

Case 5-B

Facebook: Should you opt out or in?

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Consider Facebook. For most college students, on most college campuses, Facebook has become *the* social networking site—a place to meet people, talk to friends, form interest groups outside of geographical constraints and beyond the prying eyes of parents and teachers. Many college students access Facebook multiple times daily.

In September of 2006, Facebook made changes that automatically alerted everyone in a user's network any time any other member of that person's network updated anything. Users were flooded with minutia. Even more objectionable was that messages intended for one person, or one part of a network, were directed to *everyone* in a network (Stanard 2006). The furor was immediate and passionate:

If you don't want this information to be out there, don't put it on Facebook. How did the news feed work any differently than the real-world gossip chain? . . . Eh, maybe this will convince people that they shouldn't put their whole lives on the Internet.

It's not the fact that they can see it, it is the fact that it is "broadcast" that makes it bad. I don't care that people I know find out that I break up with a girl, but I don't want it to be sent RSS style to everyone I know.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg apologized to Facebook users and relented on the policy change. In 2007, Facebook users protested again, this time over a feature called Beacon, which tracked user actions on dozens of outside Web sites and revealed information about users' actions and purchases to their Facebook friends ("Facebook Users Protest Online Tracking" Nov. 30, 2007). The Beacon feature was removed from News Feeds, and users now have opt-out control over whether their data is sent to third-party applications.

The protest of Beacon was significant because the tracking feature was similar to tracking tactics often employed by online advertising, though usually without user awareness. According to the Center for Democracy and Technology ("Privacy Implications of Online Advertising" 2008), a Harris Interactive/Alan F. Westin study found that "59% of respondents said they were not comfortable with online companies using their browsing behavior to tailor ads and content to their interests even when they were told that such advertising supports free services. A recent TRUSTe survey produced similar results. It is highly unlikely that these respondents understood that this type of ad targeting is already taking place online every day" (p. 6). Because users are commonly unaware of this practice, they are unable to take action to protect their personal information if they wanted to. Although Web sites and advertisers sometimes offer opt-out options for users, few consumers "have been able to successfully navigate the confusing and complex opt-out process" (p. 13). What all these discussions pointed out was that, once posted, Facebook owned the information about its users and was selling it for a variety of purposes. This ownership arrangement was spelled out in the terms and conditions on the site, but many of the site's almost 1 billion users didn't understand the ownership issue and its implications.

How confusing was thinking about privacy on Facebook? In 2009, the *New York Times* published a guide to Facebook privacy settings: users had to go through more than 100 different steps to alter their privacy profiles on the popular website. Facebook itself got the message. In the next year, it altered its software to make it much easier for users to change privacy settings. With two clicks, it was now possible to replicate what had taken more than 100 a year earlier (<http://gadgetwise.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/27/5-steps-to-reset-your-facebook-privacy-settings/>).

But, Facebook continued to push the privacy envelope. In 2011 the website adopted automatic facial recognition, making it easier—and even encouraging users—to tag new photos placed in the site by Facebook friends. Furthermore, the facial recognition feature was an “opt out” option—users could say they wanted it only after the fact. Those who did not want it could opt out only after photos had been tagged.

That move proved controversial in Europe, where a group of privacy watchdogs, the Article 29 Data Protection Watch Party which has the power to punish firms that violate privacy, launched an investigation. That move was followed in Great Britain and Ireland. The Information Commissioner’s Office of Britain is “speaking to Facebook” about the privacy aspects of the technology, said Greg Jones, a spokesman for the group.

“We would expect Facebook to be upfront about how people’s personal information is being used,” Mr. Jones said. “The privacy issues that this new software might raise are obvious.” <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/09/technology/09facebook.html>

In the US, there continued to be what some considered unintended consequences. In 2009, one survey found that 45% of employers use Facebook and Twitter to screen job candidates. Two years later, a Microsoft survey found that the figure might be as high as 75% (<http://anitaclew.com/2011/07/19/facebook-%E2%80%93-a-hiring-manager%E2%80%99s-best-friend/>) despite repeated and public cautions that using the social websites to screen job applicants raised real issues of discrimination by virtue of age, gender or ethnicity that might come with viewing wall posts. In 2011, the Library of Congress announced that it would archive and store all tweets since Twitter was founded in 2006—making the 144-character comments as long lived as those in any book or in the Congressional Record.

But, the impact of Facebook and other devices, including mobile phones, was not merely informational: it was psychological and sometimes physical. One multi-national study in Europe found that young people who were asked to withdraw from using their electronic devices for 24 hours began to show the physical, psychological and emotional signs of withdrawal normally associated with addiction (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/8235302/Facebook-generation-suffer-information-withdrawal-syndrome.html>).

And, in 2012, in response to a number of highly publicized cases of cyber bullying, including some that resulted in death or suicide of teenagers and young adults, Facebook augmented the power of its Family Safety Center and provided new tools to report cyber bullying. Meanwhile, in May of that same year and after Facebook’s highly publicized and financially questionable (at least for some) decision to become a public company and offer stock to investors, General Motors withdrew its advertising from the site saying that Facebook ads had demonstrably little impact on sales.

At the core of the debate over Facebook and many other, similar websites, is the concept of privacy. Based on your personal experience and your professional goals, respond to the following issues:

Micro Issues

1. Should journalists use information gathered on Facebook as part of the reporting process? If the answer is yes, are their guidelines?
2. Should strategic communication professionals use the information about individual consumers provided on sites such as Facebook for purposes of target marketing? If the answer is yes, are their guidelines?
3. Should the rules for professionals, such as journalists and strategic communications professionals, be different than those for average Facebook users?

Mid-range Issues

1. Should the ownership of information on Facebook reside with the person who did the posting, with Facebook “friends”, or with Facebook itself—a corporation? Use an ethical analysis to justify your answer.
2. Distinguish in ethical terms between an employer requiring a drug test and an employer vetting a potential employee on Facebook or Twitter.
3. Should it be possible to delete “yourself” from social networking sites?
4. Is there an ethical distinction between “your” information posted on social networks and the connections you make with friends—and their information—on those same networks, particularly in how networks sell that information to third parties?

Macro Issues

1. Privacy advocates have suggested that all systems such as Facebook should operate on an opt-in basis, in other words, the user would have to agree up front that certain information should be available to third parties. Critique this stance applying utilitarianism, the work of John Rawls, and communitarianism.
2. What institution, if any, should regulate social networking site content, particularly for problems such as stalking, bullying, and identity theft?
3. What are the potential ethical implications of government, as compared to corporations, archiving information posted in sites such as Facebook and Twitter?
4. Are Facebook’s evolving privacy setting an example of open source ethics? What, if any, are the problems with this approach?