



THINK SAFETY

KEEP DOORCLOSED

When Online Gets Out of Line

Privacy:
Make an Informed Online Choice

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What is Online Social Networking?

A social networking website is an online service that helps you build and maintain networks of friends with shared interests over the Internet. Currently, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of social networking websites in use. Social networking websites can take the form of blogs, chat rooms and discussion forums. These networks are becoming increasingly popular with university and college students and can help you to connect to people with interests similar to your own.

What are the Privacy Implications?

When you choose to connect with friends through a social networking website, remember that you are ultimately responsible for determining what information you share with others. Make sure you select a website that allows you to make good choices about how and to whom you reveal the information you post. By default, many social networking websites allow all registered users to access all the information that you post on your profile – no exceptions.

Information that you post on a website that has weak privacy controls and policies may become viewable by anyone online – not just your friends, but anyone, ranging from professors, prospective employers, to potential predators. Even websites with extensive privacy options

may be required to make your personal information available to certain authorized persons, such as university administrators or law enforcement agencies. Be aware of the options you have to keep your sensitive information private.

Remember that social networking websites are still evolving and new information products and services are constantly being added. This means that, at any point in time and potentially without any notice to you, information from your profile and logs of your online activities may be used and disclosed in unexpected ways that can affect your privacy.

What Choices Do You Have?

Before you register or create a profile on a social networking website, look for the privacy statements and policies. Get to know what your privacy choices are. Remember that anything you post on your profile could potentially be online forever and shared without your knowledge. You should ask yourself these questions:

- > Does the website allow you to join a "closed network" in which registration is limited to those with a verifiable e-mail address from your university, college, school, workplace, or other organization?
- > Does the website allow you to block access to certain sensitive information?
- > For those who are not already confirmed friends, does the website allow your profile to be viewed only with your consent?
- > Does the website allow any user to have access to your profile, address, telephone number, or class schedule?

- > Does the website keep track of your online activities and automatically stream this information to others in your network?
- > Are the pictures and information on your profile or in your blog appropriate?
- > Are you comfortable sharing the information on your profile with people you have never met?

How is Privacy Protected by Facebook?

Facebook is an example of a social networking website that has been providing relatively strong privacy protection by offering "closed networks" that focus on real-world communities and friend connections. Specifically, Facebook offers the following protections:

- > You can choose to be part of a "closed network" consisting of individuals from a verified community (closed versus accessible-to-anyone platform);
- > By default, only users from your verified communities (confirmed through a working e-mail address on a particular network or by invitation) have access to your profile;
- > You may choose to block your name and network from being searched by anyone outside the type of network to which you belong (e.g., high school, college, company, regional, etc.);
- > A diverse set of privacy options allows you to block access to address or contact information;
- > You can block access to information by anyone other than verified friends or friends of friends;

- > You can turn off the automatic streaming of your online activities through a news feed to your friends;
- > You may completely hide your profile from being viewed; and
- > Suspect or improperly verified users may be flagged for investigation.

Have You Made Informed Choices?

Online social networking can be a great way to communicate with old friends and to meet new ones. If you decide to use a social network, do so in an informed way. Going on "automatic pilot" when online is a bad idea. It is important that you take the time to make informed decisions about the site you use, the information you post, and those with whom you choose to share your information. Do it now.

The Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario and Facebook worked together to develop this brochure to alert you to some of the privacy issues involved in social networking. Privacy is all about freedom of choice and personal control over who has access to your personal information. Your privacy options may vary widely from one website to the next – it is important that you make informed choices. This brochure is intended to help you make choices that will protect your personal information.

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