

Facebook's Going to Let Teens Share With the World. Should They?

by [Justin Brookman](#) [1]

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Earlier this week, Facebook [announced](#) [2] that they were going to allow teenagers on the site to share photos, status updates, and the like publicly instead of just with friends (or friends of friends). My [initial reaction](#) [3] was mostly indifference given that teens (and really, kids too) already have the ability to share with the world on dozens of other sites. However, Facebook, despite increasing competition is still the world's leading social network, and it was initially premised on sharing exclusively within narrow social circles. Over the past couple of days, I've wondered if there's an argument for Facebook exceptionalism, such that they should continue to prohibit teens from publishing their thoughts and experiences to the world? Or should other services do more to limit what teenagers can do online?

On the one hand is the ineluctable fact that teenagers can be remarkably [awful human beings](#) [4], and can and will use Facebook to torment each other. Episodic teen awfulness has been de rigueur for time immemorial and will presumably continue to be the case because apparently that's [the way teenagers are wired](#) [5]. Bullying in front of the world on social media could arguably make it more painful, but I doubt publicness is going to meaningfully exacerbate the problem — teens' Facebook networks were already pretty interlinked with the default "friends-of-friends" setting for sharing (Facebook is laudably changing the default to "friends" for new teenage users going forward). Arguably having behavior public for the world to see should serve as something of a check on the worst behavior (though that hasn't stopped some teenagers from documenting sexual abuse on Twitter). In any event, making Facebook a more public experience may just push teens away from the service. Already, fear of [school](#) [6] and parental snooping is increasingly [leading teens](#) [7] to other social networks like Twitter and Tumblr that don't require real names.

Some have [voiced the concern](#) [8] that public posting will lead to advertisers' increased access to teens' information to improve targeted advertising. I think this is wrong for the most part. Whether a particular post is public or not doesn't have anything to do with the tailored ads that they see on the site — locked down Facebook accounts still receive ads based on the private information shared on the site (just as Gmail targets ads to users based on the contents on their email communications). Facebook doesn't need data to be public in order to make money off of it; arguably, it's in Facebook's interest to restrict access to data, so it controls who can monetize it. The move to allow public posting seems more designed to drive engagement with the service, and to prevent teens who want a public soapbox from leaving the site.

I think the best argument against Facebook allowing teen public posting on the site is that kids need to be protected **from themselves**. That is, not from other kids, but from their own self-destructive and short-sighted actions. Teenagers are probably more likely to post things that they will subsequently deeply regret. The idea behind the "Right to be Forgotten" is stupid things that you do shouldn't necessarily haunt you for the rest of your life. In arguing for his [Do Not Track Kids legislation](#) [9], Senator Markey has repeatedly made the sympathetic argument that this should especially be the case for teenagers and children — one silly mistake on social media shouldn't crush your future. In fact, we already have a similar concept in the law: we routinely [expunge juvenile court records](#) [10] from public records on the notion that teens deserve a second chance at life without being permanently judged for their mistakes.

I share these concerns, but ultimately, I think they're outweighed by both teens' legitimate free expression interests coupled with the technical impossibility of stopping teenagers from publishing to the web (at least not without [severe privacy-invasive and prohibitively expensive techniques](#) [11]). Teenagers have a moral right to voice their opinions, even if they may rethink or regret them later. Moreover, Facebook actually offers pretty good controls to let users subsequently delete any posts they want. Yes, frenemies can take screenshots of terrible status updates, but that's true today

under Facebook's [friends-of-friends setting](#) [12]. Perhaps Facebook could expand its controls so users can delete more posts at once — by month or year — making it easier to sort through all the noise of your past, without spending hours of time to sift through status updates, or [just walking away from the service entirely](#). [13]

By no means am I a privacy defeatist who says that all surveillance is unavoidable — to the contrary, I think we must have the ability to place hard limits on [data collection](#) [14] and retention. However, I do think that barriers on self-publishing — data that you affirmatively want to share with the world — are not likely to be very effective in the modern age; certainly not in rule-of-law regimes that encourage individual free expression. By and large that's a good thing. But an unavoidable cost of a world where it's so easy to publish is that mistakes will be made. In letting teens post publicly, Facebook needs to make the controls very clear, and should also offer persistent nudges and reminders about how they are sharing their content.

For the rest of us, [educating teenagers](#) [15] about the consequences of having a megaphone to the world is going to be essential, and well as a [greater tolerance](#) [16] for mistakes and youthful indiscretion.

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