

Facebook lets users form groups and download data

6 October 2010, by Glenn Chapman



Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg gives a speech launching a new aspect to the social networking website in Palo Alto, California on October 6, 2010. The online facility will let users form cozy cliques as part of a move to give people more control of their information at the world's most popular online social network.

Facebook is letting users form cozy cliques as part of a move to give people more control of their information at the world's most popular online social network.

A "Groups" feature that lets Facebook members set up private online havens for clusters of family, co-workers, teammates, or others was unveiled Wednesday at the firm's headquarters in the Californian city of Palo Alto.

Founder Mark Zuckerberg said that the "biggest problem" in online social networking is that people tend to divide their friends into separate circles that they interact with differently, such as co-workers or former school chums.

"Now, people can map out all the real world groups they have in a graph," Zuckerberg said, referring to "Groups."

"If we can do this, we can unlock a huge amount of sharing people want to do that they don't do now

because it's too annoying or the privacy," he said.

Groups are shared spaces in which people can communicate with tools including email lists and "group chat that is pretty killer," he added.

"We think that what we have out of the box, version one, blows away everything else," Zuckerberg said, referring to "groups" services offered by Internet stalwarts such as Yahoo! and Google.

Facebook also began rolling out a feature that will let people download all pictures, video, comments and other digital information they have uploaded to the social networking service.

"Download is really so you can have a copy of all your information," Zuckerberg said. "You own your information. You should have control over it. You should be able to do whatever you want with it."

A new "dashboard" feature to be rolled out in the coming days will let Facebook users see and manage what information in their accounts is accessed by third-party applications.

Explaining the new features, Forrester social computing analyst Augie Ray said "the dialogue during the past year that popped up over privacy issues may have caused people in Facebook to get nervous.

"What we are seeing today is a genuine desire to stop those concerns while at the same time really give people better control," Ray said.

The new features are part of a drive to build Facebook into a "social platform" where people share and connect across the gamut of applications used to swap pictures, messages, videos and more online, according to Zuckerberg.

"We think social can be like the PC (personal computer) platform, giving people control of their

information in different contexts," he said.

"Groups" was built with the help of Hot Potato, a young New York City Internet firm that Facebook bought in August.

Hot Potato about nine months ago launched a social networking service that lets smartphone users "check-in" to let friends know what they are thinking, watching, playing, attending, listening to, or otherwise doing.

"Groups are about how we are living our lives today," said Hot Potato founder and Facebook Groups leader Justin Shaffer. "We think this is going to change, fundamentally, how you use Facebook today."

People forming Facebook Groups can make them open, closed, or secret.

Membership and content of open groups is public, while the content of closed groups can only be seen by members. Secret groups hide their membership and contents.

Analyst Rob Enderle of Enderle Group in Silicon Valley doubted that features Facebook started rolling out Wednesday would do much to ameliorate concerns about how safe personal data is in the online community.

"They are approaching a trust issue like you would a technology problem and patching the product," Enderle said.

"They are turning people into mini data managers," he continued. "But, if you don't trust Facebook in the first place, why would you believe your Group is a contained area that Facebook won't mine?"

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APA citation: Facebook lets users form groups and download data (2010, October 6) retrieved 20 October 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-10-facebook-users-groups-download.html>

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