

PRIVACY ON FACEBOOK

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“Nothing you do is being broadcast; rather, it is being shared with people who care about what you do – your friends.”

-Mark Zuckerberg

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I. Abstract

In this report we will examine the findings from our semester long investigation of privacy on the social networking site, Facebook. To arrive at our findings, we compared privacy options to other sites, interviewed Facebook users, and surveyed the information listed on profiles. We will also explore why people use Facebook, what benefits they gain from it, and how breeches of trust may or may not have affected use and participation in Facebook.

2. Introduction

Facebook is a social networking web site that primarily serves college students in the United States. It launched in February of 2004 to several Ivy League schools, and has since expanded to over nine million registered users to become the seventh most trafficked site on the web (Wikipedia). From 2004 to October of 2006 Facebook was available only to users with a university email address. In October of 2006, this restriction to universities was lifted. Users are part of networks, which can be schools, companies, or physical locations. Viewing profiles of other members is limited to the current networks of the user, or “friends” in other networks.

The type of information shared on Facebook varies between users, but may include things like contact information, interests and activities and employment information. Users can upload pictures and identify themselves and other people who appear in the pictures; these pictures are then accessible via the profile of the person that was tagged. According to Wikipedia, users upload over 2.3 million photos daily, making it the number one site for photo sharing.

Recently, Facebook added a News Feed feature which was intended to help users keep track of what is happening with their friends. The idea was that as friends added new friends, joined different Facebook groups, uploaded photographs, etc., these changes would be broadcast to other Facebook friends. Though our interviews suggest that users have come to accept this feature, it was met with considerable resistance when it was first introduced. Many members felt that their privacy had been violated. Even though the same information was previously available via member profiles, the fact that this information was now being aggregated left members feeling far more exposed. The Facebook developers appeared to be caught off guard by the negative response. As the backlash grew they eventually conceded that they had made a mistake, and moved quickly to repair the damage by providing privacy controls for managing one’s participation in feeds.

In the wake of the feeds debacle, Facebook developers delayed plans to open the site the general public. Current Facebook members were encouraged to voice their concerns before the change took place. When the previously college-only network eventually opened its doors in October, the response was muted in comparison to the outrage over feeds.

3. Methods

Given our interest in issues such as trust and privacy, we opted against methods with a strict usability focus, such as heuristic evaluation. Ease of use, while relevant to the user experience as a whole, is unlikely to influence whether, for example, a Facebook user decides to share her phone number, or a change in relationship status. As such, we turned to the following methods, in each case with the intent to learn more about information sharing, trust, and privacy on social networking sites in general, and on Facebook in particular:

- ◆ Comparative Evaluations
- ◆ Relevant Literature
- ◆ Interviews
- ◆ Profile Survey

Short descriptions of each method and how it was applied are provided below.

3.1 Comparative Evaluation

We performed a comparative evaluation of two sites that have similar functionality to Facebook: MySpace and LinkedIn. For our comparison, we focused on factors related to information sharing and privacy protection. Our findings will be covered in more detail in the section that follows, but in general, member profiles on MySpace enjoy far fewer protections than on Facebook, while the career-oriented LinkedIn erects more barriers to making new connections (for example, by way of subscriber-only features) than is true on Facebook.

3.2 Relevant Literature

Though Facebook is a frequent topic in the popular press, little has been published about Facebook in the academic literature. A notable exception is Gross & Acquisti (2005), who looked at “actual field data about the usage and the inferred privacy preferences of more than 4,000 [Facebook] users” at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). The authors looked at the extent to which users at CMU provided personal information. In attempt to quantify this behavior, which they call information revelation, they note, “90.8% of profiles contain an image, 87.8% of users reveal their birth date, [...] and 50.8% list their current residence”. As a measure of the validity and identifiability of information provided by Facebook users, Gross & Acquisti determined that 89% of Facebook profiles use real names. As others have noted, this is in contrast with online networking sites such as MySpace (<http://www.myspace.com/>), where users typically avoid the use of last names.

That Facebook users give generously of their personal information is not necessarily news. A more significant contribution by Gross & Acquisti may be the privacy implications revealed by their research:

It would appear that the population of Facebook users we have studied is, by large, quite oblivious, unconcerned, or just pragmatic about their personal privacy. Personal data is generously provided and limiting privacy preferences are sparingly used (2006).

They note that by default, profile names and images are searchable by all Facebook users, regardless of institutional affiliation, and that full profiles are visible to all users from the same institution. Though users have the option of exercising more control over their profiles, the authors note that few do. Only 1.2% of users made use of the setting that limits searchability, while fewer still (0.06%) chose to limit their intra-institution visibility.

Another contributor to the as yet thin academic literature concerning Facebook, Danah Boyd has written extensively about the culture of social networking sites. Her commentary on the Facebook feeds controversy encapsulated one of the emergent themes of our study, namely, that privacy is not a simple on/off proposition:

Was all of the information in the News Feeds available to users before? Yes. That's not the point. In the tech world, we have a bad tendency to view the concept of "private" as a single bit that is either 0 or 1. Either it's exposed or not.

[...]

Privacy is not simply about the state of an inanimate object or set of bytes; it is about the sense of vulnerability that an individual experiences. When people feel exposed or invaded, there's a privacy issue (2006).

Based on the response from the Facebook community--some 750,000 members joined the group, "Students Against Facebook News Feed"--these are not the remarks of an isolated academic. The News Feed feature and ensuing uproar would seem to contradict Gross & Acquisti's conclusion that Facebook users (or at least those surveyed at CMU) are "by large, quite oblivious, unconcerned, or just pragmatic about their personal privacy." Have Facebook feeds exposed a previously dormant concern over privacy? Or have previous studies simply failed to detect the subtle edges of privacy concern?

The question of whether there is a difference between posting information and having it broadcast is one that we would revisit during our subsequent interviews.

3.3 Interviews With Current Facebook Users

Interviews with current Facebook users served as our primary method of data collection. We interviewed graduate and undergraduate students at two universities, the University of Michi-

gan and the University of Iowa. We conducted nine interviews in all, in each case exploring issues related to information sharing and privacy on Facebook. Below are a few of the main questions posed during these semi-structured interviews (for a complete list of interview questions, seek Appendix A):

- ♦ What information do you share in your Facebook profile? Contact information? Relationship status? Political views?
- ♦ Are you more likely to post information on a site like Facebook rather than other places online? Why?
- ♦ How do you feel about the news feed feature? Has this feature affected your willingness to share information about yourself? Do you feel that there is a difference between posting information online and having it broadcast? Why?
- ♦ What kind of privacy controls do you use?

3.4 Profile Survey

In an effort to gather more quantitative data, we surveyed the profiles of friends within our own networks. We looked at 60 profiles between the three members of our project team, and in compiling our findings looked for patterns of information sharing (i.e. types of information that are most/least shared via member profiles). In recognition that our sample was not exactly random, and thus not representative of Facebook users at large, we also compared our findings with the aforementioned Gross & Acquisti study, which looked at the profiles of over 4,000 CMU students.

4. Findings

4.1 Comparing Facebook to Other Social Networking Sites

MySpace is very different from Facebook in that it takes an all or nothing approach to displaying information. When creating a profile, all of the information posted in that profile is, by default, visible to all 70 million members. Users have the option of making their profiles private, however, in doing so their information is only visible to confirmed friends. MySpace lacks an in-between layer, such as the localized networks (e.g. university affiliation, geographic affiliation) used by Facebook.

LinkedIn occupies a slightly different space than either Facebook or MySpace, in that it is specifically geared toward career networking. Profiles on LinkedIn display professional and aca-

demic background. Absent are personal details such as favorite movies, music, etc. In terms of privacy, profile access follows a tiered model similar to that of Facebook. By default, users can see the full profile of their 'Connections' (the LinkedIn equivalent of Facebook 'Friends'), but only a limited profile of others in the same network (i.e. connections of connections). Profiles of other LinkedIn members, those outside your network, are only visible if those members have made their profile public. In terms of making new connections, many of the features intended to support this type of activity are restricted to paid subscribers. If you already know the email address of the person you would like to 'connect' with, there is an invite feature which allows you to do this free of charge. In cases where you do not know the email address of the person you are wishing to connect with, features such 'Introduce Me' and 'InMail' are available on a limited-use, subscription basis. Among the sites we reviewed, the notion of premium features is unique to LinkedIn, and would appear to create a higher barrier to social networking than exists on either MySpace or Facebook.

4.2 What People Share

A survey of 60 profiles of the authors' Facebook friends suggests that users' willingness to share varies depending on the type of information in question. Figure 1 (below) shows the distribution of information shared, with religious views, street address, and phone number being the least shared items. Email addresses, birthdays, and undergraduate schools were among the categories most often shared. It should be said, that while our sample size was relatively small and our sampling method was not random in a statistical sense, our findings mirrored Gross & Acquisti's 2005 study. Notable exceptions to Gross & Acquisti included the low share rates for street address and phone number. In the absence of formal methods, we are reluctant to draw any firm conclusions, however, this finding at least raises the question of whether Facebook users are less willing to share their phone number and street address than was shown previously.

Some users have general rules for what constitutes sensitive information and others have learned from experience. S4, an undergraduate female, has a nearly complete Facebook profile with every section of her profile filled in except her address and phone number. She explained her decision to withhold her contact information:

"I don't put [my] phone number or actual address... the phone number because I don't want strangers calling my phone, and address can be dangerous because there are crazy people out there. It's just safer."

Though few of the interviewees reported negative experiences resulting from their use of Facebook, S4 was an exception. She had been contacted by a stranger who tried to communicate with her frequently using her instant messaging screen name. In a subsequent incident, this individual went to her place of employment to see her. Based on this experience, she has removed all but her email address from the contact information portion of her Facebook profile.

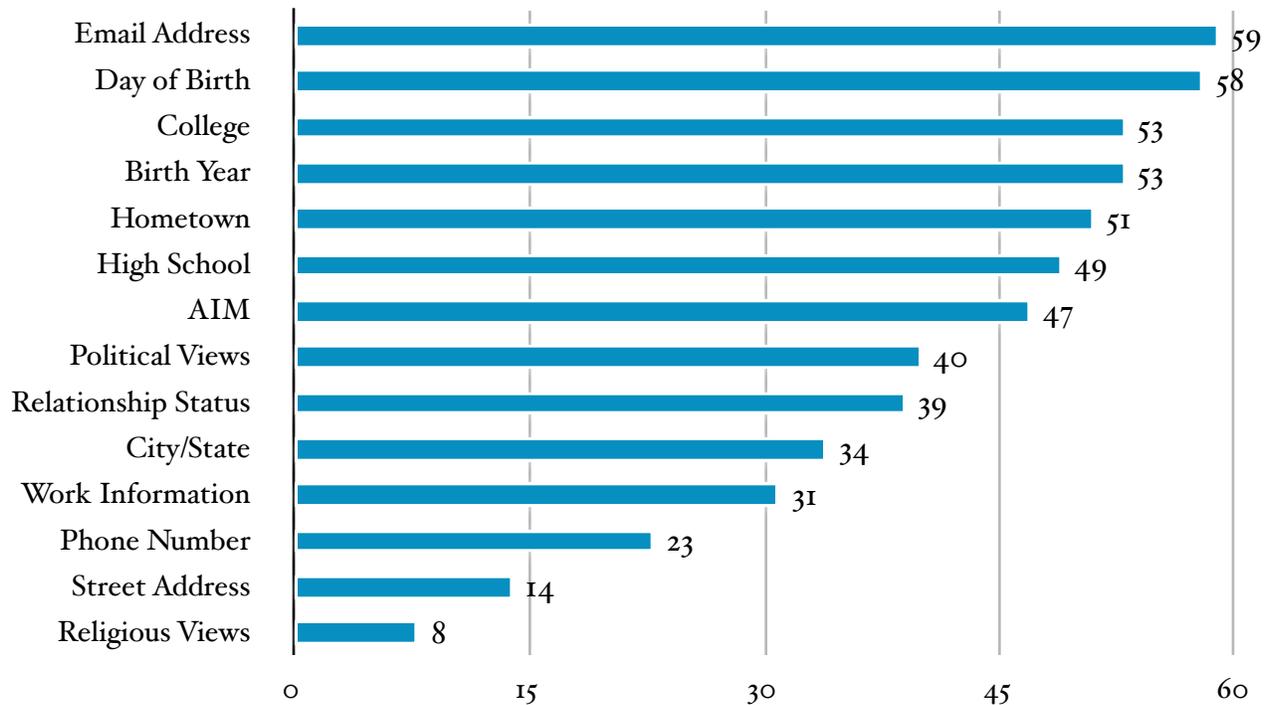


Figure 1. The results of a survey of 60 profiles. This provides us with clues to the perceived sensitivity of a particular piece of information.

The general opinion from users is that Facebook is a safer place to publish personal information online than other online services. All nine interviewees said that they were more likely to post information about themselves on Facebook compared to other web sites, including blogs, forums, and other social networking sites.

Yes I am more likely, it's a combination of feeling more secure and comfortable " (S1)

"I think I feel more trusting of Facebook. I guess, I don't know, it used to be that you had to have an account at a school, and I just feel like the creator of Facebook is trying to make it so peoples' information stays safe..." (S3)

4.3 Why People Use Facebook

Users expressed a variety of reasons why they used Facebook that centered on three main points. First, that it's beneficial to use [MS: maybe qualify this a bit, as in, socially beneficial or...]. Second, that they can make new connections and maintain old ones that were not previously possible. Finally, that they trust having their information with Facebook. While the third reason isn't a cause for use, it is a key factor that satisfies a privacy requirement in the minds of users.

4.3.1 IT'S SOCIALLY BENEFICIAL

Facebook's benefits are derived from two basic properties: access to aggregated social awareness information and the ability to make connections with people of interest. Our subjects told us that they enjoyed reading the information that was posted online by their friends. With the Facebook feeds feature, users have access to a digest of social awareness information from people in their social circle.

"Overall I want to stay in the loop. I check birthdays, spy on high school friends, check up on people... and poke people." (S6)

"When I first log on, I check out the feed because it tells me what's going on. If someone posted pictures, I check out the album, and I see if I've been invited to events, groups, friend requests, etc." (S2)

As a result, Facebook users can easily track the latest information and events within their social circles. Some of this awareness information augments gossip or other talk that happens in social circles. Major changes to profile elements such as relationship status seem to draw attention from other users and that information gets spread. Subjects expressed a variety of uses for this information including: satisfying personal curiosity, sharing in conversations and gossip, tracking accounts of younger siblings, and congratulating or consoling friends when important events happen.

"I tend to spread the gossipy stuff. For instance, I'm on it right now and my high school Spanish teacher is engaged, that kind of stuff" (S1)

"If someone changes their relationship status, you might mention it to them or other people, I might follow up on pictures with the person that's in them. It's kind of a conversation starter if you haven't talked to someone in a while." (S2)

"I police my younger sister's account! I let her know when comments in her profile or photos, for example, are inappropriate." (S7)

Social awareness information is important for maintaining and building relationships in the off-line world. Facebook greatly enhances the ability for its users to gather and track this information, especially in situations where a person is geographically separated from their friends.

4.3.2 CONNECTIONS ON FACEBOOK

The type of connection between friends on Facebook ranges from good friends to acquaintances. Subjects told us that they were able to easily make new connections with people where it may have been more difficult without Facebook. Subjects also used Facebook to revive old connections, especially with high school classmates and old friends.

"Well people have found me and I've become good friends with them, and I also looked up some old friends from 10 years ago that I haven't seen since I moved away from Michigan." (S2)

[I reconnected with] a friend who I used to be best friends with from 8 months old. We stopped being friends in HS, she contacted me through Facebook a couple years ago, and we've been in touch since then. I've been able to stay in contact with people I met in Australia" (S3)

"[Facebook is] a chance to connect with classmates, for example, that you may only know from class." (S8)

One subject estimated that about 70% of her friends in Facebook were people that she didn't know well prior to making the connection on Facebook. Another subject met a romantic interest through her participation in a Facebook group (members of this particular group were all international students who shared the same home country). Other subjects report that the ability to make connections in Facebook has improved their social life by meeting people of similar interests.

Most subjects reported that they had friends in Facebook that they didn't know particularly well. In some cases, these people were a privacy concern. Subject s1 explained that she didn't post her phone number on her profile page because the people who are her friends in Facebook aren't necessarily the people she wants calling her. So why do Facebook users make these sorts of connections?

In a blog entry, Danah Boyd ponders some possibilities for why we tend to accept friends that aren't necessarily friends:

- ◆ To be nice to people that you barely know (like the folks in your class)
- ◆ To keep face with people that they know but don't care for
- ◆ As a way of acknowledging someone you think is interesting
- ◆ To look cool because that link has status
- ◆ Because its easier to say yes rather than no if you're not sure

She goes on to point out that, "The term 'friend' in the context of social network sites is not the same as in everyday vernacular," (Boyd, 2006).

"I'm not going to lie, there's people on there [my friends list] that I'm pretty sure I've never met or don't remember." (S3)

Given that there are varying levels of familiarity with the people on a friends list, it doesn't seem like Facebook users are concerned about those people having access to their information.

None of the 9 subjects told us that they used the limited profile feature to show a slimmed down version of their profile to certain friends. While there isn't enough information to make a conclusive statement, we hypothesize that this is due to user feelings that what they post isn't particularly revealing and that they are only concerned with certain specific groups, such as employers.

4.3.3 TRUSTING FACEBOOK

Finally, users did not express any concerns with Facebook having control of their personal information, even after a perceived breach of trust when Facebook feeds were introduced. Most didn't feel concerned that Facebook might share their information with 3rd parties without their approval. This trust seemed most apparent when compared to other networking sites like MySpace.

"Yes [I trust Facebook], because I am a part of the Michigan network and only Michigan students can see my profile." (S4)

"Yeah, I don't have a reason not to [trust Facebook]. I don't have anything on there that I consider valuable." (S2)

"They are adequate, but really complicated, so I don't always know if I'm setting everything how I want it." (S6)

"Yes [I trust Facebook]. I wouldn't use any other social networking sites. I still feel like MySpace is for weirdos." (S7)

A key factor in this trust seemed to be the limited scope of a network in Facebook. In contrast to MySpace, subjects expressed more comfort with sharing information in a limited scope network. The University of Michigan network is limited in size compared to the greater Facebook community with 56,959 people compared to 9+ million total accounts. Our conjecture is that while a limited network helps, this comfort is due more to the feeling of kinship with peers than the smaller size of the network.

4.4 Outrage Over Feeds

In early September of 2006, without warning to the users, Facebook incorporated a new feature called "news feeds." The news feeds, displayed on users' home pages, broadcasts a list of re-

cent changes made by the users' friends. "News" items that are broadcast include most profile fields such as interests and activities, relationship status, wall posts, new photos, new friends, notes (journal entries), groups joined, and comments made on photos or notes. Inability to opt out of having information broadcast as well as the suddenness led to outrage among members. Facebook groups were created to protest the feeds, with one group reaching over 950,000 people in several days. The strong reaction to the feeds was unexpected by founder Mark Zuckerberg, who had told Business Week several days earlier that he was not concerned about a privacy backlash (Lacy, 2006). Figure 2 shows an image of the News Feeds.

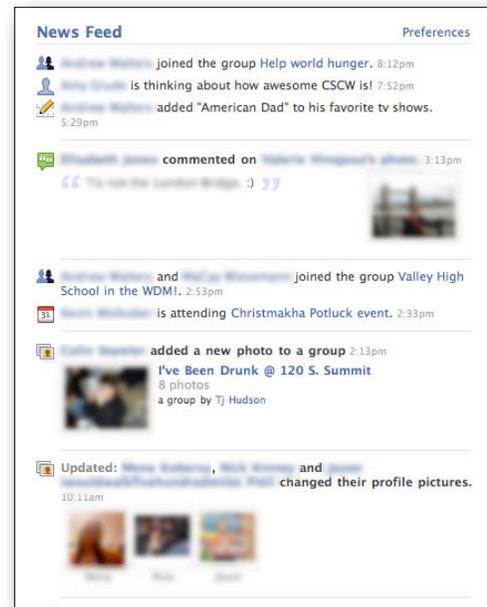


Figure 2. News feeds display digested information from a user's friends. This information ranges from the mundane (adding a new favorite movie) to juicy bits of gossip (changes to relationship status).

Subjects interviewed had the following comments on the feeds:

"The news feeds feel so stalkerish" (S1)

"At first I was freaked out... It's weird that something is tracking your every move." (S5)

"At first I found it creepy, but now I like it because I can see really quickly if people have changed information." (S3)

Several key aspects of the feeds led to the overwhelming outrage. First, feeds change the nature of sharing from something one simply posts online to something that is being broadcast. Before the feeds existed, a profile was consumed wholly, as a finished product. Now, users see a profile as a process, where a string of items are consumed individually. Additionally, there was a shame factor, where subjects knew that other people were going to see changes they were making, and became self-conscious about those changes. Second, the cost for others to obtain information is much lower than before, when potential viewers had to manually click on a profile and search through it for changes. Last, the authors became conscious of a larger and more attentive audience.

"If I do something like change my picture three times in a row, I will delete those notices from the feeds because I don't want people to think I'm stupid for changing my picture so often." (S6)

"Before posting, I think "Do I want people to see this?" For some things, like wall posts or comments that I make, I don't want everyone to see them so I delete them from the feeds." (S5)

"Lets say I've been watching Dr. 90210 a lot, and I was like "maybe I'll add that to my favorite TV shows" but then it's going to come up on the news feeds as "S4 added this" and they will be like "why did she add that? Does she think that we care that she likes that show?" (S4)

Other side affects of the feeds expressed by the interview subjects were feelings of being watched and of added accountability for their actions.

"... when you change anything it shows up on the feeds, so if X and Y break up, the whole Facebook community knows that." (S1)

"Yeah, when it's on the feed everyone sees it automatically, so when you put it on Facebook, it's not just putting it on Facebook, it's that you're telling everyone on Facebook." (S2)

"Again, I don't want to feel like I am being monitored or that people have visibility to everything I am doing in Facebook." (S7)

Three days after the feeds were initially released with no way to "opt out," robust privacy controls were added along with a letter of apology to the Facebook community from Zuckerberg that began "We really messed this one up." Later in the letter, Zuckerberg states "...we didn't build in the proper privacy controls right away. This was a big mistake on our part, and I'm sorry for it." The new privacy controls can be seen in Figure 3.

Nearly three months after the feeds were introduced, all of the interview subjects either liked or didn't mind the feeds. For those that liked it, they felt that the feeds saved them time in accomplishing their goal of "staying in the loop" and knowing what was going on around them. Six out of Nine subjects use the privacy controls, though the degree to which they use them varies significantly. The combination of perceived security and decreased effort in maintaining social awareness lead to the turnaround in sentiment.

4.5 *Exclusivity in Facebook*

Facebook had planned to open the service up from college and high school students only to "everyone" shortly after the feeds feature was released, but postponed this several weeks after the backlash from the feeds. In the wake of anger over the feeds, members were encouraged to share their concerns over the opening of Facebook. Many voiced a concern that profiles which

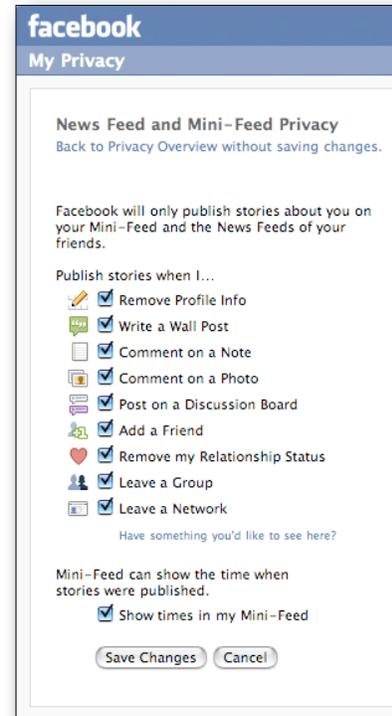


Figure 3. Following the outrage from its users, Facebook engineers added privacy controls to the feeds feature.

had been developed with friends in mind could now be located by parents or other relatives. This recalled the invasion of privacy complaints aired during the feeds controversy. In response to this feedback, Facebook developers added more powerful privacy settings, as shown in Figure 4. With these controls, users can restrict who can find them by searching. These restrictions can be applied both within and outside one's network. If a user blocks those outside their current network from searching for them, it would appear to outsiders as though they didn't have an account at all.

When, in October of 2006, Facebook finally went through with its plan to extend membership to anyone with a valid email address, the change was met with little fanfare. Yet when asked how they felt about the site being no longer restricted to schools, many interviewees expressed dismay. However, in contrast with reactions to feeds, dislike for this feature stemmed from losing a sense of exclusiveness rather than from privacy concerns. As discussed above, users generally feel that Facebook is now providing adequate privacy controls.

"I don't like it. The premise of Facebook was that it was just for college students so you could feel comfortable that everyone who looked at your stuff would be your peers. Furthermore, adults or other people who want to get on there, there's other networking sites for them." (S1)

I don't know...I don't like it very much because that was one thing I liked, I felt like it was more secure because it was just people in college... I feel like, why don't they use Myspace?" (S4)

"It makes it less special. I liked it as a college thing." (S6)

Feelings of disappointment aside, subjects' use of Facebook did not change.

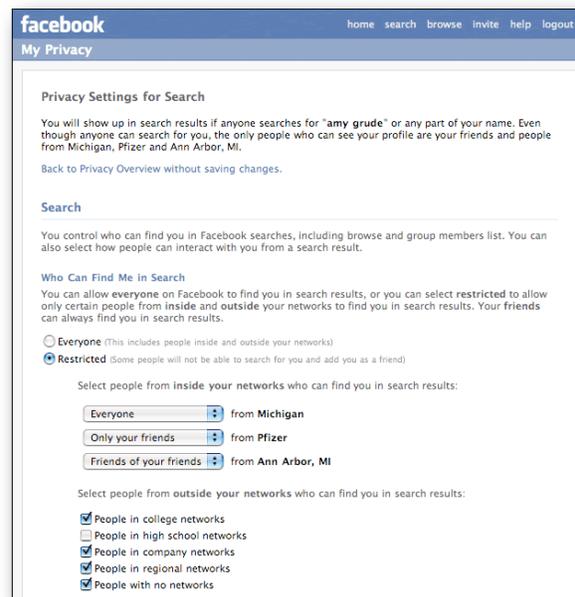


Figure 4. Privacy controls were added to limit the access to your profile by network. By default, your profile is findable, but not viewable by those on different networks.

5. Discussion

In retrospect, despite the considerable resistance at the outset, Facebook feeds now appear to be a popular feature. Full acknowledging their failure to understand the subtlety between posting and broadcasting information online, Facebook listened to the negative responses they received. The result was a suite of privacy controls which seem to have satisfied the majority of Facebook users. 3 months following the implementation of privacy controls, our 9 subjects seemed to enjoy the feature, or at the very least, have come to accept it. Facebook was able to identify the privacy problem and after listening to their users, were able to give users the control they needed to have much needed control over their information. This story exemplifies what we deem as our our challenges to social network developers.

1. Communicate with your users, telegraph when something might affect their privacy.
2. Listen to your users, adapt accordingly. Admit when you're wrong.
3. Give your users control over their information, give them the ability to opt out.
4. Innovate. Find new ways to foster social interaction, while keeping these principles in mind

When applied to the feeds story, the launch of this feature could have gone much more smoothly. The Facebook team might anticipated that people would feel differently about posting information in an aggregated environment and much of the uproar could have been avoided. Moving forward, any social network developer should feel that diligent communication with users is a must when making changes that could potentially change the perceived level of privacy.

6. Summary

In this investigation of Facebook, we used comparative analysis, profile surveys and user interviews to understand what kind of information was shared, how it is controlled and how people felt about the privacy of their information online. We found that people use Facebook because it helps them keep track of social awareness information, make new connections, revive old connections and all this can be done because they trust Facebook with holding and controlling access to their information. Following the introduction of Facebook feeds in September of this year, users were upset when their information was aggregated and presented in digest to their the members of their friends list. We found that users felt that the entire nature of publishing had changed from simply posting information online to broadcasting this information to their friends. Today this means that authors are mindful of how information is posted and are mindful that their friends are consuming this information in piecemeal as opposed to a completed

artifact. We concluded with four challenges to social network developers which centered around communicating and understanding the reaction of users to new features and how they pertain to privacy.

Despite being cautioned by experts, we form expectations of privacy whether the forum is public or not. Whether this feeling is right or wrong in an online environment is beside the point. From a development standpoint, CSCW applications dealing in personal information must be able to meet the privacy expectations of its users. Failing to do so invites the sort of user unrest provoked by Facebook feeds. While successful in mitigating customer outrage, Facebook lost sight of this and had to work hard to regain the trust of its users.

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