Poster: Privacy Attitudes of Facebook Users

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1.   INTRODUCTION

Privacy is a hot-button issue. On May 6th 2010, the New York Times "Business Innovation Technology and Society Blog" (or "Bits Blog" for short) offered Facebook users the chance to ask questions of Elliot Schrage, Vice President for Public Policy at Facebook in the blog entry's comments section. [1] Mr. Schrage then responded to a subsection of the reader questions in a subsequesent interview with Bits Blog reporter Jenna Wortham. [2] The 268 questions posted do not represent the general population due to the the self selecting nature of the survey, but they still provide a rich data set on the privacy attitudes of privacy conscious Facebook users

2.   THE NEW YORK TIMES COMMENTS

All 268 responses to the initial blog post at the New York Times were hand coded into several categories... our preliminary results are summarized below:

Category Name	Total Responses	Percent
Have a specific piece of information they wish to remain private	101	37.6%
Dissatisfied With Opt Out	67	22.7%
Find Current Interface Confusing and/or deceptive...	47	17.5%
Have Left/ Will Leave/ Refuse to Register for Facebook based on privacy concerns	37	13.8%
Express Concern Future Updates Will Reveal Private information	36	13.4%
Have concerns deleted data remains on FB servers	22	8.2%
Desire Prompt Notice of Privacy Policy Changes	17	6.3%
Dissatisfied with lack of human support	15	5.6%
Willing to Pay For Privacy	9	3.3%

3.   ANALYSIS OF PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Based on the preliminary results, a number of conclusions are immediately apparent. Of this sample, users overwhelmingly have some sort of data they want to keep private. Users specifically mentioned:

- Fan Pages/Like Pages
- Wall Posts
- Posted Links
- Status Updates
- Images
- Location (hometown and/or current location
- Entertainment Preferences(Favorite bands, movies, books, etc)
- Profile Existence (wants search invisibility)

These users are not happy with opt out, and they claim to be ready to leave Facebook, though this threat is not backed up by hard data, and may be hyperbole. Mark Zuckerberg, CEO and president of Facebook stated in an interview on May 27th 2010 that Facebook has not seen any recent changes in traffic patterns. [3]

4.   FACEBOOK'S RESPONSE

Mr. Schrage responded to a subset of the 268 questions in a subsequent blog post[2]. While Mr. Schrage was not able to address every question, he did touch upon two major issues: usable privacy controls and Facebook's current "opt out" policy. As we mentioned previously, many users specifically mentioned privacy controls as a reason they initially joined Facebook. Some examples of users specifically mentioning in the NY Times bits blog are included below:

"Facebook why are you trying to confuse me with all of these privacy updates? I feel like Facebook is trying to trick me in to making my information marketable?"

"...why are you becoming MySpace? People came to Facebook because it HAD walls; I don't mind all my friends knowing what I have on my Facebook page because they're my FRIENDS (and real ones, too). The problem arises in what Facebook has arbitrarily (or monetarily) deemed public information."

"One of the compelling reasons I joined Facebook in the first place   was   its   fine-grained   privacy   controls..."

"Why not have one over-arching privacy setting so that allows users to choose if they want EVERYTHING to be set the same way or (e.g. "Friends Only") or if they want to apply different settings to different areas (e.g. "Friends Only" for info, "Friends of Friends" for pictures, etc.)?"

Responding to comments such as these Mr. Schrage responded:

"Unfortunately, there are two opposing forces here — simplicity and granularity. By definition, if you make content sharing simpler, you lose granularity and vice versa. To date, we've been criticized for making things too complicated when we provide granular controls and for not providing enough control when we make things simple. We do our best to balance these interests but recognize we can do even better and we will." [2]

This position does not take into current research shows that users make decisions based on heuristics.

We believe it is reasonable to to assume users may click on an

"opt-in" button without understanding its implications, leading to later frustration when that user's private information is shared.

Current research also indicates that there is not a dichotomy between privacy and security. For example, the Locaccino project[4] has shown that usable access controls are a realistic goal. As of May 26 th 2010, Facebook has made some usability changes to it's privacy controls [5] based on user feedback.

Another issue that came up in the initial sample was user perceptions of Facebook's opt-out policy. Mr. Schrage's comments may not address Facebook user's concerns about opt-out. Respondents to the NY Times article made statements such as:

"Why can't you leave well enough alone? Why do I have to do a weekly ritual of checking to see what new holes you've slashed into the Facebook Security Blanket, so that I have to go and hide or delete yet more stuff? Are Facebook customers really pounding on your door screaming that they want more categories of their personal data to be available to marketers every few months?"

"I may love the X-Files, but I don't necessarily want everyone who is fan of theirs to see my personal information. After all, on that show "Trust no one" was a mantra of Agent Fox Mulder. Excuse my "Mulder"-ian paranoia, but is this new protocol an attempt by Facebook to force users into a larger network and, thereby, circumvent users' individual privacy settings?"

As mentioned earlier, 22.7% of respondents specifically mentioned a negative view of Facebook's opt-out model. Unfortunately, while enlightening, the responses mentioned thus far are not generalizable to the general population, due to the self selecting nature of the survey.

5.   CURRENT WORK
Our current work focuses on determining if the privacy attitudes of the general population match up with those found in the initial study of New York Times comments.

To accomplish this, we plan to run a three-part Mechanical Turk survey. The first part consists of basic demographic information such as age, education level, and geographic location. The second part is a 15 question survey designed to measure users' privacy attitudes. [6] Finally, we will ask a set of questions designed to elicit attitudes regarding specific aspects of user's Facebook profiles, such as status updates, photos, or wall posts.

Based on this survey data, we will be able to determine the Facebook privacy attitudes of the general population, and possibly draw conclusions about specific demographic groups.

6.   ACKNOWLEDMENTS

7.   REFERENCES
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