

On Facebook, some savvy networking avoids headaches

By CATHERINE BAUM Staff Writer

Originally published on: Monday, September 03, 2007

Users are now required to enter their birth date when they sign up to start using Facebook, the social networking Web site launched in February 2004.

While they may receive digital gifts and birthday wishes in the form of wall posts from their friends, they are also giving Facebook Inc. valuable information that Facebook claims it is not accountable for.

Even a Facebook user who has their profile set to the most strict privacy option is sharing information with people they do not know - with their permission.

The Facebook privacy policy states that "Sharing of information is done at your own risk. Please keep in mind that if you disclose personal information in your profile or when posting comments, messages, photos, videos, marketplace listings or other items, this information may become publicly available."

"People who post things on their Facebook account thinking that they're not going to be seen by anybody but their friends have no reason to think that that's true and no recourse if it turns out to be false," said James Waldo, author of "Engaging Privacy and Information Technology in a Digital Age," a report by the Committee on Privacy in the Information Age, National Research Council.

"It's not your information, it's their information. It happens to be about you, but you don't have to be told that it's being accessed," he said.

Just the beginning

The birth date is just one facet of personal information revealed by the Facebook user, who averages 30 unique page views per day on the site, according to alexa.com.

Though a check in the box to indicate one has read the terms of use and privacy policy is required to sign up, there is no automated navigation to these policy links before using the Facebook.

How data is being handled, how it is kept secure, how it will change over time and what might happen if it is no longer wanted there are points to consider, said Ben Adida, a fellow at the Center For Research on Computation and Society.

Facebook Inc. is a company that is subject to be bought and sold, and a part of its product is every user's profile.

"Why aren't people worried because there's a company that knows every friend you have and every person you've been intimate with and all your hobbies and your political leanings?" Adida asked. "If you look at the privacy policy, it doesn't say a whole lot about what Facebook will do with the data and that's the thing that people should be worried about."

A user is required to give full name, occupation or student status, e-mail, password and birthday. Under the terms of use, users agree to " (a) provide accurate, current and complete information about you as may be prompted by any registration forms on the Site... (c) maintain and promptly update the Registration Data, and any other information you provide to Company, to keep it accurate, current and complete."

"By clicking the links on Facebook, you are effectively signing a contract with Facebook that says you agree to this," Adida said.

Birth dates are used by many organizations to authenticate their clients, and revealing birth dates on Facebook increases the risk of identity theft. People mistakenly compare revealing online privacy to managing their money online, Adida said.

"There are people who will say storing your private data online is a normal thing and in 10 years, if you don't store your private information online you'll be looked at as the crazy person who stores money under their mattress instead of the bank," Adida said. "If you ever run across that comparison, you have to call BS on it because money is recoverable but you can't put the cat back in the bag once your birth date is out in the wild."

Facebook has access to user data even if it is deleted by the user.

The company does back-ups on a regular basis as the information can be used to form policies, create generalizations and provide a better service based on personalized information, according to Jose Soltren, systems administrator at D.E. Shaw & Co. in New York City and co-author of "Facebook: Threats to Privacy."

According to the privacy policy, Facebook shares "your information with third parties only in limited circumstances where we believe such sharing is 1) reasonably necessary to offer the service, 2) legally required or, 3) permitted by you."

Data mining, the science of pulling out useful information from large databases, is a potential way for somebody to make money off your data, Soltren said.

"Your information in a data mining data base is about as powerful as one vote in a presidential election, but that's why you need to tell millions of people about this and have them all critically think about it," Soltren said.

Whatever the Facebook data may be used for, it's very personal information. Secrecy is a basic human need, according to Latanya Sweeney, Carnegie Mellon computer scientist who was interviewed by Scientific American magazine.

"Privacy allows an individual the opportunity to grow and make mistakes and really develop in a way you can't in the absence of privacy, where there's no forgiving and everyone knows what everyone else is doing," Sweeney told Scientific American.

"There was a time when you could mess up on the east coast and go to the west coast and start over again.

"With today's technology, though, you basically get a record from birth to grave and there's no forgiveness."

Facebook users should think about how they project their identity online, according to Allan Friedman, a Ph.D. candidate in public policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. He looks at security, privacy and trust from an end-user perspective.

Friedman, who never joined Facebook, does not like the idea of having "a single profile presenting a single face" to the public.

"I just didn't want to have inferences drawn," Friedman said.

The Facebook generation is one of the first to encounter social networks and its consequences.

"As we start to put all this private data on the Web, are we just moving towards a society where there is no privacy - and if so, can we handle it? I'm not sure we can," Adida said.