

In Online Social Club, Sharing Is the Point Until It Goes Too Far

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Denizens of one of the Web's most popular student hangouts are in an uproar over changes to the site that they say make their online musings much too public, turning their personal lives into a flashing billboard.

Facebook.com, a site used by more than 9 million students and some professionals, is an Internet lounge where people share photos, read one another's postings and make connections -- a kind of digital yearbook through which people find out about goings-on with their friends and on campus.

But this week the site's immense popularity backfired after it started a feature that culls fresh information users post about themselves -- Tim is now single -- and delivers it in headline-news format to their network of buddies. Facebook, of Palo Alto, Calif., unveiled the feature at midnight Monday, saying it would make new information easier to find. Within hours, online protest groups were formed and thousands of people had joined.

"I don't like it because it's kind of stalker-ish," said Yan Fu, a freshman at George Washington University, adding that he now thinks twice before posting to his page. "I think, 'Everybody can read it,' so I've avoided it."

Fu's sentiment was shared by many Facebook users, hundreds of thousands of whom have joined ad hoc groups of petitioners calling themselves "I hate the new facebook format" and "Students Against Facebook News Feed."

Such a strong reaction in defense of privacy is rare among the teenage and twenty-something generation, which grew up in the era of public disclosure in the form of blogs, video sharing and reality television. Until now, questions about the wisdom of disclosure were raised primarily by parents, teachers and university administrators, while students flocked to Facebook and similar sites such as MySpace, Xanga and LiveJournal.

These social-networking sites have changed the way students meet and remember what they did last night -- especially as it gets easier to take and post information online or link to photos and video. For schools, the online networking phenomenon raised concerns that students' lives and escapades were being played out much more publicly with sometimes funny, sometimes embarrassing and occasionally dangerous results.

The women's lacrosse team at Catholic University got in trouble recently for photos posted online of the players and an all-but-naked guy. Last year, when Virginia Commonwealth University freshman Taylor Behl disappeared, police read her postings on social-networking sites for clues to her killer. That led many universities to warn students about risks as soon as they get to campus -- or even before they have arrived.

Virginia Tech asked older students to talk with freshmen about using caution. Catholic added online security issues to its student orientation. Students at Georgetown University got a brochure over the summer, and some signed up for a technology and online security class during orientation.

Georgetown pre-med student Miguel de Leon took the class and said the lecturer "made a good point when he said you wouldn't put your cellphone number on the wall of a building on M Street." So why post it on online message boards, or "walls"? De Leon changed his privacy settings afterward.

Joining Facebook requires a legitimate e-mail account at a school or business. Members can decide how

private they want their profile to be by limiting access, for example, to only undergraduates, faculty or individuals.

Many students said that they think it is fine to use technology to give outsiders a window into their lives and thoughts but that Facebook's new policy of broadcasting every update about their lives to other users is trespassing on the bounds of their privacy.

"It's really creepy," said Jenny Myers, who graduated this year from American University and works in Washington. "I think it's absolutely ridiculous, putting people's information out there, even small things."

That might be a shift in thinking among 18-to-25-year-olds, said Larry Ponemon, chairman of the Ponemon Institute, a Michigan research firm that studies privacy. "On the one hand, they're complacent about posting photos but really active and protesting when their information gets posted in a news feed."

The news feed takes information that people might have buried in their profile page and automatically displays it on the homepages of people in their network. As the information is broadcast more widely, attention is called to changes that previously might have been seen only by people who hunted. That's where the new feature goes too far, many students said.

"It used to be so innocent and fun," said Susanne Tortola, a recent American University graduate who uses Facebook to keep in contact with friends.

Before the recent change, her information -- relationship status, notes her friends have posted and photos she kept -- was visible only to people who read her profile. But now that Facebook is actively promoting updated information, Tortola can no longer quietly make changes, such as eliminating people from her roster of friends. Facebook's new system blasts that information as if it were on the marquee outside a movie theater. "Facebook can use your information and distribute it however they want to now," Tortola said.

George Washington sophomore Rachel Lynch's roommates have joined the protest, and she has shied away from posting any notes on her friends' walls for fear that it would attract voyeurs. "It's a privacy line that should never be crossed."

Faced with many complaints, Facebook responded yesterday by posting its response on its official blog.

"Calm down. Breathe. We hear you," wrote Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's chairman and chief executive.

"We're not oblivious of the Facebook groups popping up about this," Zuckerberg wrote of the protests. ". . . And we agree, stalking isn't cool; but being able to know what's going on in your friends' lives is. This is information people used to dig for on a daily basis, nicely reorganized and summarized so people can learn about the people they care about."

Facebook's site already provides privacy settings that allow users to control who sees what information, he said. At the strictest setting, information would not be circulated on the news feed; the news feed collects only information that people have already allowed to be visible on their pages.

Still, for George Washington senior Justin Persuitti, the mere prospect of unexpected disclosure made him conjure up unsettling scenarios: "You could have a girlfriend and be at a bar kissing another girl, and somebody could post [a cellphone photo] on your wall."