



How Photobucket Broke The Internet (And Why You Should Care)

What do you call an entity that holds over 10 BILLION pictures hostage...

...One that blackmails over 100 MILLION people for \$400 each?

Photobucket, apparently.

For those who don't know, Photobucket is an extremely popular image hosting service that's commonly used on blogs, forums, and store listings. It was, at one point, the world's LARGEST image hosting service.

So if you haven't heard the news, this might come as a shock. Not just in the sheer incompetence and lack of empathy involved, but the fact that it was even POSSIBLE.

Picture this...

It's June 20th. Photobucket updates their blog with a [short post](#). The post is about updated terms of service.

Nobody reads it.

Because first of all... who goes to Photobucket to read a blog? Seriously.

Second, a "Terms of Service" update isn't exactly accompanied by fireworks and fanfare. Usually snores.

To make it worse, the post itself was three sentences. *Three*. No mention of the MAJOR bomb they were planning to drop on their users in a few days.

Then The Internet Breaks.

A slight exaggeration.

But not by much.

Blogs everywhere instantly become wastelands of broken images. Tutorials and "How-To's" on TENS OF THOUSANDS of sites are rendered useless. Amazon and eBay look like a post-apocalyptic exercise.

Here's the image everyone sees.



No real warning. No explanation. Nothing.

The fix was simple: just pay a jaw-dropping \$399 a year.

Here's What Happened.

You see, the suits at Photobucket decided they simply weren't making enough money by hosting images.

Especially since 99.99% of their 100 million users didn't actually pay anything. They simply used Photobucket as a way to host images on blogs or forums or shops.

They think: "alright, we actually need to start making money from this thing."

Nothing out of the ordinary so far.

Except they decide the way to make money is to stop all third-party hosting of images... unless you pay.

So you could no longer upload an image to Photobucket and then have it appear on a forum or website. Heck, you can't even LINK to it.

The moment they make the change, everybody who had previously done this has all their imagery broken.

Plus, they go completely off the rails and decide NOT to tell anybody first.

As You Can Imagine, People Were FURIOUS.

The only way to fix those images is to cough up \$400.

Some users, whose livelihoods depend on the fact that their sites aren't broken, had no choice but to do so.

Others kept all their files on Photobucket, without a physical copy on their hard drives. Which meant the only way to avoid losing years and years of memories was to download every picture (of which there might be thousands) one by one or, you guessed it...

Pay up.

In the words of one user...

"This is nothing less than blackmail."

Despite the backlash (and boy, [has there been backlash](#)), Photobucket hasn't responded to the situation.

But you can be sure that more than a few people paid that ransom if only to keep their businesses running and archives alive.



This, by the way, is all perfectly legal and above-board.

How?

I'll get into that in a moment.

But here's the reality. These days, you don't need a gun to rob people. Just servers - and a lot of data.

The Lesson Here Isn't Just That Photobucket Is An Awful, Awful Company.

They are. But that's not the takeaway.

No, the lesson is something most people don't quite 'get.'

Giving someone else your data to host is giving it away. Period.

It's not yours anymore.

Which is why it's perfectly legal for them to withhold images you've created from you. Sometimes, you have to read the fine print. The moment you put something on Photobucket... they own it.

And it's the same with countless other online services. Facebook. Instagram. Snapchat.

You see...

Data Ownership Is New. Really New.

When you think about it, the concept of putting information online hasn't been around for that long. Comparatively.

Few new industries are born on the scale of something like the internet. Most have had HUNDREDS of years to get things right.

Two decades? Pah.

In these last 20 years, things have evolved drastically. But this brings about its own problems.

The thing with new and emerging industries is that often - there aren't any rules when they get started. No guidelines.

It's the wild wild west and the fastest gunslinger in town gets to be the sheriff.

So these pioneers set the rules, but the thing is...

Nobody Actually Checked What Those Rules Were!

In 2015, Snapchat provoked controversy by updating their terms of service.

Among other things, these terms stated:

"You grant Snapchat a world-wide, perpetual, royalty-free, sublicensable, and transferable license to host, store, use, display, reproduce, modify, adapt, edit, publish, create derivative works from, publicly perform, broadcast, distribute, syndicate, promote, exhibit, and publicly display that content in any form and in any and all media or distribution methods."

To put it even MORE simply...

Basically, They Could Do Whatever They Want...

With photos sent via their app.

Given that you USE Snapchat primarily because you don't want other people keeping your stuff, people were pretty upset.

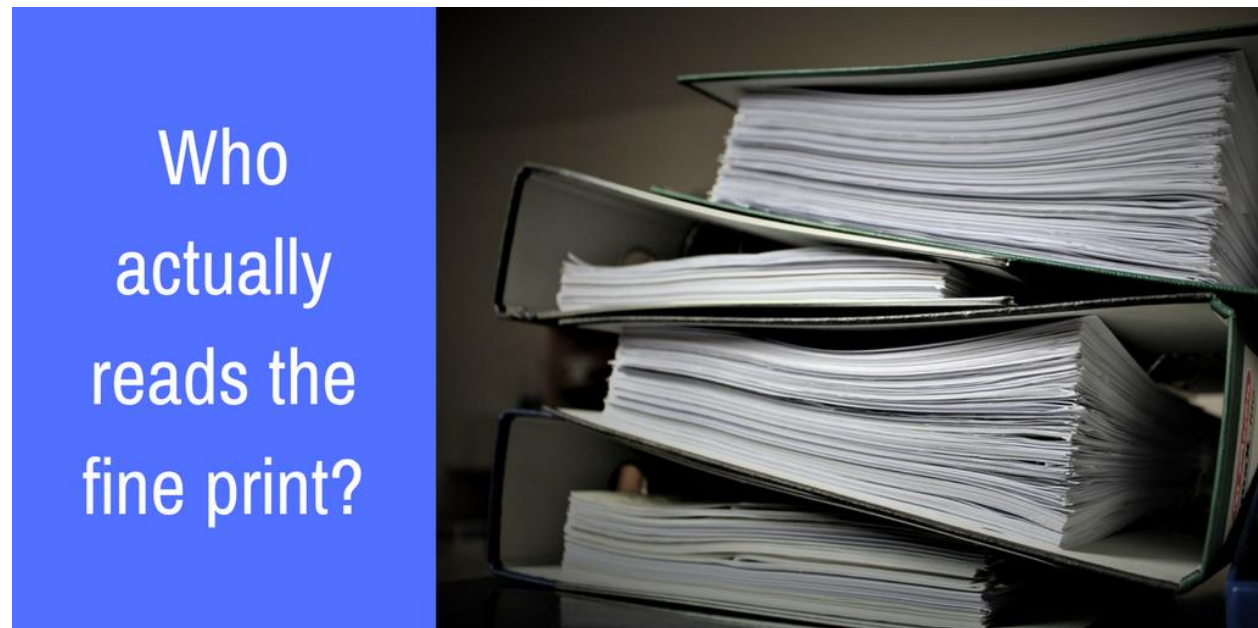
Now, to be fair to Snapchat, they updated their terms to increase transparency, and they stripped a lot of "lawyer talk" from the language.

They also defended the update, saying they didn't actually change anything fundamental - they just reworded it.

They also said that their policy...

Was Standard For The Industry - And Not At All Unusual!

They were right.



Because that clause where they get to do whatever they want to your stuff and you don't have a say on what?

The EXACT SAME ONE is in the terms and conditions of almost every other social media provider.

Instagram. Facebook. Twitter.

Or image hosting services, like Photobucket.

So let me repeat:

If You Host Or Propagate Your Content Through A Third-Party Service...

It's probably not yours anymore.

Which is why you get things like this truly absurd hostage situation with Photobucket. It's legal, even though it shouldn't be.

And nearly every other provider can do the EXACT SAME THING with what you hand them, without legal consequences.

Now let's be fair.

Most of these services won't.

Because they want people to keep using them. Or they're decent human beings. Or they want to be able to keep mining your data out to advertisers.

Whatever.

The lesson here isn't that these companies will repeat this situation...

It's That They Could.

It's become expected that you give providers rights to your files and content.

Because no one stood up and said "hey, maybe I should stay in control of my stuff."

But why?

Why should these companies have the ability to mine our content, sell it off, or hold it for ransom?

The simple answer: that's the way it's always been.

Maybe it shouldn't be.

Protect Yourself From These Situations

For one thing, BACK UP YOUR STUFF.

Don't keep important files purely with a third-party provider or the cloud.

After all, if they can hold them for ransom – they can also delete them.

Now, you probably already knew that. But it's easy to get complacent because of how convenient it is. What's the worst that can happen, right?

Answer: [PRETTY BAD](#).

Not as bad as some warn, to be fair, but far greater than most believe. Check a news report, the countless stories of hacking, legal seizures, unscrupulous behavior, and you'll see what I mean.

Especially as this might lead to situations where you lose access to YEARS of photos, videos, or documents.

Keep a copy on local too.

But that's short term. Long term, more content is going online, and the only REAL way to protect ourselves is to ask...

Why?

Why do you need rights to all my photos and videos when I share it through your service?

Why should I hand that over when I'm the one who created the content I'm putting out there?

Why is it necessary?

Sometimes they'll have a good answer for us. But too often they demand control of your stuff because it's the *norm*, because they know most people won't fuss about it.

But we should.

Oh, And One Last Thing On Photobucket...

The day after their update blog, they released another.

Presumably to launch their grand new plan to blackmail hundreds of millions of users:

["PHOTOBUCKET LAUNCHES UNLIMITED 3RD PARTY HOSTING PLAN"](#)

Brilliant.