

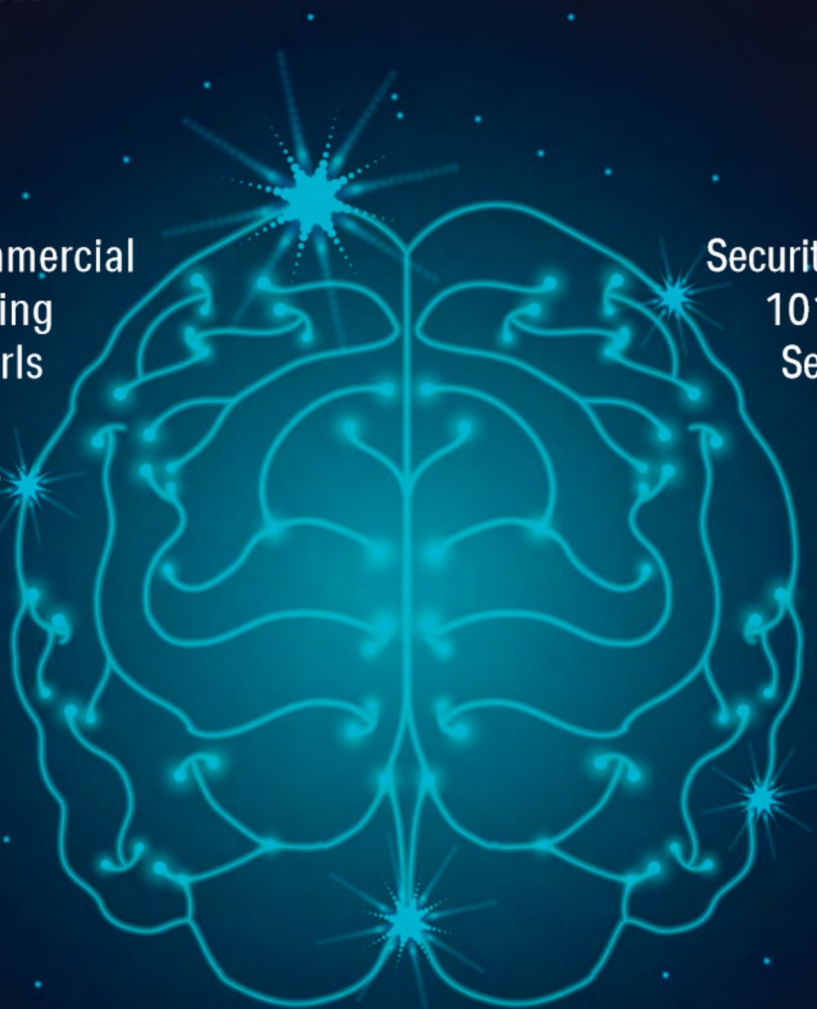
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# Ephemeral Data: Now You See It—Now You Don't!

BY **ROBERT B. FRIED**

Billions of users globally communicate via text message or chat apps. This form of communication can prove valuable to investigations. With ephemeral messaging, this data is short-lived, and so it is important to identify and collect it before it disappears.

## MESSAGE DELETION & CONTROL

Depending on the configuration settings, ephemeral messaging apps allow data to be deleted within a specific period, and often allow the parties to have some control. For example, users of the app Signal can configure “Disappearing messages” to delete anywhere from 1 second to 4 weeks after they are viewed. The app Confide, allows senders to engage in Confidential Mode messaging (hides / destroys / prevents screen shots of messages). Beyond the lifecycle of messages being timed, many of these apps offer secure communication via end-to-end encryption; so only the sender and recipient can see it.

## RISE IN POPULARITY

Many ephemeral apps are popular, as they are free or require only a nominal subscription fee (for advanced features). They are being used for personal and business communications. The social media app Snapchat is popular among teenagers in the United States. Although businesses use these apps, those in highly regulated industries, where data retention is required, have implemented policies to restrict the usage. In fact, because of their increasing popularity, in 2023, the Department of Justice (DOJ) issued updated guidance on the use of personal devices, third-party, and ephemeral messaging platforms for corporate-based communications.

It should be of no surprise that ephemeral messaging apps are being used by criminals for nefarious purposes...

## WHERE DID THEY GO?

Even if data gets deleted, it can still exist—elsewhere! For example, the recipient of a message may notice that it will be deleted and can choose to take a screenshot of the message; depending on the app, doing so may be possible. Further, although the message may no longer be present in the app, it may exist as a photo on a device. There is also the possibility of the message existing

on the messaging provider’s servers; however, based on data retention policies, the messages may be deleted after a period. There is also the possibility of deleted messages existing in a backup (such as a cloud storage service (for example: Apple iCloud or Google Drive or one that is saved to a local device) that was created prior to their deletion.

## ENGAGING AN EXPERT

Upon encountering ephemeral messaging apps during an investigation, it is important to contact a digital forensics expert. They specialize in the defensible collection of data from electronic devices or accounts. Depending on the make and model of the device, the operating system installed on the device, and the app and its version, it may be possible for a digital forensics expert to use a forensic tool to collect the locally stored data. If the user provides the account credentials (username/password) and multifactor authentication code, a digital forensics expert may use a forensic tool to collect messages stored in a messaging app or a backup in cloud storage.

Users may install or log in to ephemeral messaging services via computer, mobile device apps, or a web browser. A digital forensics expert can advise an investigator on what data may be available based on how the messaging service is being used. If a forensic tool does not offer support, the digital forensics expert may have to document the data manually, which would include the use of photography or transcription.

Remember...

- As messaging apps continue to add enhanced features, investigators need to be conscious of how they are being used.
- Ephemeral messaging apps allow users to have their messages deleted by a specific period. While messages may be visible now, they may disappear a minute from now.
- When encountering these ephemeral apps during an investigation, investigators need to act fast and engage a digital forensics expert, as it may be possible to collect the data in a defensible and efficient manner. **PI**



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