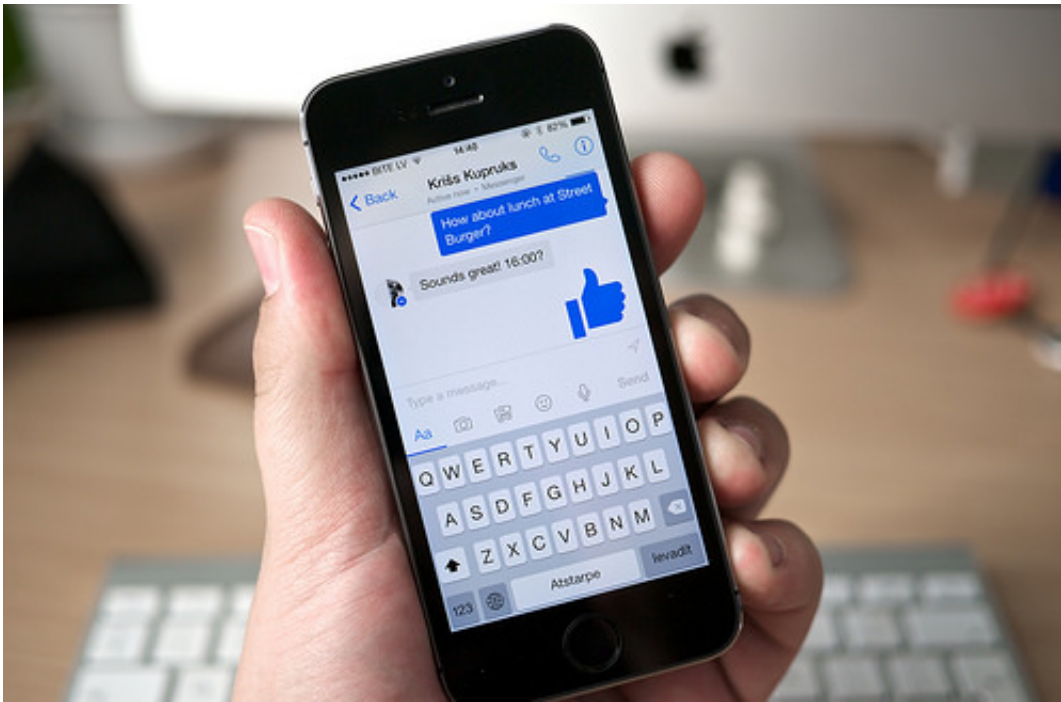


How much do we really know about privacy on Facebook?

August 22 2014, by Michael Cowling



Facebook's Messenger sparked the latest outrage over privacy - but should people be concerned? Credit: Flickr/Karlis Dambrans, CC BY

The recent furore about the [Facebook Messenger](#) app has unearthed an interesting question: how far are we willing to allow our privacy to be pushed for our social connections? In the case of the Facebook Messenger app, the answer appears to be: "Not as far as Facebook thinks."

For those who are not yet on Facebook (yes, there are some), the social media giant has been asking all users who want to continue sending messages to their Facebook friends on their mobile devices to download a Facebook Messenger app. Facebook is preparing to [stop the chat](#) feature on its main Facebook app.

The Messenger app has been available for a while but only recently became compulsory.

Uproar over app permissions

Beyond the complaints about adding another app to the mix, the real controversy emerged when new downloaders discovered that the app, especially on [Android](#), was asking for a whole raft of permissions. These included the ability to read your SMS messages, read your phone call log and access the photo roll on your device.

This seeming intrusion into the privacy of users sent people into an uproar on the internet. An [article from the Huffington Post](#) on the dangers of Facebook app permissions went viral this month.

There were plenty of follow-up articles on the situation from the [Wall Street Journal](#), [Washington Post](#), famous rumour-debunking site [Snopes.com](#) and, ironically, statuses and rants shared *ad infinitum* on Facebook itself.

Even now, the fallout continues, with many one-star reviews of the app appearing on the [Apple app store](#). Articles continue to appear on [many tech sites](#) reassuring users that downloading the app does not give any more permission than many other apps (including the main Facebook app itself).

Facebook tries to ease concerns

For the record, [Facebook maintains](#) that it hasn't done anything wrong and that the permissions that have been requested are standard practice for many apps, both theirs and those of others.

Believe what you will, but of course this then raises the more interesting question: how far are we willing for our privacy to be pushed in this digital age?

Remember that many of these complaints about the Messenger app are coming from the same cohort of people who regularly share details of their lives, such as photos and event invitations, on Facebook.

Even as the social media platform changes and people get frustrated with how Facebook is controlling our lives, people continue to use the site as a social tool.

Who reads privacy policies anyway?

It's clear that we want to have our cake and eat it too. A [study](#) from Carnegie Mellon University in the US suggested that if we were to read the [privacy policies](#) of every web service we use just once in a year, it would take a [full month](#) of our work time.

Instead, we rely on blind trust and obscurity ("surely they don't care about me") to get through these situations. Perhaps this is why people are so upset with the Messenger app; it exposes terms that we all agreed to but would prefer to remain blissfully unaware of.

Of course, some recent stories have come to light that suggest our fears aren't totally unfounded. For instance, the revelation that Facebook

conducted an experiment on the [news feed](#) of thousands of its users shows the company has no qualms about using our data.

Or the more recent story by [Wired](#) of the journalist who committed to "Like" everything on Facebook for two days, only to find his friends slowly pushed out of his news feed and replaced with corporate sponsorship and left/right-wing political opinion.

The true cost of connecting online

These articles are beginning to show the dark side of social networking. A new movie by director [Jason Reitman](#) promises to do even more, showing how people are connected but also conflicted about their social life. The movie, [Men, Women & Children](#), follows the digital life of several different participants as they navigate the digital world of the 21st century.

So, what to do? The internet and social networking allow us to remain connected, but it comes at a price to our privacy, which some are apparently not willing to pay, or at least not willing to acknowledge.

Perhaps the problem will solve itself, as digital native children replace their digital immigrant parents in the world of the 21st century, and our expected level of privacy changes. Or perhaps we will all tire of Facebook and [social networking](#), move away from such platforms and no longer have this issue.

But more likely one day somebody will realise that just as the industrial age needed regulation on roads and manufacturing, so too does the information age need regulation on the use of information.

And when that day comes, perhaps we all need to stop relying on blind trust and take the time out of our year to read the new privacy

legislation.

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