Debate

Is There a Right to Privacy on Facebook?

ISSUE: Should Facebook allow outside parties to have access to user information?

Although it is free for users to participate on social networking sites, companies like Facebook are businesses; they must make money to stay in operation. One way in which social networking sites collect revenue is by allowing marketers to post advertisements on their sites. Yet with the growing competition in social networking, social media must take new steps to retain their competitive edge. One way is to allow marketers to access more information about users. Unfortunately, this has also led to massive criticism about violations in user privacy.

The site that has generated the most criticism is Facebook. Facebook has implemented changes to promote more open identification. For example, users can no longer hide their name, gender, profile picture, or hometown from other users. Facebook also gives access to this same information to its partners of Facebook Connect, a program that lets users log onto third-party websites using their Facebook profiles, as well as to third party application developers for games played on Facebook. This, along with other concerns, has drawn the attention of Congress and spurred a Federal Trade Commission (FTC) investigation into user privacy.

In 2011 Facebook incorporated a facial recognition feature to its platform that enabled people to automatically be tagged in photos posted on their own or on their friends' pages. In some places this feature was made a default setting, which caused an uproar among many users. Additionally, a study was performed by Carnegie Mellon University showing the possibility of finding people's personal information, such as social security numbers, through facial recognition technology or cloud computing and cross referencing that information with social networking sites. They indicated that as the technology becomes more advanced, it will be increasingly easier for more people to obtain sensitive information.

In December of 2012 Facebook's newly acquired Instagram, a photo sharing mobile application, released a new policy that stated users' photos could be used in advertisements without permission or any compensation to the users who took and posted the photos. There was an immediate and furious response from users saying that they would stop using the app if the wording of the policy was not changed. Co-founder of Instagram, Kevin Systrom responded to the outrage immediately and promised that the policy would be reworded before it was to take effect in January 2013.

Another recent addition to Facebook's portfolio is the Facebook Home application for Android mobile phones. This app allows users to be logged into Facebook constantly and shows friends' updates and posts on the home screen of the user's mobile phone. Facebook has always been able to access users' information while using the mobile app or their website; however, with the Home application, they are able to access more information more frequently. Information such as who is called and how long the conversation lasts can be tracked along with conversations made via text messages. Furthermore, since cell phones are equipped with GPS, Facebook could be able to access the businesses and neighborhoods that users frequent as well as where they live. Cell phones are also equipped with accelerometers, which can tell Facebook how you commute, whether it be walking, running, or

driving. However, Facebook has assured critics that it will not actively track users through GPS technology. The application is also optional, so it is up to users to decide whether they want to adopt it.

Many users do not grasp that the most basic information they reveal becomes public domain on the Internet—accessible to virtually everybody. Several people have revealed personal details that were later used against them. The question is who should be held ultimately responsible. Shouldn't consumers educate themselves about what types of information they should reveal? On the other hand, it can often be hard for users to anticipate how this information could be used.

For example, online Internet consultant Ron Bowes decided to scan 500 million Facebook profiles. He was able to collect personal details on 100 million Facebook users, which he then compiled into an online document available for download. Note that this basic information was not private, so technically Bowes did not break any laws. Once Bowes had the name of one person, by default he was able to view their pictures, friends, and other details. Facebook replied that this type of information was already public domain and existed in other search engines like Google and Bing; hence, Facebook suggests that it was the users' choice to take this risk. Indeed, since no laws were broken and all of this information was available on the Internet (for those looking hard enough), one can argue that outside parties are within their rights to conduct these searches and compile information.

Despite these controversies, Facebook continues to maintain its dedication to user privacy and declares that despite the open identity technology it wishes to adopt, it will not allow advertisers to collects its users' information without their permission. It also claims that many of its web services are more useful to users when it knows something about them. Although Facebook would gain huge profits if it can create a better way to identify users and make this information available to its partners, Facebook claims that its practices are no different than other advertising displayed over the Internet. It has even changed some of its policies that would have potentially allowed advertisers to view users' profiles without consent.

On the other hand, Facebook is treading a fine line with privacy advocates. Many people dislike sharing their personal information on the Web, worrying that it might fall into the wrong hands. Due to Facebook's shady privacy record in the past, users are concerned with what companies like Facebook will do with additional personal information. The company, they argue, may be likely to cut privacy corners to make a profit. And even though Facebook requires profits to survive, is it ethical to use consumers' personal information to do so? Many say no. They fear that not only will Facebook sell user information to advertisers but also monopolize online identity technology. As a result, some consumers are attempting to take steps to protect their identity, including considering a social network users' bill of rights. Governments are also considering whether the social networking industry will require regulation to protect consumer privacy. The FTC charged Facebook with violating users' privacy by changing its privacy controls in 2009 in a move that automatically shared certain details about users' lives without their consent. As part of the settlement, Facebook agreed to twenty years of privacy audits conducted by an independent third party.

In spite of all these negative aspects, not all people are opposed to outside parties using information gleaned from these sites. Some believe that a new age of web-based interaction and information-sharing is a good thing. Companies can use social networking sites to connect with consumers and then tailor their messages to fit consumers' needs. Users are more likely to receive messages that appeal to their interests, unlike traditional forms of advertising that have little control over which advertisements are displayed to whom. Features like Twitter feeds can also help marketers communicate the availability of products and how and when they can be purchased.

Others argue that increasing the connection between company and consumer is an unavoidable step in social networking innovation. The best way to be successful is to meet consumer needs in better and more profitable ways. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg even expressed his desire for Facebook users to become more public,

thereby changing the social norms to which consumers have become accustomed. The debate still rages over whether this greater information sharing between users and companies is unavoidable, or whether this is simply an attempt for social networks to gain more revenues by trampling on the rights of users. It is important to note that in Facebook's most recent privacy audit, the firm's privacy controls were found to be sufficient.

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There are two sides to every issue:

1. Facebook is within its right to embrace online identity technology and share public domain information with outside parties

2. Facebook is violating its users' rights to privacy in order to make quick profits.

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