



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on April 21, 2015

## Report: Facebook Chat Messages Monitored by CIA-Backed Company

As if Facebook doesn't do enough damage to users' privacy without help, the social media giant has apparently been either the target or the willing accomplice of a shadowy firm known as Recorded Future.



The company is an American-Swedish startup that has been backed by Google, as well as the CIA and NSA, according to a report by [Sputnik News](#), which says Recorded Future has been scanning Facebook Chat messages as part of the "open web."

As the name implies, Recorded Future's objective is to compile data by vacuuming the web and then analyzing that data to predict future events — particularly terrorist activities. The disturbing revelation is that — like other government-funded groups — the company does not narrow its searches to known or suspected terrorists, but casts a wide net that includes everyone.

Recorded Future "continuously analyzes the open web and attempts to quantify that information in order to predict the future," reported [Sputnik News](#). The company seems to consider Facebook Chat fair game in its fishing expedition. But Facebook Chat is not part of the open web; it is a form of private communication.

The breach of Facebook users' chat messages was discovered by a fortunate accident. A group of computer code developers with Bosnadev-Code Factory sent a link via Facebook Chat as part of a test they were running on an application being developed. When they analyzed the packet after sending and receiving it, they saw that several IP addresses were expected as part of the transmission process that is normal when a message is sent via Facebook Chat. But they also discovered anomalies — other addresses that made no sense to the developers. It appeared that someone was monitoring the transmission.

Because the link they were sending had been posted on a public site, the developers knew it was possible that the IP addresses were associated with a person or persons who had tracked the link from that site. So they sent another message containing a new link that had never been on any public site. The results were the same: Someone was seeing the link in transit. They then backtracked the IP addresses and discovered that they belonged to Recorded Future.

When Bosnadev published the facts related to Recorded Future's surveillance of Facebook Chat, both Facebook and Recorded Future denied the claims.

Facebook stated,

While investigating the claims of this post, we've confirmed that Facebook doesn't use Recorded Future — an open source aggregator of public data — to scan any private content. That means we haven't partnered with or directed Recorded Future to scan anyone's message links. It's hard to tell



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precisely what's going on based on the amount of information in the post. It's possible that another interaction, including one that could be occurring on the client machine, is consuming the URL and generating this behavior.

Considering [Facebook's record](#) regarding users' privacy, the social network giant's claims ring a little hollow.

Recorded Future responded similarly: "We have no idea what the guy is referring to. We only get Public/Open Facebook data, and certainly have no interest nor any technical ability to get to any chat data at all." The company claimed to scan only data from the open web. It added,

Our systems followed this URL after it was posted on a public site. Our system constantly explores links published on the web. We've checked our logs and confirmed that this is what happened in this specific case. It's not related to any Facebook chat messages containing this link. Our system doesn't access that information.

That explanation may work for the first link, but the second link was never published to the open web. It was created specifically for the test of sending the second message to see if the result would be the same.

In the two-year wake of Edward Snowden's exposure of the NSA and other federal agencies spying on American citizens, it should surprise no one that the NSA and CIA have funded a company accused of vacuuming up Facebook Chat messages.

At least this time, the revelation came from someone with less to lose.

As the news spreads, it's likely that fewer people will choose to continue using Facebook Chat as their communication method of choice.



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