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Boycott furthers Web privacy war

Jaclyn Youhana | The Journal Gazette

Fort Wayne – A two-choice Facebook questionnaire: Do you plan to sign into Facebook today, or do you plan to keep it off in protest?

The website www.facebookprotest.com is planning a boycott of the social-networking site today, citing privacy concerns as the primary fuel to its fire. As of 10 a.m. Tuesday, the site had amassed nearly 2,000 followers on Twitter and (ironically) more than 4,000 fans on Facebook.

Facebook has 175 million users who sign in daily, according to TechCrunch, a technology website.

One of the critics' major concerns? A detail in Facebook's policy that lets advertisers have access to user information. If a user clicks on an ad, Facebook would provide that advertiser with the subscriber's user ID, the Washington Post reports.

Users can turn off this function, but it's not easy – especially for the non-Internet-savvy.

Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg has responded to the privacy concerns, and on May 26, he unveiled privacy changes in his Facebook blog: "We've focused on three things: a single control for your content, more powerful controls for your basic information and an easy control to turn off all applications."

The changes do not address the fact that Facebook users have to opt out of giving their information to advertisers.

Openbook, at www.youopenbook.org, has a goal similar to Facebook's – protest, but with a slightly more shock-and-awe tactic. The site is a searchable database of all public Facebook statuses. A recent "recent searches" list included the phrases "lost my virginity," "naughty pics" and more, including some that are unfit to print.

The site does propose a solution to the privacy problem: a prominent slide-bar setting, ranging from "private" to "open," displayed on the home page of every profile, where users could still edit their privacy settings in detail.

Past grievances

These sites and boycotts are certainly not unique.

A blog called A Day Without Facebook called for users to boycott the site on Sept. 12, 2006, because of then-new features many users did not like, including a change to the news feeds that, according to the blog, "damages what privacy was left on Facebook."

After Facebook gave users the choice of opting out of appearing in news feeds, the site considered its work done and ended the boycott.

PCWorld reported that a group called for a two-day boycott after a major 2008 Facebook redesign.

What makes this boycott different is that it has arisen not just from changes to the site but from a comment made by Zuckerberg that he doesn't "believe in privacy."

Another difference? There's talk of Congress getting involved, wondering whether it needs to step in to regulate the site. That's something no one – including Facebook – wants, says Chad Pollitt, Internet marketing manager for Digital Hill, a Goshen-based Web design and marketing agency.

"(Facebook's) biggest fear is that the government is going to regulate or tax the Internet," Pollitt says.

That should scare anyone who uses the Internet. Have a blog? Want it taxed or regulated? If the FCC gets involved, he says, freedom on the Web will go away.

Facebook estimates it will hit the 500 million-user mark before the end of June, according to All Facebook, an unofficial Facebook resource. With that count, Facebook would rank as the third-most populous country in the world. Pollitt says, ahead of the United States at 310 million.

Facebook privacy changes

In response to the outcry over Facebook's privacy settings, the site made changes May 26 giving users more control over their accounts. These changes will be unveiled in shifts for users. Here's what the new changes mean:

- When your account has been changed, you'll see a notice at the top of your Facebook home screen. It will link to information explaining the changes and also to the privacy settings page.
 - You can keep your settings as they are. You can align your settings with those suggested by Facebook, or you can choose a single setting for all controls. This will allow you to share your information with "friends only," "friends of friends" or "everyone." This will be used as your default for future privacy changes. Previously, all this information required more than 100 different settings. Now, users can control the same information with two clicks.
 - The new settings will also simplify blocking individual users or applications.
- Source: New York Times

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Features

Feel inspired this summer

Get out your shades and charcoal. With summer comes the eternal hope of three months of sunny days and lazy times. Hopefully there will be trips to the beach. Today 3:00 am

Think New York for top beach

Hamptons hoi polloi probably assumed it was always No. 1. Today 3:00 am

Off the rack

Borders Books, Music Café

1. "Glee: The Music, Volume 3: Showstoppers," "Glee" cast 2. "Interpretations: The British Rock Songbook," Bettye Lavette 3. "The Fame Monster," Lady Gaga 4. Today 3:00 am

Closets full of emotion

Houses start out as buildings, brick and mortar: some with the good bones of graceful arches, leaded windows and wainscoting, others with more cookie-cutter sensibilities of 12-by-12 bedrooms, center-hall staircases and basement rec rooms. Today 3:00 am

Too busy for online dating? Outsource it

Max Hartshorn has pretty much mastered online dating. It took awhile, but the 24-year-old now knows exactly what kind of message to send to pique a woman's interest. Today 3:00 am

the money, I don't say, and so on the other side of the room, according to the CIA's World Facebook. China is first.

So he's not optimistic the boycott will work.

American answer

Historically, boycotts are one of the most distinctively American ways to protest, and the results – when they work – can be effective, says James Haw, an IPFW professor emeritus of history who specializes in the American Revolution.

Economically, boycotts can hurt a target if people stop buying (or in the case of Facebook, using) a product. They can call attention to a perceived problem and bring bad publicity on the target.

Granted, boycotts also mean the boycotters need to find a comparable product elsewhere, Haw says.

With Facebook, the options are lacking. Jeffrey Gaff, a Fort Wayne Web analyst for siteIQ, an information technology and services website, says he's "teetering on the edge of deletion" concerning his Facebook account.

"I think the biggest problem is that there is no viable alternative yet," he says. "I think once a new player enters the game, people will probably leave Facebook in droves, just as they have before," ditching Friendster for MySpace and MySpace for Facebook.

In the meantime, Gaff says he's waiting to see what happens.

"I think the whole boycott idea is flawed – similar to the 'nobody buy gas on such-and-such a date,' " he says. "It isn't going to hurt (Facebook), and Zuckerberg has already proven that he doesn't really care."

Some are taking the boycott further, and they plan to deactivate their accounts today. A website called Mashable: The Social Media Guide polled site users, asking whether they planned to quit Facebook. Of more than 5,000 polled, 31 percent said they would stick with the site, and about the same number said they would leave.

Even if users suspend their profiles, Pollitt says, the information won't disappear.

"Once you build a Facebook page, Facebook owns everything on that page," he says. "The truth is, if someone wants to be anonymous and remain private, they shouldn't be on Facebook. They shouldn't be on the Internet."

Not all view the privacy changes as problems. Jamie Garwood, who has taught a Facebook seminar at IPFW, says she likes the privacy changes. For example, users can now control which friends can see individual status posts or photos.

Garwood, who owns Catalyst Consulting, which helps groups better use social media, encourages people who take issue with the privacy changes to review their own settings. While Facebook can make changes to what is possible, it's still up to users to decide what they share with whom.

"One thing about Facebook is that panic and alarm seem to spread like a virus," Garwood says. For example, "People send these group invites out about Facebook charging, and they aren't true, but people just send them around as though they are."

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