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Good-Bye to Privacy?

Learn about major new threats to your privacy, from social networks to advertisers to yourself.

By Tom Spring, PCWorld May 23, 2010 8:03 pm

New Yorker Barry Hoggard draws a line in the sand when it comes to online privacy. In May he said farewell to 1251 Facebook friends by deleting his account of four years to protest what he calls the social network's eroding privacy policies.

"I'm sick of keeping track of my Facebook privacy settings and what boxes I have to check to protect myself," says Hoggard, a computer programmer. "I don't have a lot of illusions about online privacy, but Facebook has gone too far," he says of Facebook's recent privacy policy changes.

Illustrations: Harry Campbell

From Facebook to advertisers who may be putting your online identity up for sale to the highest bidder, and to strangers who could track you across town, new ways of using technology and the Internet are making privacy issues a flash point for controversy.

"Privacy today isn't what it was a year ago," says Jeffrey Chester, director of the Center for Digital Democracy, a nonprofit group that promotes online privacy and free speech. "It wasn't long ago we were worried about advertisers planting cookies on our PC," he says. With today's trends, keeping a handle on your privacy is going to become even harder a year from now, he adds.

What follows are several emerging privacy threats.

Social Networks

Do social networks herald the end of privacy? Lots of former Facebook users who recently ditched their accounts in protest think so. With 450 million users, many say, Facebook is a bellwether for other social networks on user privacy.

Swapping small talk and vacation photos made Facebook addictive for users. But over the years, they've watched as their private info became shared with a growing sphere of strangers--advertisers. And in May, Facebook made changes to its privacy policy that exposed more personal data to a wider range of marketers.

One change involved the Instant Personalization pilot program, which let

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Beautiful Website of the Day
a collection of eye-pleasing sites from around the web

Everything You Wanted to Know About IE9 But Didn't Know Where to Ask
For more than 10 weeks, I've been shining a light on the brilliant work of many talented Web designers and developers who have embraced the challenge of producing cool, cutting-edge, and beautiful Web sites using new technologies such as HTML5, SVG, CSS3, and JavaScript 5.
FRI, 24 DEC 2010 00:01:00 -0800

Simply Amazing
Web designers have always been acutely aware of the limitations of their medium: slow modems have limited the size and number of graphics used on web sites, and designers even once had to limit their graphics to a "web-safe palette" of 216 colors.
THU, 23 DEC 2010 00:01:00 -0800

selected Facebook partner Websites access your data and tailor content to your tastes. With Instant Personalization activated, your Facebook information can be accessed the moment you arrive on partner sites including Microsoft's Docs.com, Pandora, and Yelp. When the program launched in April, Facebook automatically activated it for all users. However, a privacy uproar forced the company to revise its policy. Instant Personalization is now optional for users.

This image shows Facebook's Instant Personalization pilot program, which allows Pandora to notify users of their Facebook friends' music preferences.

Facebook has suffered privacy backlashes before. In 2007 it introduced Beacon, an ad system that tracked certain actions of Facebook users on 44 partner sites so as to report those actions back to users' Facebook friends network. But many users revolted, citing privacy concerns. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg quickly apologized and made Beacon an optional feature.

"Facebook is literally turning down the Facebook privacy settings for its users," says Electronic Privacy Information Center director Marc Rotenberg. In early May, EPIC and 14 other consumer groups filed a complaint against Facebook with the Federal Trade Commission. The complaint accuses the site of following unfair and deceptive business practices, in part, for disclosing previously private details to the public.

Google Buzz (the search giant's social network) has also endured privacy issues. Buzz exposed a list of users' most frequently accessed e-mail contacts when it launched earlier this year.

Social networks have forced users to rethink what privacy is in a world where public sharing of private lives has become commonplace, observes Jeremy Mishkin, an attorney specializing in privacy law. "The real issue is how best to assure individuals they have control of their own information," Mishkin says.

Facebook declined interviews, but issued a statement: "It's important that Facebook and other sites provide [users] with clear control over what information they want to share, when they want to share it, and with whom. We're listening to feedback and evaluating the best way to respond to concerns."

Note: We have tips to help you negotiate the maze of Facebook's privacy settings.

Data Harvesting

Creating a digital profile on you gets a lot easier if you are on Facebook or Google Buzz and hanging a shingle on LinkedIn. That marketers use your interest in, say, Volkswagen cars to target-market you a new Jetta may be no surprise. But will your Facebook status ever be used by a credit agency, health care provider, or future employer to determine if you are a good bet?

Firms such as California-based Rapleaf say they are working with financial institutions to run their databases of e-mail addresses to assemble customer profiles based on information shared on social networks. Rapleaf's vice president of business development, Joel Jewitt, says it collaborates with company marketing departments, not credit-approval departments, to better target financial services to banking customers.

Rapleaf is merely one of many firms--ranging from Acxiom to Unbound Technology--that tap into social networks to marry your profiles, tweets, and LinkedIn information with your e-mail address. If a company wants to know more about you, it can just hire one of these outfits.

The firms bristle at the notion that your credit card interest rates could be jacked up based on a tweet that you just got laid off. But privacy experts say that this may be a reality in coming years (see related story: "Can Your Online Life Ruin Your Credit?").

To privacy activists, online advertisers have always been too smart for their own good. Now two emerging trends in advertising have privacy groups once more complaining that Madison Avenue has gone too far.

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All Tangled Up

While Flash has long been the primary tool used by professional game developers to create online games, HTML5 opens up game development to web developers.

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magwitch *says:*

Sun May 23 22:01:21 PDT 2010

"The real issue is how best to assure individuals they have control of their own information," Mishkin says.

That's the issue? Assurance? No, Mishkin. The issue is actually GIVING individuals control of their own information.

When the new privacy bill is obviously ghostwritten by Google, one of the worst offenders, the government is clearly not up to the task. Especially with OSTP's current leadership.

REPLY

OldSongs *says:*

Mon May 24 00:52:17 PDT 2010

Two easy steps to protect privacy more:

1. Require by law that "opt in" rather than "opt out" choices always be offered to users. That way, for example, the box beside "Please also send me..." will not automatically be checked.

2. Make certain information, such as your e-mail address, confidential by law, subject to only very limited access and use.

These are not new ideas. Requiring "opt in" procedures has been proposed for years. Legally established confidentiality has been used for years, with income tax records for example.

As this article clearly indicates there are new problems that will require new solutions but a few of the old ones will also help to protect privacy.

REPLY

dkturner *says:*

Mon May 24 01:58:34 PDT 2010

Isn't it ironic that you can sign in with facebook to comment on this article? And that if you choose to sign in with a PCWorld account you have to agree to receive a free spam^H^H^H^H newsletter?

Anyway... this seems like a good time to start freebook.com.

REPLY

8privacy *says:*

Mon May 24 07:56:36 PDT 2010

One other approach is to prevent spying out users even though they are not logged in in facebook or similar is widely used: Cookies.

Many users restrict cookies in their browser settings, but this is not enough as new browser independent cookies stay active after browser cookies were deleted! There is software however that can manage these cookies, too, or you can completely deactivate them if you know how.

See your self and let your browser do the privacy test:

http://www.maxa-tools.com/cookie-privacy.php

REPLY

ClaudeD *says:*

Mon May 24 10:42:24 PDT 2010

The best advice for using social networking site could be simoly staed like this "if you don't wnat the world to know about what you post, don't post it". Users forget at some point those social sites will close and their hards drives sold(not securely erased) and the data contained on the drives ending up in others hands or resold to possibly criminals. Think befote you post and assume your privacy will be violated. Assuming again of course you have a guarantee of privacy, usually you don't, read the fine print.

REPLY

mmaul *says:*

Mon May 24 12:13:34 PDT 2010

One thing to consider is that there isn't a free lunch in this. We get Facebook for free and someone

has to pay for the service, the equipment, ' the programming, and so on.

Facebook has to make money to keep providing us this free service. One way is obviously by supplying the information to advertising companies. Opting-In doesn't serve that business model.

Another way would be a subscription model where everyone pays some amount like $3/month for service if they decide to opt-out.

There's really no such thing as a free lunch.

REPLY

backyard76 *says:*

Mon May 24 14:12:28 PDT 2010

So what? Have you not noticed daylight?

"Welcome to existence!"

If you maintain a decent existence, what's wrong with people knowing about you?

Everything you do shall be made known, every secrete shall be made manifest with your destiny...!

REPLY

chevrolet1994 *says:*

Mon May 24 22:56:27 PDT 2010

FaceBook is going to,if it hasn't already, lost a lot of users simply because of it's privacy practices.

This is privacy issue is going to continue until it won't be worth the time and effort to go on the Internet to read your email.

REPLY

cputman *says:*

Tue May 25 22:12:02 PDT 2010

"...the age of privacy is over?" Maybe Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg would like to make his personal information public. I'm sure I could do a lot better retiring on his Social Security number than I can on mine.

REPLY

ArnoldWaldstein *says:*

Fri May 28 05:38:04 PDT 2010

Good post, thanks.

Data collection and behavioral targeting has been done in the ad business with Google for half a decade now.

What is happening with Facebook is closer to home because the'data' is us, by name and picture and connections. But the concept of privacy is indeed changing and the push to push back the standard to yesterday's ideas is not the way to create clarity...or protection.

And of course, this is not black and while cause it is 'us' we are talking about.

My thoughts on this in detail:

Facebook...can\'t love it but can\'t leave it http://bt.io/FIGx

“The best way to protect your privacy is to understand that you live in public. And act... http://bt.io/FIGz

REPLY

pugsley0134 *says:*

Fri May 28 06:10:57 PDT 2010

[font="Microsoft Sans Serif"][/font] I agree about sharing information on facebook!!! I have friends that upload status and pics from their cell phones right to facebook and they tell you every single little bitty thing they are doing!!!
ONLY TYPE WHAT YOU WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW! EXPECT IT TO COME OUT, AND HAVE A PLAN WORKED OUT! TIP**** ON FACEBOOK... ONLY SHARE YOUR BIRTHDAY'S MONTH AND DAY! OPT OUT FOR YEAR OF BIRTH! DON'T LIST YOUR CELL NUMBER ON FACEBOOK OR ANY SITE UNLESS YOU WANT A BUNCH OF CRAZIES CALLING AND TEXTING YOU

UNTIL YOUR BATTERY DIES...

Learn from the past

Take Care

Thanks

PC MAG IS AWESOME/SO IS THE WEBSITE

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REPLY

otorpogo *says:*

Fri May 28 08:55:15 PDT 2010

> *dkturner said*
>
> *Isn't it ironic that you can sign in with facebook to comment on this article? And that if you choose to sign in with a PCWorld account you have to agree to receive a free spam^H^H^H^H newsletter?*
>
> *Anyway... this seems like a good time to start freebook.com.*

I find it even more ironic that "privacy" is the ONLY concern of critics of social networking sites and other online forums. I've yet to see a single complaint in the mass media about INTEGRITY of content.

Shortly after Facebook changed its privacy settings recently, I got a pop-up when logging on showing all of the entries on my "INFO" page had been removed, and offering me instead a menu of one-click substitutes for a small fraction of my original list of favourite books, music, activities, and interests. And even these few remnants of my personally crafted profile turned out to be linked to pages that, in most cases, had little or nothing to do with my original entries.

Put simply, Facebook had decided to put me into its Procrustian bed. I turned out to be too long, and the "excess" was simply amputated, without consultation, warning, or appeal.

The point of this exercise escapes me. Trying to understand it is probably a futile exercise, as I suspect it is simply the natural result of an online phenomenon that has no guiding intelligence, and that is growing unpredictably and uncontrollably.

The only solution I can imagine is legislation giving online users ownership of their content, and forcing the owners of the forums (including PCWorld forums) to obtain their formal consent for any modification of such user content. To work, it must, of course, include significant penalties for each contravention.

otropogo

REPLY

erglazier *says:*

Tue Jun 01 04:42:31 PDT 2010

it really does not matter to some of us that advertisers are sending ads to us because we never read them anyway. all the ads posted everywhere in all the media are either deceptive or outright lies so it would behove one to ignore them. the deceptive ones are the worst because they seem reasonable unless one thinks carefully about what is being communicated.

REPLY

CEC1951 *says:*

Tue Jun 01 11:25:14 PDT 2010

I am irritated that more and more retailers are giving special breaks to people who "friend" them. I've decided to no longer shop at these places, since, apparently, I'm not good enough to be treated the same as anyone else who purchases their wares.

As for Zuckerberg, he has always had a history of having a cavlier attitude toward privacy. Sadly, many of his generation have no concept of the importance of keeping some things to themselves, as if everything they do is important. It approaches narcissism. Stop texting someone sitting at the same dinner table. Talk! Stop sexting, well, anyone. Nothing good can come from letting everyone no everything there is to know about you because, believe or not, everyone who takes an interest in you has your best interest at heart.

REPLY

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