

Study examines effect of privacy controls on Facebook behavior

November 30 2016, by Brittany Magelssen

Despite the widespread popularity of online social network platforms, privacy remains a troublesome issue. A new study from the Naveen Jindal School of Management assesses the impact of Facebook's granular privacy controls and its effects on user disclosure behavior.

"People have different views on the value of [privacy controls](#) in managing disclosures and therefore [privacy](#) dangers," said Dr. Huseyin Cavusoglu, associate professor of information systems. "Some people argue that giving users more granular controls mitigates [privacy issues](#) because users can effectively limit the recipients of shared content, thereby increasing the secrecy of disclosures. On the contrary, other people claim that users perceive privacy risks less severely when they have more controls to exercise, and as a result, share more content publicly, thereby increasing the openness of disclosures."

In a recent study published in the INFORMS journal *Information Systems Research*, the researchers used data obtained from Facebook to test the relationship between privacy controls and disclosure patterns of Facebook users based on two popular content-sharing activities: wall posts and private messages.

In December 2009, Facebook gave users additional options to manage privacy by introducing granular controls to set access permissions for wall posts on a per-post basis.

The authors developed a model to characterize the impact of granular

privacy controls on sharing behavior. They hypothesized that as users gain more control over sharing of wall posts, they will customize the audience for some wall posts and consequently will share more content through wall posts and less through private messages.

Results show that Facebook users, on average, increased their use of wall posts and decreased their use of private messages in periods after the change in privacy controls. These effects took place immediately and lasted over time.

The researchers also introduced a metric, called the disclosure index, that quantifies the openness of disclosure patterns based on the relative levels of wall posting and private messaging. The study showed that users' disclosure patterns reflected increased openness in content sharing after the introduction of enhanced privacy controls.

However, different groups of users respond to the new policy in opposite ways, Cavusoglu said.

"What we found is that users who are more privacy conscious started to share more content via wall posts and less content via private messages after the change, possibly because they are the people who are likely to use the enhanced privacy controls and therefore benefit from them. As a result, the openness of their disclosure increased," he said.

"However, those who are less privacy sensitive prior to the change actually reduced the use of wall posts and increased the use of [private messages](#) in periods following the change. The openness of their disclosure decreased. It is possible that the privacy policy change gave users who didn't worry about the privacy issues, or know about them before, a chance to think about their privacy."

Openness on social media has implications for the social networking

platform as well, Cavusoglu said.

"Facebook is a free platform that makes most of its money from advertising," Cavusoglu said. "If users share more openly, the platform can better identify users' interests. Then, the platform can help advertisers deliver relevant ads to target specific audiences and charge more for this service.

"After the change, there was some discussion among practitioner press that Facebook gave users these controls just to increase the openness in content sharing—that the intention was seen not to facilitate better protection of privacy, but rather to nudge people to share openly more. Facebook says this was its response to the outcry of users about privacy dangers. In the end, Facebook addressed the privacy concerns of [users](#), while at the same time, it increased open sharing of user-generated content. Hence, Facebook achieved both objectives."

More information: Huseyin Cavusoglu et al. Assessing the Impact of Granular Privacy Controls on Content Sharing and Disclosure on Facebook, *Information Systems Research* (2016). [DOI: 10.1287/isre.2016.0672](#)

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