

Facebook Innovations Jumpstart 'Privacy-Plus 2.0'

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Earlier today, Facebook announced three important - and potentially game-changing - innovations, firmly staking its ground as a force to be reckoned with on matters of user privacy. The new features - Groups, a data download product, and enhanced privacy controls for applications - demonstrate that Facebook has listened to past criticisms about its practices and is ready to play a leadership role when it comes to user privacy.

Facebook's new products come at a time when stewards of user data are facing challenges far more complicated than how to design defaults and privacy controls: you can call it "privacy-plus 2.0." Today, operators of social networks and similar platforms must also decide how to handle data access by third-party applications, whether or not to afford users data portability, and [what types of processes should govern content removal and account deactivations](#) [1]. These are not easy waters to navigate, but today's announcement represents a huge win for Facebook users.

Facebook Groups: Reconceived and revitalized

Of the three innovations announced today, the refurbished Groups feature will likely have the widest impact. The first iteration of Groups, which dates back to 2004, was similar in functionality to today's Facebook Pages. The 2010 version of Groups brings an old concept into a new age. With Groups, users can essentially partition their interactions (passive or active) with Facebook and create multiple, customized Facebook experiences. For example, a user who participates in a "neighborhood" group can - with one click - view a newsfeed that is visible only to members of that group, post status messages that only members of the group can see, and peruse a list of profiles that includes only group members. This new functionality will make it much easier for groups (lowercase "g") of friends to keep in touch and will likely accelerate the use of Facebook as a platform for organizing everything from bake sales to protests.

Although Groups will likely be seen by many as a seamless - even an inevitable - update, in reality it represents a revolution in approach for Facebook. The company that over the [past](#) [2] [year](#) [3] has repeatedly used questionable means to encourage users to share more of their information with the general public has finally returned to its roots and acknowledged that people use Facebook for different types of interactions with different types of people, be they friends, coworkers, or relatives.

Download your Facebook data: Data portability comes to Facebook

In May, when changes to Facebook unleashed a privacy backlash and [many prominent users quit the site](#) [4], members of both the technology and privacy communities decried an absence of data portability features. Users felt like a bad situation was made worse by their lack of options: It was impossible to leave without losing years' worth of photos, videos, messages, and more. The concept of "[data portability](#) [5]" has received prominence in many social network users' [bills](#) [6] [of](#) [7] [rights](#) [8] and in an [open letter](#) [9] to Facebook by CDT, EFF, the ACLU of Northern California, and others.

But now, Facebook has made it easy to download a file that holds everything you can find when you visit your own profile page: status updates, conversations, photos that you have posted or that you were tagged in, and more. This is a very bold step that will spur innovation by third-parties. Soon it should be easy to transfer photos to Flickr, videos to YouTube, status messages to Blogger, or even to establish a presence at a new social network site without having to start from scratch.

Authorized applications: New level of transparency and control for applications

Back in June, Facebook took an important step when it [introduced](#) [10] a new permissions model for all third-party platform applications that want to access the user data hosted on the site. Facebook applications, like smart phone applications, would have to indicate exactly which types of data they

wanted to access, be it email addresses, education information, or photos.

Today, Facebook has taken these granular data permissions to a whole new level with an industry-leading privacy setting for managing applications' data access to user data. The new setting has two primary features. First, users will be able to see what types of data were last accessed by each application. This will help them monitor applications for suspicious behavior and will hopefully promote good practices by developers: Did a quiz about "which Justin Bieber song are you" access your photo albums? Maybe it's time to delete that application.

Alternatively, you could take advantage of the second, related feature released today, one that allows you to deny applications non-essential permissions on a granular basis. While it is still a little unclear how essential and non-essential permissions will be distinguished from each other (maybe the developer of the Justin Bieber quiz thinks that access to your photos is essential), this is a first for the industry: a firm rejection of the take-it-or-leave-it deal that users are typically presented when downloading an application to run on their phone, browser, or social network. We encourage other platforms to follow Facebook's lead on this one.

Competing on privacy?

Over the past few months, Facebook seems to have made an about face on privacy. Perhaps, given rumored reports of a [Google social product](#) [11], Facebook is recognizing that success in the online marketplace requires remaining competitive on privacy.

Regardless of the motivation behind them, these changes are a huge win for consumers and the company alike. Facebook has positioned itself as a privacy innovator and we urge other companies to follow its example.

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