

# Facebook develops new privacy policy

March 9 2011, By Mike Swift

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Facebook is rewriting its privacy policy in plain-spoken English, and preparing new tools to show users how their personal data is used.

"We're really an innovative, cutting-edge company on a lot of different fronts, and I think we feel like, 'Why can't we be innovators in privacy as well?' " Michael Richter, Facebook's chief privacy counsel, said in an interview this week. "The company cares about privacy."

Nevertheless, some critics say Facebook is still not telling consumers enough about what it knows about them, and about how the social network and its business partners use that information. The [Federal Trade Commission](#) and some members of Congress are prodding the Palo Alto, Calif., social network about privacy practices like the company's recent decision to let third-party developers access the telephone numbers of users who allow it.

Facebook's intent to simplify its privacy disclosures, and to create interactive software tools to allow users to see how Facebook and application developers access their data, has drawn praise from some [privacy advocates](#). But, "until Facebook tells its 600 million members what it tells its major advertisers and marketing partners - on how to configure its system to generate data and other desired ad responses - it is failing to protect user privacy," said Jeffrey Chester, executive director of the Center for [Digital Democracy](#). "We intend to push the FTC and Congress to force Facebook to come clean about its data privacy practices."

Compared to the existing 5,900-word privacy statement, the proposed new policy is easier to read and full of graphics that illustrate how Facebook works. (Users can view and comment on the proposal at [www.facebook.com/about/privacy](http://www.facebook.com/about/privacy).) While privacy advocates say the intent is good, few are convinced the more plain-spoken policy will keep many people informed about their privacy choices.

Ryan Calo, director of the [Consumer Privacy](#) Project at Stanford University's Center for Internet and Society, says a privacy policy cannot be both succinct and thorough. "I am completely skeptical of privacy policies as a way to inform users," he said. "Nobody reads them."

Calo said, however, he is more excited about interactive tools Facebook is proposing that would allow users to do things like build their own ad on Facebook, to demonstrate that the social network does not share an individual's data with advertisers targeting a specific demographic.

For example, a San Jose Mercury News reporter who used the Facebook interactive tool to design an ad that would target Americans between the ages of 25 and 34 interested in reading newspaper stories about Mark Zuckerberg found the ad would target about 360,000 women and 290,000 men. There was no way to access the names of users, however, or where those people live.

"We're really looking at this at some level as an experiment," said Richter, who added many users "are saying that this is helpful and think we're doing a better job of explaining things."

Still, privacy advocates like Chris Conley of the American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California say Facebook, even in the proposed policy, is not telling users enough about how it uses data they don't actively share, such as how Facebook tracks visits to the pages of other users. Other critics say Facebook often implements new features

that affect a user's data without communicating what users get out of it.

"They are constantly changing things, and they don't notify the users, and I think that bothers users," said Amber Yoo of the San Diego-based Privacy Rights Clearinghouse.

And Facebook doesn't appear likely to stop discovering new ways to utilize user data.

As the proposed privacy policy says: "Granting us this permission not only allows us to provide [Facebook](#) as it exists today, but it also allows us to provide you with innovative features and services we develop in the future that use your information in new ways."

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