

Facebook's Pattern for Privacy Concern

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As new users of Facebook may slowly realize, privacy is an extremely important issue that is constantly evolving with each new feature added to the social networking site (SNS). For the uninitiated, Facebook is an SNS that started out as a platform for college students to create profiles about themselves, post pictures online, and send messages to each other. Soon the platform opened up to users at other universities, and finally to everyone that had an email address. So what started as an SNS of users that share a similar demographic, now has transformed into a massive network of people from all walks of life. Not only has the network of users grown, but features have also been added to make the SNS more functional. The addition of new features to the growing Facebook community tests the privacy limits of its current users, some causing more harm than good. There are two important features that Facebook has implemented in over a year that have created controversy in how personal information is used, presented, and archived. One is called News Feed, and the other is called Beacon.

Facebook's News Feed (and the related Mini-Feed) is a feature that was added in September of 2006. Upon logging into Facebook, every user views the News Feed for their account on their home page. According to Facebook, the primary use of News Feed is to highlight

“what's happening in your social circles on Facebook. It updates a personalized list of news stories throughout the day, so you'll know when Mark adds Britney Spears to his Favorites or when your crush is single again. Now, whenever you log in, you'll get the latest headlines generated by the activity of your friends and social groups” (Sanghvi, 2006).

The corresponding Mini-Feed is similar to the News Feed, but the bits of information presented are focused on a single user. The Mini-Feed is located solely at each individual user's profile page. The introduction of these “Feeds” marked a change in how users discovered the new pieces of information about their friends on Facebook. Users no longer had to scour the profiles of each of their friends to see what was different about their profile, or who posted on their wall last. All

of this information is neatly organized and presented in the News Feed and the Mini-Feed.

Unfortunately, the feature was released without any significant user testing, and as a result, faced intense user backlash in the form of thousands of emails, online petitions, and even Facebook groups (Lacy, 2006).

The News Feed is ingenious because it helps keep users coming back to Facebook with the least amount of effort. The “stickiness” factor, or the ability for Facebook to keep users on the SNS for as long as possible is high because the News Feed makes it extremely easy to find what’s new and different about the user’s friends. When combined with mobile applications such as the iPhone Facebook web application, or the Blackberry Facebook Application, the user’s access to all new and unseen information becomes extremely accessible and convenient while on the go. Instead of trying to navigate user profiles and lengthy web pages on a small mobile screen, users can utilize the concise and compact News Feed to stay up to date with all of their friends on Facebook. Although all of the information posted to the News Feed is already available on individual user’s profiles, Danah Boyd disagrees with the notion that News Feed is helpful, and believes there is an implicit privacy breach that News Feed imposes on some users.

Many users of Facebook became enraged when News Feed initially launched because the feature was automatically turned on for all users. At its launch, most users had no idea what News Feed was supposed to do. Fortunately, a few days later, the CEO of Facebook acknowledged this himself in an open letter on the Facebook blog where he stated “when we launched News Feed and Mini-Feed we were trying to provide you with a stream of information about your social world. Instead, we did a bad job of explaining what the new features were and an even worse job of giving you control of them” (Zuckerberg, 2006). Currently, there are plenty of settings that a Facebook user can toggle to hide or show bits of information from their profile

to their friends' News Feeds. That's fine if the goal is to keep a user's own personal information hidden from the automatically updating News Feed, but as Danah Boyd points out, "Facebook is giving me the "gift" of infinite gossip. But I don't want it. I can't handle it" (Boyd, 2006). In other words, Boyd believes that an individual user has a threshold for how much social information can be retained. Potentially, this becomes an even bigger problem because a user cannot turn off their news feed, and it's a feature that is prominently displayed upon logging in.

This can be devastating to some users because the overflow of information "gives you a fake sense of intimacy for people you don't really know that well. And that fake sense of intimacy is both misleading and dreadfully disappointing" (Boyd, 2006). Even more concerning, was the launch of a website called FakeYourSpace that operated from November 2006 to March 2007. When it was still operational users of Facebook could sign up for a fake friend to leave comments on your profile twice a week (Cashmore, 2006). The service was obviously sketchy from the start, but because of the introduction of the News Feed, and the fake sense of intimacy it implicated, users of Facebook unknowingly inherited a new problem. Users could conceivably manipulate the News Feed to depict fake relationships, or unknowingly reveal personal information, disrupting the normal flow of information that happens in real life. Before the News Feed was established, users made a conscious effort to search for information about their friends. But because the information is presented effortlessly, relationships become more passive, yet retain the same sense of intimacy. If a user's relationship status went from married to single, a Facebook friend of that user just received a very personal piece of information through their news feed. In a sense, this increases the level of intimacy that the friend has with the user who just got out of their marriage, but at the same time, the intimacy is not reciprocated because they did not inform their Facebook friend directly.

While the News Feed acts as a convenient way of displaying information that is publicly available, Facebook enabled a controversial feature that works in tandem with the News Feed called Beacon. Introduced in November 2007, Beacon enables a brand or a business to send a user's personal information to Facebook, based off of what that user does on an external website. From there Facebook can post this information to your News Feed automatically for you if you haven't changed your privacy settings on the site. Facebook describes Beacon as "a new way to socially distribute information on Facebook... [It] is a core element of the Facebook Ads system for connecting businesses with users and targeting advertising to the audiences they want" (Facebook, 2007). Like its News Feed feature a year before, Beacon was met with backlash from Facebook's community; this time it's because of the privacy issues that arise when it reveals information from a third party company. For example, movie tickets purchased on Fandango can be relayed to Facebook, and broadcast to the News Feed of a user's network of friends. While this announcement may seem trivial, and helpful to friends of the user, it also introduced some important privacy issues.

Facebook will continue to monetize their platform through the use of ads as the SNS keeps growing. In order to make their online community more appealing to both its users, and its advertisers, ads must be more relevant and less intrusive. Facebook came up with a solution that would benefit both the user community, and its advertisers. Beacon is a step in the right direction, but with a flawed start. By making the Beacon service opt-in by default, Facebook inadvertently assumed that all of its users wanted to announce any transactions they made with Beacon partners on their friends' News Feeds.

Soon after Beacon was introduced, MoveOn.org Civic Action, a nonprofit organization, created a petition to fight against the feature calling it an "invasion of privacy" because "People

across the country saw private purchases they made on other sites displayed on their Facebook News Feeds" (MoveOn.org, 2007). Not only were Facebook users disturbed by the revealing of private information, they were alarmed by the transparent data mining being used by Facebook if Beacon was enabled (Weiner, 2007) and (Perez, 2007). To the surprise of many critics, Facebook acknowledged that it does not hoard any information sent through its Beacon service if the user opts-out (Berteau, 2007). A month after Beacon was released, Facebook gave its users the ability to completely opt-out of the system (Zuckerberg, Thoughts on Beacon, 2007). Even though Facebook prematurely released the Beacon service without fully testing the privacy details, the response from the community was expressed quickly, and Facebook has fixed and apologized for the mistakes they have made. Without the feedback from the community and the media, Facebook may not have changed its policies with Beacon. It is important to realize that this is a learning process for both Facebook as a platform, and Facebook as a user community.

It's clear now that Facebook must be more active in testing the new features it will implement on the SNS. Facebook's News Feed and Beacon were so ill received because the features surprised most of its online community. If a new feature is introduced, a randomly phased roll out may be more beneficial if controlled user testing is not feasible. First, this limits the impact of the feature to a specific network, or grouping of users. Only some users of the online community would receive the new feature, and feedback would be garnered from them. This would allow Facebook to avoid an overwhelming backlash, and empower the online community to improve a work in progress. A question remains, do users of Facebook want to stick around for its evolution? As the New York Times reports, some users might say that it may be extremely difficult to leave and erase your tracks. Due to a lack of time or effort, users of

Facebook may stick around whether they like it (as an active member) or not (inactive member with personal data still hoarded on Facebook's servers) (Aspan, 2008).

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