

# The Like Economy

## The Politics of Data and Dataflows in the Social Web

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**Abstract:** In this paper I would like to draw attention to the various actors involved in creating and maintaining a particular infrastructure of the social web, which is currently enabled by Facebook's social plugins and Open Graph. This infrastructure allows the platform to transform web activities, in the form of willing and unwilling contributions, into comparable and valuable data in a Like Economy. By focusing on the medium-specific features of this infrastructure, the social plugins and Open Graph, possible ways out of these unwilling contributions will be explored.

### Introduction

On 24 December 2011, software developer and long time blogger Dave Winer declared his blog a "Facebook-free zone."<sup>1</sup> A blog without a Like button, Facebook comments, or any other plugins connected to Facebook. The choice followed his decision to delete his Facebook account after hacker and blogger Nik Cubrilovic had revealed that Facebook was tracking its users even when they were logged out.<sup>2</sup>

The issue that Facebook is tracking its users through the Like button had already been brought to the attention by researcher Arnold Roosendaal in April 2010. He discovered that every time a user loads a page with a Like button, Facebook connect, or any of Facebook's other social plugins, a cookie that automatically sends user data back to Facebook is placed on the user's machine. In addition, Roosendaal discovered that Facebook not only tracks its own users, but that the platform also tracks non-Facebook users (2010). While the data of non-users cannot be connected to individual user profiles, as in the case of Facebook users, it is still collected and connected to an aggregate database providing potential valuable data for advertisers. Facebook is not only gathering data from more than 845 million active users<sup>3</sup> *within* the platform itself, but is also tracking these users *outside* of the platform on websites that have implemented Facebook features without requiring active engagement from users in the form of a click on a button. On top of that, Facebook also tracks non-Facebook users and therewith turns every web user visiting a website with a Facebook feature into a potentially valuable Facebook contributor.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://scripting.com/stories/2011/12/24/FacebookfreeZone.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://nikcub.appspot.com/posts/logging-out-of-Facebook-is-not-enough>

<sup>3</sup> [www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2012/feb/02/Facebook-ipo-facts](http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2012/feb/02/Facebook-ipo-facts)

Bearing Facebook's upcoming initial public offering in mind, this paper does not consider these practices within the framework of the debates on user exploitation (Fuchs 2010) or free labor (Terranova 2004) in which user activities are considered as 'work' for Facebook and therefore users should share in the wealth of the platform when the first stock has been sold to the public. Instead, it wishes to draw attention to another important actor that enables these valuable dataflows from and to Facebook, namely the webmaster implementing the Like button.

## The Like Economy

The Like button is one of the many social buttons such as the Twitter, Digg, Reditt, Google+, StumbleUpon button that enable the easy sharing of content across platforms. The Like button was initially only available within Facebook itself and was introduced as a way to capture short comments, feedback or appreciation of a status update or picture into a single action: "Like!" During the 2010 F8 Developer Conference, Facebook announced a Like button for the entire Internet. The platform externalized the act of liking by decentralizing one of its key features through the launch of social plugins and the Open Graph. The Open Graph allows developers and webmasters to connect their websites to Facebook's social graph, the core of the platform, which represents all relations between people among users and with objects. Since the launch of the social plugins, over 2.5 million websites have integrated with Facebook,<sup>4</sup> therewith enabling dataflows between these websites and the platform and users visiting these websites and Facebook. The social plugins allow for a partial opening of Facebook's walled garden because they enable carefully regulated dataflows both into and out of the platform.

When a user clicks a Like button this, on the one hand, enables dataflows *into* the platform as the like is displayed in the user's News Feed where it can be further liked, shared and commented on by friends, and, on the other hand, enables dataflows *out* of Facebook by feeding those further likes, shares and comments back into the Like button counter. The Like button not only displays how many times a website has been liked outside of Facebook, but also how many times it has been liked, shared and commented upon within the platform. It is designed as a composite metric that collapses different types of social activities performed both inside and outside of the platform into a single number that adds a +1 to the counter. By transforming social activities into a single number it metrifies affective responses, a process that allows Facebook to make this data comparable, countable and sellable.

The dataflows of the Like Economy are characterized by their scalability and various degrees of visibility. A like is displayed in the user's News Feed where, depending on the user's privacy settings, it can be further liked, shared and commented upon by either all Facebook users, friends of friends, friends or a selected group of friends. When a user likes another user's liked website, this like is also displayed on the user's News Feed where it is exposed to yet another group of users. But not all contributions to the Like Economy are visible in the News Feed or in the Like Button counter, as mentioned above in the case of the unwilling contributions enabled by cookies. More-

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<sup>4</sup> [www.readwriteweb.com/archives/Facebook\\_like\\_button\\_a\\_year\\_old.php](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/Facebook_like_button_a_year_old.php)

over, likes are fleeting objects and users cannot access a history of their own likes – except for liked Facebook pages – even after a formal request to receive a copy of one’s own personal data. When the Austrian law student Max Schrems of the “Europe versus Facebook” group requested his own data under European law he received a file containing 1,222 pages which did include his deleted information but did not include his like data.<sup>5</sup> Upon a second request Facebook responded that it would not provide “any information to you which is a trade secret or intellectual property of Facebook Ireland Limited or its licensors.”<sup>6</sup> Likes are considered valuable proprietary data within the Like Economy and do not belong to the user.

## The Politics of Data in the Social Web

The Like Economy thrives on visible and invisible dataflows from and to the platform that collect and exchange valuable data from users in the form of willing contributions by clicking Like buttons and unwilling contributions through cookies simply by visiting a website with a Facebook feature. Simply logging out, deleting one’s profile or not being a member is not enough as Nik Cubrilovic, Arnold Roosendaal and Max Schrems have shown. Their discovery and coverage of Facebook’s practices have helped to increase awareness of the issue and may have inspired different types of interferences by various actors.

Webmasters placing Facebook’s social plugins on their websites play an important role in enabling the infrastructure of the Like Economy. Privacy-aware webmasters of the German news website Heise have developed a new type of Like button that asks users’ permission to opt-in before enabling dataflows to the platform.<sup>7</sup> Heise have developed this button because the original Like button does not comply with the website’s data protection and privacy policy. Their two-click Like button, unlike the regular button, does not send data to the platform automatically until it has been clicked and activated. This may also be a solution for the German webmasters in the state of Schleswig-Holstein where the Independent Centre for Privacy Protection declared the Facebook social plugins, including the Like button, illegal because they violate the German Telemedia Act (TMG). They have ordered webmasters to remove all social plugins from their websites at the risk of a maximum fine of 50,000 euros.<sup>8</sup>

Besides webmasters, users themselves may also disrupt the dataflows by installing special plugins that will stop instant data transmissions. These plugins include ‘Facebook Disconnect’ which is also embedded in the Disconnect plugin that will block *all* third parties that track you on the web, including other social media platforms such as Twitter and Digg, and search engines such as Google and Yahoo!<sup>9</sup> A similar tool is Ghostery which makes each and every type of tracking mechanisms visible for users with the option to block them.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [www.europe-v-Facebook.org/](http://www.europe-v-Facebook.org/)

<sup>6</sup> [www.europe-v-Facebook.org/FB\\_E-Mails\\_28\\_9\\_11.pdf](http://www.europe-v-Facebook.org/FB_E-Mails_28_9_11.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [www.heise.de/ct/artikel/2-Klicks-fuer-mehr-Datenschutz-1333879.html](http://www.heise.de/ct/artikel/2-Klicks-fuer-mehr-Datenschutz-1333879.html)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.datenschutzzentrum.de/presse/20110819-Facebook.htm>

<sup>9</sup> <http://disconnect.me/Facebook>

<sup>10</sup> [www.ghostery.com/](http://www.ghostery.com/)

As users are becoming increasingly aware of data-mining practices and privacy issues they are taking the matter of Facebook tracking its users through the Like button higher up. Max Schrems of “Europe versus Facebook” has filed an official complaint with the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner in Ireland where the European headquarters of Facebook are located. Various consumer and privacy groups in the US have requested the Federal Trade Commission to investigate Facebook’s tracking, shortly after Facebook settled a 2009 privacy complaint with the FTC. In addition, three concerned Californian citizens have filed a class action lawsuit related to the Like button as a cookie.

Another type of interference to disable or disrupt the dataflows between websites, users and Facebook takes place in the form of artistic interventions. The FB Resistance group features a script by @xuv that automatically likes all your friends’ updates “if you’re too busy to show them love manually” which not only subverts the idea of liking but at the same time adds noise to Facebook’s valuable dataflows.<sup>11</sup> As awareness about Facebook’s way of collecting user data, without the explicit permission of the user, grows, the number of interventions is also growing. These interferences vary from taking Facebook to court, to modifying or blocking dataflows, or to adding noise to the Like Economy.

## Conclusion

Facebook is using the Like button to create the infrastructure of the Like Economy, in which all user activity is converted into valuable data. This is enabled by decentralizing its features into the web using social plugins and at the same time recentralizing all data through the Open Graph back into the walls of its platform where it can be further shared and liked by friends. Webmasters placing these plugins on their websites play an important role in creating this infrastructure but they may not be aware that they automatically turn every visitor of their website into an unwilling contributor to the Like Economy. Users not wishing to contribute to the Like Economy can install special plugins to disrupt the dataflows and to disconnect from the platform completely.

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<sup>11</sup> [http://w.xuv.be/projects/love\\_machine](http://w.xuv.be/projects/love_machine)