

Facebook plans to simplify privacy settings

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Facebook logo

(AP) -- Facebook is overhauling its privacy controls over the next several weeks in an attempt to simplify its users' ability to control who sees the information they share on the site.

Privacy has been a central, often thorny issue for [Facebook](#) because so many people use it to share personal information with their friends and family and beyond. But as the 5-year-old [social networking service](#) has expanded its user base and added features, its [privacy](#) controls have grown increasingly complicated.

The Palo Alto, Calif.-based company said Wednesday that the new settings will give people greater control over what photos, updates and personal details they share with their friends, family and strangers on Facebook and, eventually, the wider Internet.

To make the settings easier, Facebook is consolidating its existing six privacy pages and more than 30 settings onto a single privacy page. It will also standardize the options for each setting so the choices are

always the same, something that hasn't always been the case.

That means that for various pieces of content, users will be able to click on a lock icon to choose whether to show it to everyone, only their friends, friends of friends, members of professional or school networks or people on a customized list.

Previously, users had to navigate page after page to exclude, if they want, bosses or co-workers from seeing their photo albums, status updates or shared links. And because the privacy settings were dispersed on different pages, even after making a profile visible to friends only, the photos on that profile could remain public.

Facebook's chief privacy officer, Chris Kelly, said in a conference call with reporters that the changes don't have anything to do with advertising or the information Facebook is going to make available to advertisers.

Rather, he said, the site wants people "to be able to share information with as many or as few people as they choose."

One of Facebook's most notable privacy mishaps was a tracking tool called "Beacon," which in late 2007 caught users off-guard by broadcasting information about their activities at other Web sites, including their purchase of holiday gifts for those who could see the information. The company ultimately allowed users to turn Beacon off.

Other changes, too, have often met with user uproar. Earlier this year Facebook let its users vote on the site's guiding principles after tens of thousands joined online protests over who controls the information they share on the site.

To prevent another backlash, Facebook will gradually roll out the latest changes. Facebook will start by testing them out on small groups of users

and tweak the final version of the controls based on feedback. Facebook said it would take more than three weeks to reach every user.

"They are learning how to listen carefully to their users," said Jules Polonetsky, co-chairman and director of the Washington-based Future of Privacy Forum and former chief privacy officer at AOL. He added that Facebook has learned from the past that suddenly making big changes, whatever they are, has not been the most effective approach.

The privacy changes come as Facebook tries to become a broadly used destination, competing not just with other social networks like Twitter and [MySpace](#) but also more established hubs like [Google](#) and Yahoo.

To do this, Facebook needs its 200 million-plus users to share content and interact with more people than their close friends and families.

"To be lots of things to lots of different kinds of people," Polonetsky said, Facebook needs to give its users, who come from different cultures, age groups and career levels, more control over what they share on the site.

The site will soon let users assign different privacy settings to each piece of information they make available, including photos, contact information and work info, as well as status updates, links and photos.

In another big change, the site is also getting rid of its regional networks. Facebook said those separate zones have led to too much confusion over which information can be widely seen or kept relatively private. In the past, someone who joined a New York network, for example, could inadvertently make personal information available to everyone else in that network, including complete strangers.

Facebook will continue to have social networks related to schools and

work.

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