating further to ensure that didn't happen.

"We talk about this in terms of URLs and tracking, but what we are tracking is bits and pieces of people's lives being sent off into black boxes to be used in ways that we don't know," Fitzgerald continues. "Next time you are picking your kids up from school or if you pass a playground, think of each of those kids and the bits and pieces of their lives that are getting pushed out over the Internet."

According to Fitzgerald, Edmodo is not alone in its veiled consumer tracking practices. He has plans to unmask more edtech companies operating in this manner in the future with the hope that his work will help to educate the public and perhaps make some educators think twice about the "free" products they are using.

"Very few people understand how adtech [advertising technology] works and very few people know ad targeting and profiling happen," says Fitzgerald. "We cannot have an informed conversation about the scope of this because adtech is completely opaque."

Editor's Note: Sites A and B are hypothetical examples and not meant to reflect real website names.

Comments

[Policy]

Edmodo's Tracking of Students and Teachers Revives Skepticism Surrounding 'Free' Edtech Tools
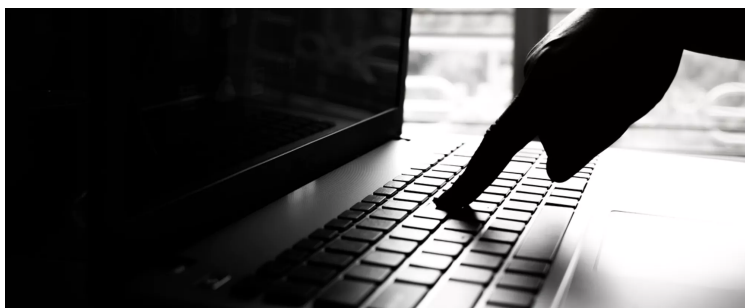
By **Jenny Abamu**   May 15, 2017

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Edmodo's investigation into its alleged massive data breach, in conjunction with reports from bloggers that the company has been tracking student and teacher users for advertising purposes, is more than a public relations nightmare. It raises tough questions about the implications of vendors offering "free" edtech products to schools.

> People need to start charging what these businesses cost to run. We need to stop talking about services that are free and start talking about services that bury the cost in different ways

Bill Fitzgerald

Edmodo, an education technology company founded in 2008 as a K-12 social network, allows educators to communicate with students and parents through their digital platform. The website boasts having a little over 78 million users, and up till recently, the company's plan to make money has been unclear.

"I want people to be clear about what they are doing," says Bill Fitzgerald, the blogger who broke the news about Edmodo's hidden tracking systems, in an interview with EdSurge. "People need to start charging what these businesses cost to run. We need to stop talking about services that are free and start talking about services that bury the cost in different ways."

Fitzgerald noticed ad trackers while logged into the site by using an intercepting proxy. While logged in as a test student, he observed tracking cookies from DoubleClick, which helps advertisers and ad brokers control ad delivery to a website. He also pointed out the tracking methods Edmodo used was generally associated with dynamic remarketing, which means when someone visits Site A then goes to Site B, they see an ad on Site B related to Site A. (For example, when a user visits Amazon to shop for shoes, then leaves to visit Facebook, they will often see an advertisement for the same shoes they were viewing on Amazon.)

"I am looking into a black box," admits Fitzgerald. "I have no idea about the thought process behind this. All I can do is describe what I observe." Unfortunately for educators and students, what he observes could be a collection of data that creates a user profile for advertisers unbeknownst to vulnerable users.

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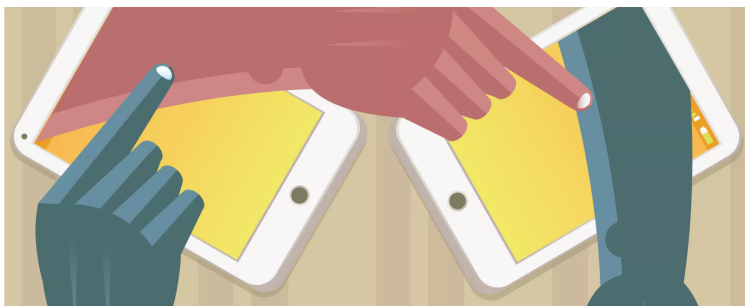
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