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Cell phone photos can reveal location, hacker warns

Linda Hoang, Global News : Monday, February 28, 2011 12:00 AM

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With the advent of smartphones and social networks, taking photos with a cell phone and posting them online has become common, a great way to capture and share memories to friends and family.

But what many people don't know is that a photo taken with a cell phone, especially smartphones, can contain GPS information that could potentially allow strangers to track and locate where you are and where you've been.

With the advent of smartphones and social networks, taking photos and posting them online has become common, but what many people don't know, is that a photo posted online can contain GPS information that could allow strangers to track and locate where you are, and where you've been.

Photo Credit: Global Edmonton , Globalvedmonton.com

Free software is available online to interpret GPS data and point out the exact location your photo was taken on a Google map.

RELATED



GPS cell phone safety

Local hacker and computer security consultant Brad Haines warns that most people posting photos aren't aware of the risks.

"So often we use gadgets that we just do not understand and don't understand the repercussions," Haines said.

"The amount of information that people are giving away through these photos, I think people are learning at a very slow rate. I think in general a lot of people are not aware of what their devices are doing."

Haines said by using certain programs, he -- and others -- can easily track the location of where a photo is taken because of EXIF or "exchangeable image file format" data information contained within photos.

"Recently as this issue has gained momentum more and more free tools are coming out for people to be able to extract this information and put it into Google Maps," Haines said.

"It's very scary. If there's people you don't want to know where you are, they'd be able to find you in just a few mouse clicks... with remarkable precision."

While GPS coordinates within photos are also handy in tourism and travel situations, Haines said some websites like Facebook strip location information from photos as they are uploaded to the site but others, like photo sharing website Flickr, allow photos with location data (or "geotagging") as a popular feature.

But when the information can fall into the wrong hands, and for the wrong reasons, that's where worry arises.

"I have nieces and nephews and if they take a picture, I don't need some creep stalking them," said Buck, an Edmontonian who was told about the risks that posting photos online can pose.

"You could take a picture of a coffee cup on your kitchen table inside your house and they would be


able to figure out your address, wow, that's crazy," another concerned Edmontonian, Allison, told Global.

The ability to turn off GPS data can be found in the Options and Location Settings sections of your smart phone and is something Haines advises everyone be aware of. [For more information about how to turn of the settings, click here.](#)

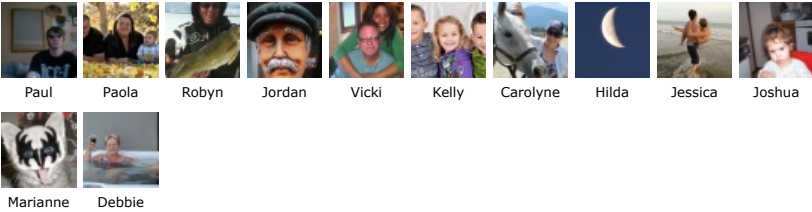
"We're so quick to give information away. People really need to understand the decisions they are making," he said.

With files from Julie Matthews

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