

Review: Facebook snapshot doesn't capture dynamics

May 17 2012, By ANICK JESDANUN , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- In my five years on Facebook, I've shared a lot of photos, links and other tidbits about my life. I've commented on what my friends share, and I've endorsed plenty of their posts by hitting the "like" button. I've gained Facebook friends over the years, and I've lost some.

With Facebook Inc. expected to begin trading as a public company this week, I decided it was a good time to take CEO Mark Zuckerberg up on his offer to give back to me everything I've put up on Facebook.

In announcing the Download Your Information feature in 2010, Zuckerberg promised "an easy way to quickly download to your computer everything you've ever posted on Facebook and all your correspondences with friends: your messages, Wall posts, [photos](#), [status updates](#) and profile information."

It was billed as part of Facebook's effort to give you more control over your data.

Why might you want this?

[Internet services](#) sometimes lose data. A few of my Facebook posts have inexplicably disappeared over the years, so it's reassuring to know that I can download a backup anytime.

The feature also allows me to close my Facebook account without giving up all of my memories, should I ever want to. As long as Facebook keeps

offering the feature, I can post to my heart's content and rest assured that I always have the option to leave without losing my digital investment.

Perhaps one day another social network will overtake Facebook. It would be great if you could populate that with years' worth of photos and musings from Facebook, rather than have to start over. There's no good way of doing so now. I'm surprised rival [Google](#) Plus doesn't have a huge "import" button for transferring over your Facebook life. But having that archive is a start, and it'll just take someone to build that transfer capability.

I'll also add that a Facebook archive could be useful if a family member dies. You might want to close the account, but save the data.

To access the feature, look for the arrow on the upper right side of your Facebook page. Click on it and select "Account Settings" from the drop-down menu. Then look for a link to "Download a copy" at the bottom of the "General" tab. After entering your password, you'll need to wait a few hours for Facebook to email you a link.

You use the link to download the archives to your computer, in the form of a collection of Web pages, which you can open with any browser. Links on the left direct you to such things as "Photos," "Friends" and "Messages." You can navigate through the links, even when offline, as everything's stored on your computer.

Browsing through the archives offers a nice way to resurrect long-lost memories. It's something I can do by visiting my Facebook profile page, but now I can do it without an Internet connection.

Here's what I found:

- The "Wall" link gives me everything I've ever posted on my profile,

back to 2007's declaration that I was "wasting a lot of time on facebook." I also got stuff people wrote on my profile page or tagged with my name, as well as stuff I've written on my friends' pages. I also got a record of people's comments on those posts.

Some of the context is missing, though. It says 17 people liked a post I made last weekend, but I couldn't find out who they were. I wished someone a happy birthday on April 26, but the archive doesn't say who that was. Nor does it reveal comments I've made on other people's profiles.

Facebook is sensitive about including information on your friends. The company wants to give them the option to delete information from their profile, but that can't happen if it's already stored in your archive.

- The "Photos" link gives me the photos I've shared from my computer or phone. As with profile posts, I get comments made about those photos, but I get nothing on people endorsing them with a "like." I also don't get friends' photos in that feed, even if I'm tagged in them.

I'll also point out that this isn't a good way to back up your photos. Facebook shrinks larger files, so you lose the photo's original resolution. What you get is adequate for Web viewing, but disappointing for large prints, especially if you're using a high-quality camera.

A "Videos" link essentially does the same thing. Your videos are there in the standard MP4 format, which Facebook otherwise doesn't let you download. This archive can be useful if you've lost your original footage.

- The "Friends" link gives me an alphabetical list of friends, and in a handful of cases, their email addresses. I can get so much more on Facebook, including phone numbers and hometowns, but leaving that out lets your friends decide later not to share those details with you.

- The "Events" link gives me a list of birthday parties and other gatherings I've been invited to, but I don't get information on which friends were attending and what they posted about the event. I do get links, though, to the Facebook page with that information, but I need to be online and signed in to Facebook.

- "Messages" gives me a record of my Facebook conversations, including replies from friends and some chats, while "Profile" offers biographical information I already know about myself.

Last month, Facebook began to offer an expanded version of my archives, promising information on friend requests, events attended or declined and the numeric Internet Protocol addresses of computers I've used.

The most interesting part was the list of people I've unfriended and those who have ignored my friend requests so far (you know who you are, and I know where you live). I also got a list of people I have ignored.

I question the usefulness of the list of data cookie IDs tied to my account. These cookies can be used to build a digital dossier and target ads to my interests, but seeing "3oF9T2zf3fXcYM6TunBbZ5bG" tells me nothing about what Facebook is doing. I also question the need to know what IP addresses were used to access my account, except perhaps to see whether any unauthorized users might have hacked it.

As I looked through the files, I realized they felt pretty empty compared with the site. Facebook's utility is in the connections with [friends](#), not the specific images or musings I post on the site. A data archive can't fully capture the dynamics of those connections.

I'm glad Facebook offers this feature, and I intend to create snapshots every so often. But for now, my Facebook data is most useful on

[Facebook](#), not stored away on my computer.

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