

The case for oversharing

June 24 2010, By Chris O'Brien

There's been a lot of squealing of late over our rapidly eroding privacy on the Web, with the finger of accusation pointed directly at those sneaky Facebook folks. Founder Mark Zuckerberg is now the Snidely Whiplash of the Web, tying our privacy to the railroad tracks as he twirls his handlebar mustache and cackles with glee.

However, instead of making Zuckerberg the easy archvillain, I want to pause and rethink this privacy thing.

Let's remember that everything we share on [Facebook](#) is done so voluntarily. We do it because of the benefits we receive. We like to share because it allows us to connect and discover. Over time, our notion of privacy has changed dramatically -- and not just because of some sinister plot by Facebook.

Even more important is where this trend is taking us. We've been hearing a lot about how oversharing is sucking us into a black hole where our various sins will haunt us forever. I want to balance that bleak scenario by offering the case for oversharing, and why the benefits and social good that may flow from that impulse may far outweigh the downsides.

The topics of Facebook, privacy, sharing and the power of crowds were front and center at a conference I attended last week called the Future of News and Civic Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. The event, which was co-hosted by MIT's Center for Future Civic Media and the Knight Foundation, brought together more than 200

[programmers](#), entrepreneurs, journalists and academics to discuss the way technology is reshaping news and information.

Many of the discussions we had in various sessions reflected the ambivalence being experienced by growing numbers of Facebook users. Namely, that it's growing too powerful, that we're risking too much by ceding so much control over our identity and personal information.

And yet, I also saw numerous presentations and demonstrations of services, many still in the earliest of early stages, that offered compelling reasons for how oversharing might create a lot of social good.

To cite just one example, let's look at Red Ink, a Web site being developed by MIT graduate student Ryan O'Toole. Red Ink wants us to do something that many of us consider unthinkable: Share our most personal financial information.

Yes, there are for-profit services like Blippy that want you to post and share your purchases. Red Ink wants to do that, and then some. It wants you to share parts of your bank account, tax forms, mortgage records. Now, before you recoil in horror, consider the enticement: O'Toole wants to help you take this information, and aggregate the same information from your friends and community with the idea that the resulting data would make all of you smarter consumers with much greater economic clout.

You could see how your dollars flowed through your community, support local businesses, get the best deals and wield influence by collectively spending -- or not spending -- at certain businesses. Assuming he can develop the proper privacy protections, O'Toole argues that having this information would level the playing field between individuals and banks and businesses who already make use of their access to your financial information.

"They know quite a bit about how we spend our money," O'Toole said. "And they can mine a lot of this data. And they give that information to businesses and governments to support their agendas. We're really disenfranchised from really working with that same data."

This project is moving out of the ivory tower and into two pilot programs O'Toole is launching. The first is in South Wood County, Wis., where a local community foundation and O'Toole will create a site for people to share information about their income and their charitable giving. The hope is that by seeing what proportion of income people donate, others will be motivated to give more.

The second pilot is in Bucks County, Pa., where O'Toole and a local foundation will ask residents to post their natural gas bills online. They hope that by sharing that information, residents will be motivated to reduce their own use, and cut the county's carbon footprint dramatically.

As I said, this is just one example. There are efforts to share more medical information. And projects to share more educational data. Part of these experiments is to try to better understand the privacy issues, and the threshold that needs to be cleared before people will share this information.

It might seem far-fetched that we'd share this information. But let's remember just how rapidly and radically our notion of privacy has evolved over the past decade. When I first arrived in Silicon Valley back in 1999, one of the biggest complaints I heard as the telecommunications reporter was about Pacific Bell's new caller ID service. At the same time, many newspaper Web sites had stirred controversy by asking readers to register using their e-mail address. While these both struck many as massive privacy scandals at the time, they seem downright quaint today.

What we have learned since then is that with the right incentives, people will, in fact, share boatloads of personal information. And while this is often depicted as a generational thing, the fastest-growing segment of Facebook for some time now has been people over 35.

When Zuckerberg says the trend is toward more sharing, he's not being self-serving. He's just stating fact.

The impulse now, since we can't stop Zuckerberg -- and worse, we can't seem to stop ourselves -- is to turn to regulations and government to do both for us. Before we go down this road, we need to consider the benefits that sharing and social networking have brought.

I'd hate for us to panic and try to stop a future that may, in the end, turn out to be better for all this sharing.

(c) 2010, San Jose Mercury News (San Jose, Calif.).
Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: The case for oversharing (2010, June 24) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-06-case-oversharing.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--