

## Facebook Privacy

Facebook, the world's most used online social media platform,<sup>1</sup> is well known for controversy surrounding the privacy rights of user content, built on a foundation of questionable practices and incidents including its inception via the hacking of Harvard student information.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in the near-decade since its founding, the social network has only seemed to spawn further and exacerbated issues that increasingly concern not only its 1.1 billion users, but society at large. USA Today cites that "Facebook's tracking cookies retain the capacity to extensively track non-members and logged-off members alike,"<sup>3</sup> essentially from any website on which the Facebook "like" function is implemented.

Perhaps the most oft-cited concern regarding Facebook privacy has been the manner in which the company has subtly, yet significantly, continued to alter privacy settings; the company has been criticized for implementing an opt-out system without users being notified that their personal information has suddenly, at the apparent whim of the website, been made public to the world. One of the most controversial instances of this was in 2009, deemed by the Federal Trade Commission as "unfair and deceptive, and violated federal law."<sup>4</sup> Facebook has since begun to notify users of changes, yet as CNN's Pete Cashmore notes, "it was much easier to simply agree to the revisions than to access the intricate settings panel and assert your desire for greater

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<sup>1</sup> Bullas, Jeff, "10 Social Media Facts, Figures and Statistics You Need to Know," *jeffbullas.com*, accessed September 16, 2013, <http://www.jeffbullas.com/2013/08/28/10-social-media-facts-figures-and-statistics-you-need-to-know/>.

<sup>2</sup> Carlson, Nicholas, "At Last -- The Full Story Of How Facebook Was Founded," *Business Insider*, accessed September 16, 2013, <http://www.businessinsider.com/how-facebook-was-founded-2010-3#we-can-talk-about-that-after-i-get-all-the-basic-functionality-up-tomorrow-night-1>.

<sup>3</sup> Acohido, Byron, "Facebook tracking is under scrutiny," *USA Today*, accessed September 16, 2013, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/news/story/2011-11-15/facebook-privacy-tracking-data/51225112/1>.

<sup>4</sup> Hernandez, Brian, "Is Facebook Doing Enough to Protect Your Privacy? [POLL]," *Mashable*, accessed September 16, 2013, <http://mashable.com/2011/11/29/facebook-privacy-poll/>.

privacy.”<sup>5</sup> The New York Times confirms this sentiment in an article entitled, “Facebook Privacy: A Bewildering Tangle of Options,” illustrated with a dauntingly intricate infographic that indicates the myriad locations within a user’s Facebook account where privacy settings can be manipulated, down to each individual photo and the personalized ads on external websites.<sup>6</sup>

What are the implications of these controversial privacy settings and policies? The New York Times’ Somini Sengupta suggests, “It can be scoured by police officers, partners and would-be employers. It can be mined by marketers to show tailored advertisements. And now, with Facebook’s newfangled search tool, it can allow strangers, along with ‘friends’ on Facebook, to discover who you are, what you like and where you go.”<sup>7</sup> This is a frightening prospect that transcends more than simply the content of a website, threatening the privacy of the personal lives of 15% of the world’s population. Furthermore, leaked information by former CIA employee, Edward Snowden, revealed that the US government made requests to infiltrate the accounts of nearly 20,000 Facebook users, many of which were granted.<sup>8</sup> What the US government purportedly enacts for the purposes of national security could arguably be seen as hypocritical and counter-intuitive. The American Library Association’s Privacy Interpretation of

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<sup>5</sup> Cashmore, Pete, “Why Facebook’s privacy war is not over,” *CNN*, accessed September 16, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/TECH/social.media/05/27/facebook.privacy.war.cashmore/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Gates, Guilbert, “Facebook Privacy: A Bewildering Tangle of Options,” *The New York Times*, accessed September 16, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/05/12/business/facebook-privacy.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Sengupta, Somini, “Staying Private on the New Facebook,” *The New York Times*, accessed September 16, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/07/technology/personaltech/protecting-your-privacy-on-the-new-facebook.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/07/technology/personaltech/protecting-your-privacy-on-the-new-facebook.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>8</sup> Saul, Heather, “NSA scandal: Facebook says it received over 9,000 data requests from US government agencies in just six months,” *The Independent*, accessed September 16, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/nsa-scandal-facebook-says-it-received-over-9000-data-requests-from-us-government-agencies-in-just-six-months-8659997.html>.

the Library Bill of Rights states that “[p]rivacy is essential to the exercise of free speech, free thought, and free association.”<sup>9</sup>

The controversy of Facebook privacy encompasses myriad issues in an incredibly broad spectrum of significance: the former permanent storage of user data even following account termination,<sup>10</sup> advertising and datamining,<sup>11</sup> face-recognition technology,<sup>12</sup> potential employers requesting account access,<sup>13</sup> interference in police affairs,<sup>14</sup> and breaches of the Canadian Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act<sup>15</sup> to list a few. 2010 even saw the mass deletion of 33,000 user accounts in an event called Quit Facebook Day as part of a petition against the website’s privacy policy.<sup>16</sup> Yet despite all of this, Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg asserts, “We will keep focused on achieving our mission of giving people the power to share and making the world more open and connected,”<sup>17</sup> implying, as the CNN article title states, “Facebook’s privacy war is not over.”<sup>18</sup>

Facebook privacy presents a unique predicament. Certainly individuals have the freedom to opt out of Facebook use altogether, as many choose to do, however a certain level of

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<sup>9</sup> American Library Association, “Privacy,” *American Library Association*, accessed September 16, 2013, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/privacy>.

<sup>10</sup> Aspan, Maria, “How Sticky Is Membership on Facebook? Just Try Breaking Free,” *The New York Times*, accessed September 16, 2013,

[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/11/technology/11facebook.html?\\_r=5&ref=business](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/11/technology/11facebook.html?_r=5&ref=business).

<sup>11</sup> Wagner, Kurt, “How Facebook is Using Your Photos in Ads,” *Mashable*, accessed September 16, 2013, <http://mashable.com/2013/09/05/facebook-ads-photo/>.

<sup>12</sup> Gannes, Liz, “Facebook facial recognition prompts EU privacy probe,” *CNET*, accessed September 16, 2013, [http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023\\_3-20070148-93/facebook-facial-recognition-prompts-eu-privacy-probe/](http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023_3-20070148-93/facebook-facial-recognition-prompts-eu-privacy-probe/).

<sup>13</sup> Morrison, Tony, “What to Do When A Potential Employer Asks for Your Facebook Password,” *Mashable*, accessed September 16, 2013, <http://mashable.com/2012/04/08/employer-facebook-password/>.

<sup>14</sup> Drudi, Cassandra, and Omar El Akkad, “Facebook proves problematic for police,” *The Globe and Mail*, accessed September 16, 2013, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/facebook-proves-problematic-for-police/article665975/>.

<sup>15</sup> Denham, Elizabeth, “Report of Findings Into the Complaint Filed by the Canadian Internet Policy and Public Interest Clinic (CIPPIC) against Facebook Inc. Under the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act,” accessed September 16, 2013, [http://www.priv.gc.ca/cf-dc/2009/2009\\_008\\_0716\\_e.pdf](http://www.priv.gc.ca/cf-dc/2009/2009_008_0716_e.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Kiss, Jemima, “Facebook: Did anyone really quit?,” *The Guardian*, accessed September 16, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/pda/2010/jun/01/digital-media-facebook>.

<sup>17</sup> Cashmore, Pete, “Why Facebook’s privacy war is not over.”

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

subjugation to this model of social networking is perhaps necessary to stay up-to-date and connected in today's increasingly technological world. It has been my own experience that those without access to and use of Facebook often miss out on important social gatherings and communications, including professional obligations -- particularly in the realm of Library and Information Science. And while other social networking platforms such as MyCube, TheFridge, and Diaspora provide a welcome alternative, they lack the extensive user base that dictates much of Facebook's appeal. Essentially, Facebook users want to be treated fairly and there is much debate about whether or not the social networking website is meeting this demand. Perhaps users should familiarize themselves with resources such as Lifestacker's "The Always Up-to-Date Guide to Managing Your Facebook Privacy."

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