Privacy as information access and illusory control: The case of the Facebook News Feed privacy outcry

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, millions of people, especially youth, post personal information in online social networks (OSNs). In September 2006, one of the most popular sites—Facebook.com—introduced the features of News Feed and Mini Feed, revealing no more information than before, but resulting in immediate criticism from users. To investigate the privacy controversy, we conducted a survey among 172 current Facebook users in a large US university to explore their usage behaviors and privacy attitudes toward the introduction of the controversial News Feed and Mini Feed features. We examined the degree to which users were upset by the changes, explored the reasons as to why, and examined the influences of the News Feed privacy outcry on user behavior changes. The results have demonstrated how an easier information access and an "illusory" loss of control prompted by the introduction of News Feed features, triggered users' privacy concerns. In addition to enhancing our theoretical understanding of privacy issues in the online social networks, this research is also potentially useful to privacy advocates, regulatory bodies, service providers, and marketers to help shape or justify their decisions concerning the online social networks.

1. Introduction

Recently, the booming popularity of online social networks (OSNs) has attracted significant attention: the asynchronous or semi-synchronous nature of communication in these settings, as well as the emphasis on social cues, allows users to manage their identities and contexts in desirable ways (Boyd and Ellison 2007). By providing platforms for information sharing, video sharing, photo sharing, chatting, tagging and blogging, OSNs have been experiencing massive growth over the past few years. Facebook.com, for example, attracted over 200 million unique visitors in November 2008, while MySpace.com also had an impressive 125 million in the same month (Arrington 2009). According to a recent survey published by PEW Internet and American Life Project, it is shown that 75% of US adult Internet users age 18–24 have a profile on an online social networking site (Lenhart 2009).

However, this commercial potential and rapid growth has been overshadowed by the privacy problems OSNs pose. Large amounts of the identifiable information revealed and disseminated are giving rise to growing privacy concerns among various stakeholders, including OSN providers, marketers, and other users on the social networks (Acquisti and Gross 2006, Dinev et al. 2009). These con-

cerns pertain to the confidentiality of accumulated personal data and the potential risks that users may experience through possible privacy and security breaches (Acquisti and Gross 2006, Gross et al. 2005). Users often reveal their true identities on social networking sites, thus exposing their published personal information with potential abuse by online crooks, stalkers, bullies, and, commonly, even by their own friends (Gross et al. 2005, Kelly 2008).

Facebook, a free social networking website that is especially popular among college students, upset its subscribers when it released the News Feed feature on September 5, 2006. The feature culls new information that users post about themselves on their 'walls' or personal profile pages and delivers it in headline-news format on the website's initial page as seen by a user's network of friends and acquaintances, e.g. "Ron's status changed from 'in a relationship' to 'single'." Facebook initially promoted the News Feed feature as a convenience, with the promise that it would make new information easier than ever to find.

Within days of News Feed implementation, hundreds of thousands of users protested vehemently by forming groups (ironically, on Facebook) with names such as "Students Against Facebook News Feed" and "I Hate the New Facebook Format." – this huge backlash was widely covered in the mainstream press and dubbed Generation Y's "first official revolution" (Schmidt 2006). Facebook CEO – Mark Zuckerberg subsequently apologized in an open letter on Facebook entitled: "Calm down. Breathe. We hear you." He wrote (Schmidt 2006):

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"We didn't take away any privacy options... The privacy rules haven't changed. None of your information is visible to anyone who couldn't see it before the changes... Nothing you do is being broadcast; rather, it is being shared with people who care about what you do—your friends."

In response to the widespread concerns, Facebook immediately took down the News Feed applications and worked nonstop for two days on providing a wider variety of privacy preferences to block from feeds and control what might be pushed to whom (Jesdanun et al. 2006). Then Facebook re-released the News Feed applications with new privacy control features. On September 8, 2006, Mr. Zuckerberg's apologized for this privacy outcry and said (Jesdanun et al. 2006):

"This was a big mistake on our part, and I'm sorry for it... But apologizing isn't enough. I wanted to make sure we did something about it, and quickly. So we have been coding nonstop for two days to get you better privacy controls."

Why did the introduction of News Feed bring about such a privacy outcry? The News Feed takes information that people might have placed in their profile page and automatically displays it on the homepages of people in their network of 'friends.' As the information is broadcast more widely, attention is called to changes that previously might have been seen only by people who actively hunted for it. Before the recent change, one's information—for instance, relationship status, photos, or public messages posted by friends—was visible only when users intentionally 'pulled' and read a profile. After the change, Facebook started publishing updated information in a 'push' model so that it would make new information easier than ever to find (see Figs. 1a and 1b).

It can be argued that with News Feed, no new information is revealed; people are able to see changes if they choose to visit their friends' Facebook pages. News Feed did not change restrictions on access to information. Still, the change brought about a member outcry regarding online privacy. Users who before were complacent about access to posted photos and personal details protested

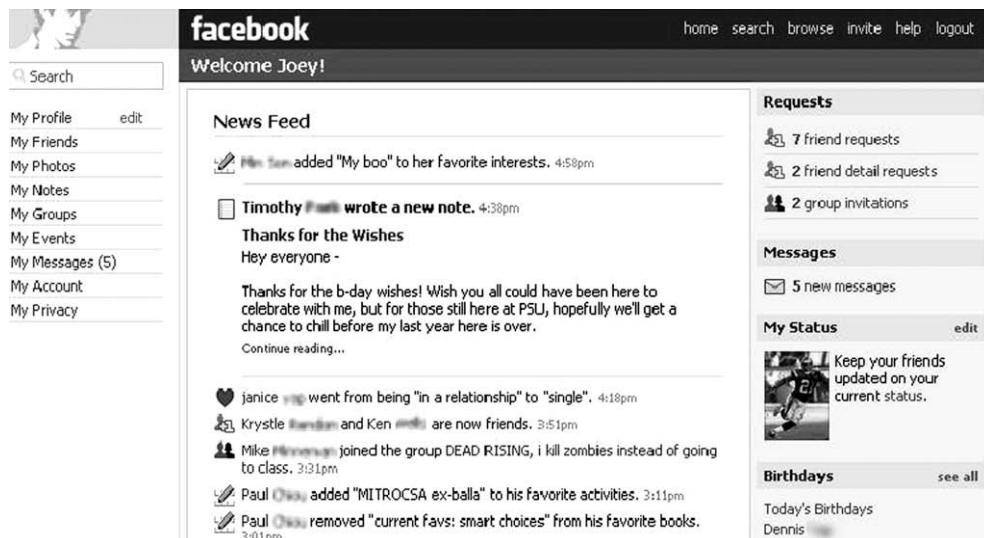**Fig. 1a.** Early Facebook user home page without News Feed.

Fig. 1b. Facebook user home page including News Feed feature.