Is 'Facebook Privacy' an Oxymoron?

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Facebook's new feature, "Tag Suggestions," stretches the limits of expected privacy. Tag Suggestions not only allows others to tag you in photos, it uses facial recognition to suggest your name. This could be bad for those who do not want their boss to know they were at the ballgame after they called in sick, or who simply prefer in general to control their privacy.

Should we ever expect privacy when using Facebook or are "privacy" and "Facebook" two words that shouldn't be used together?

Everything social

If it were up to Facebook, everything would be public all the time. As founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg has said, "The default is now social."

The more data you share, the longer you and your friends spend on Facebook. The more data Facebook gets, the more opportunities it has to earn income. At each opportunity to share, we get used to sharing more.

"People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people," Zuckerberg has said. "That social norm is just something that has evolved over time."

Data you share

If there were a "Keep Private" box that everyone could check or uncheck, privacy on Facebook would be simple. The problem with that, of course, is that if you kept everything private, no one would know you were on Facebook. You have to share something to have a presence, and people differ on what they want to share.

Here are the available settings for controlling the different types of things you can share on Facebook:

- Posts by me
- Family
- Relationships
- Interested in
- Bio and favorite quotations
- Website
- Religious and political views
- Birthday
- Places you check in to
- Address
- IM screen names
- Email addresses
- Phone numbers
- Data your friends share

Your privacy isn't dictated only by information you provide, but by information your friends have. Here are some settings you can use to control how your privacy is affected by others:

- Photos and videos you're tagged in
- Permission to comment on your posts
- Suggest photos of me to friends
- Friends can post on my Wall
- Can see Wall posts by friends
- Friends can check me in to Places

Data that Facebook shares

Even if you lock down how you and your friends share your data, Facebook has access to it, and so does its applications. You are always told when you install Facebook apps what data it will have access to, but most people don't consider the possibility of that data being made public. In May 2011, Symantec found 100,000 Facebook apps were 'leaking' personal data and had been for years.

There are now tools to test for this, but is this just the first of many holes to be found?

Facebook privacy?

The New York Times reported in 2010 that in the previous five years, Facebook's privacy policy had grown from 1,004 words to 5,830, more than are found in the Constitution of the United States. And that didn't include the 45,000-word Privacy FAQ, or the videos and overviews of how to control your settings.

To Facebook's credit, it constantly has evolved its privacy settings to provide its members with more control. Although Tag Suggestions may have compromised your privacy for a short time, Facebook, after public pressure, did add a setting for you to disable it.

Of course, when the next new feature is released using a "public" default setting, this same issue is likely to occur.