# Is Facebook finally taking anonymity seriously?

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Facebook experimenting with a level of anonymity for users on the social media platform. Credit: Flickr/Steven Mileham, CC BY-NC

Having some form of anonymity online offers many people a kind of freedom. Whether it's used for exposing corruption or just experimenting socially online it provides a way for the content (but not its author) to be seen.

But this freedom can also easily be abused by those who use anonymity to troll, abuse or harass others, which is why Facebook has previously been opposed to "anonymity on the internet".

So in announcing that it will allow [users](#) to [log in to apps anonymously](#), is Facebook is taking anonymity seriously?

## Real identities on Facebook

CEO Mark Zuckerberg has been committed to Facebook as a site for users to have [a single real identity](#) since its beginning a decade ago as a platform to connect [college students](#). Today, Facebook's core business is still about connecting people with those they already know.

But there have been [concerns](#) about what [personal information](#) is revealed when people use any [third-party apps](#) on Facebook.

So this latest announcement aims to address any reluctance some users may have to sign in to third-party apps. Users will soon be able to log in to them without revealing any of their wealth of personal information.

That does not mean they will be anonymous to Facebook – the social media site will still track user activity.

It might seem like the beginning of a shift away from singular, fixed identities, but tweaking privacy settings hardly indicates that Facebook is [embracing anonymity](#). It's a long way from changing how third-party apps are approached to changing Facebook's entire real-name culture.

Facebook still insists that "[users provide their real names and information](#)", which it describes as an ongoing "commitment" users make to the platform.

## Changing the Facebook experience?

Having the option to log in to third-party apps anonymously does not

necessarily mean Facebook users will actually use it. Effective use of Facebook's privacy settings depends on user knowledge and motivation, and not all users opt in.

A recent Pew Research Center report reveals that the most common strategy people use to be less visible online is to clear their cookies and browser history.

Only 14% of those interviewed said they had used a service to browse the internet anonymously. So, for most Facebook users, their experience won't change.

## Facebook login on other apps and websites

Facebook offers users the ability to use their authenticated Facebook identity to log in to third-party web services and mobile apps. At its simplest and most appealing level, this alleviates the need for users to fill in all their details when signing up for a new app. Instead they can just click the "Log in with Facebook" button.

For online corporations whose businesses depend on building detailed user profiles to attract advertisers, authentication is a real boon. It means they know exactly what apps people are using and when they log in to them.

Automated data flows can often push information back into the authenticating service (such as the music someone is playing on Spotify turning up in their Facebook newsfeed).

While having one account to log in to a range of apps and services is certainly handy, this convenience means it's almost impossible to tell what information is being shared.

Is Facebook just sharing your email address and full name, or is it providing your date of birth, most recent location, hometown, a full list of friends and so forth? Understandably, this again raises privacy concerns for many people.

## How anonymous login works

To address these concerns, Facebook is testing anonymous login as well as a more granular approach to authentication. (It's worth noting, neither of these changes have been made available to users yet.)

Given the long history of [privacy missteps by Facebook](#), the new login appears to be a step forward. Users will be told what information an app is requesting, and have the option of selectively deciding which of those items Facebook should actually provide.

Facebook will also ask users whether they want to allow the app to post information to Facebook on their behalf. Significantly, this now places the onus on users to manage the way Facebook shares their information on their behalf.

In [describing anonymous login](#), Facebook explains that:

Sometimes people want to try out apps, but they're not ready to share any information about themselves.

It's certainly useful to try out apps without having to fill in and establish a full profile, but very few apps can actually operate without some sort of persistent user identity.

The implication is once a user has tested an app, to use its full functionality they'll have to set up a profile, probably by allowing Facebook to share some of their data with the app or service.

## Taking on the competition

The value of identity and anonymity are both central to the current social media war to gain user attention and loyalty.

Facebook's anonymous login might cynically be seen as an attempt to court users who have flocked to [Snapchat](link), an app which has anonymity built into its design from the outset.

Snapchat's creators famously turned down a [US$3 billion](link) buyout bid from Facebook. Last week it also revealed part of its [competitive plan](link), an updated version of Snapchat that offers seamless real-time video and text chat.

By default, these conversations disappear as soon as they've happened, but users can select important items to hold on to.

Whether competing with Snapchat, or any number of other [social media](link) services, Facebook will have to continue to consider the way identity and anonymity are valued by users. At the moment its flirting with [anonymity](link) is tokenistic at best.

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