



Facebook and Privacy

by Jodi L. Wyman

The social networking website Facebook has recently been in the news. Canada's Privacy Commissioner has posted a report listing ways Facebook is alleged to have breached Canada's privacy laws. She has demanded the site make changes in the next thirty days or face legal action.

Canadian laws require that companies who gather personal information about individuals not only be judicious and candid about doing so, and but also disclose the use they will make of the information. The Privacy Commission is concerned Facebook is breaching the law by, for example, releasing personal information about its users to third parties without the consent of the users. Also, it may be retaining this private data much longer than is necessary, for example after the user has canceled their account or even died.

The personal information can include full names, addresses, birthdates, email addresses, marital status,

spouse and children's names, employment status and employer names, interests and of course photos. Even more worrisome is that a user's personal profile could contain this sort of information about other people, who may not have signed up for a Facebook account.

While enforcing Canadian law is important, the debate is now underway as to how effective trying to police the internet can ever be. Perhaps the common sense approach is for people to take steps themselves to protect their information and be smart when using any on line service.

The old adage is that nothing in life is free, and this is true for services offered by Facebook or Twitter or YouTube or Google. The user may not pay a direct cost to sign up, but clearly the company has to make money somehow, and it is normally by attracting advertisers with the information they collect. It

is naïve to think otherwise.

There is also the question as to what sort of reasonable expectation of privacy any one has when joining a social network like Facebook. By posting the information on line, it is also naïve to think you can maintain control of it. It is risky to rely only upon laws for full protection.

It may be a matter of all of us developing better habits on the internet. Most of the social networking sites do not require that the user disclose extensive personal information, or even that it be accurate. There is nothing wrong with posting only the bare minimum of information or using a user name. Always remember that comments posted on Facebook or Twitter could be read by family members, potential employers, or even used as evidence in court. Clearly understand that photos exist in cyberspace forever and could turn up in another setting and cause great embarrassment.

Caution should be used

with email as well. For example, it is a good idea to have a separate email address to use on internet sites, and not give out a secure home or work address except to customers, friends and family. Change passwords

often. Most importantly, remember that emails or text messages sent out can go to the wrong recipient, or even to your whole address book, in error. More and more emails have been turning up as evidence in court, and have

been the source of several recent political scandals.

Some common sense caution by Canadians may be far more effective than legal action in cyberspace.