Case 9: Facebook Privacy

In the last six years, Facebook.com has gone from being a relatively exclusive website for Ivy League students to the most popular social networking site on the web. With more than 400 million users and 25 billion items of content by its own count, [1] and a structure that allows people to choose their "friends," the website and the company running it can have dramatic effects on many lives.

Lately, though, some users have begun to wonder whether they have misjudged the company's dedication to user privacy. While Facebook has recently stated that it operates on a principle whereon "People have control over how their information is shared,"[2] its recent actions can seem to be in conflict with this principle.

The key decision that first concerned privacy advocates was Facebook's decision to change users' default privacy settings to publishing users' posts and photographs automatically unless they specifically opted-out. If someone wasn't keeping up with Facebook's announcements, previously private pictures were in many cases made visible to everyone on the Internet and so-called "status updates" were broadcast to everyone as well.[3] This prompted a warning from privacy advocates such as the Electronic Freedom Foundation not to use Facebook's default privacy settings[4] until users had easier control over their own information.

Facebook is a privately held company that has not bothered to hide its interest in using its massive user base to make money from advertising and other forms of marketing. Facebook users' decision to invest large amounts of time in social networking on the site is a result of the experience Facebook has created so far. No one is forced to use Facebook or its services, and if users strongly disagree with the company's privacy policies they can cease to use the site, deactivate their accounts, or delete their accounts (though Facebook doesn't make this option easy to find).

Some point out, however, that Facebook has a duty to respect the privacy of the users who began using its service before privacy became a secondary concern. Users became accustomed to the idea that their data was private unless they specifically allowed it to become public. They point out that users' previous experience with the service amounts to an agreement that Facebook cannot break lightly. Since the option to make one's profile public was always available without many people making use of it, one could surmise that many users did not want to make their profiles available for everyone to see.

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[1] "Statistics | Facebook," Facebook Company Website, http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics.
[2] "Facebook Redesigns Privacy," Facebook Company Press Release, May 26, 2010, http://www.facebook.com/press/releases.php?p=164155.
[3] Ryan Singel, "Public Posting Now the Default on Facebook," *Epicenter* (weblog), Dec. 9, 2009, http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2009/12/facebook-privacy-update/.
[4] Kevin Bankston, "Facebook's New Privacy Changes: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," *The Electronic Freedom Foundation*, Dec. 9, 2009, http://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2009/12/facebooks-new-privacy-changes-good-bad-and-ugly.