



Column: Old friend Facebook, farewell

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(John Smith) has added you as a friend on FACEBOOK. (Nancy Williams) has tagged a photo of you on FACEBOOK. (Jason Anderson) has sent you a message on FACEBOOK.

If you are a college student who hasn't been living in a bubble for four years, you have, in all probability, seen one or all of these messages in your e-mail inbox at one point or another. Moreover, if you are among the 85 percent of college students who use Facebook daily, you probably responded immediately.

But what kinds of information did you release online? Your telephone number? Home address, perhaps?

Some of you may be rolling your eyes in incredulity at the notion of a logical thinking person disclosing information of such personal nature for the masses to see, but, unfortunately, these severe lapses in judgment are quite common.

Founded in February 2004, The Facebook, is an online "community" for high school and college students that works as a social networking forum. Students create profiles of themselves, sharing everything from what kinds of music they enjoy to their relationship status and pictures.

People are also allowed to view others' profiles, even if they don't know the person. But there is also the option to make your profile only visible to those in your network. In many ways Facebook is a great way to keep in touch with friends you've fallen out of contact with over the years, and many people I have spoken with feel it is a better tool than e-mail.

But unlike with Facebook, people cannot view your e-mail account online. And increasingly, the kinds of information that college students are choosing to release on Facebook can be very dangerous.

It is difficult for me to fathom that in this day and age, with rampant identity theft, stalking and invasion of privacy, a person could be so

imprudent as to give up his or her home address, current address, and cell phone numbers online.

But according to a recent study by SOPHOS, a computer security firm, students are doing it. In the study, SOPHOS created a profile under the name “Freddi Stauer,” an anagram for “ID Fraudster.” Of the 200 friend requests, SOPHOS got 82 respondents — 72 percent shared more than their e-mail addresses, 84 percent shared their full dates of birth, 87 percent provided details about education or work, 78 percent listed their current addresses or location, 23 percent disclosed their telephone numbers, and 26 percent provided their instant messenger screen names.

The extremely alarming statistics hit quite close to home for me. I have a friend who made the grave mistake of divulging her full date of birth, address, telephone number, and IM screen name on Facebook. She quickly became the target of a middle-aged stalker who used the information, particularly her IM screen name, as a way to contact her to solicit sex. She eventually had to involve the police because of his threats.

That very frightening ordeal taught her a valuable lesson: do not disclose information of such a sensitive nature, and think about the implications of your decisions before you make them.

Facebook and privacy issues continue to become all the more disturbing these days. In the last week, the web site has announced that its patron’s profiles will soon be searchable on the Google search engine. It does, however, give you the option to “opt out,” which is the decision to make your profile unsearchable on Google.

Of late, I have decided to completely “opt out” of Facebook all together. Two days ago, after hearing of the site’s new partnership with Google, I decided that it had overstepped its boundaries and I chose to deactivate my account. I realize that Facebook gives you the option of not allowing your profile to be searched on Google, but given the recent SOPHOS study on its users and personal information, I think it is an irresponsible move on the part of the web site.

My advice to those who plan to continue to use Facebook: Please take care to seriously think about the nature of information you share with people online. If you wouldn’t share the information with a complete stranger on a street corner, why would you do it online?

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