

Ottawa announces changes to Facebook operations

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Facebook will make a series of changes to its website operations and privacy policy to better protect its worldwide users from privacy violations, after a series of negotiations with the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada.

CTV.ca News Staff



Privacy Commissioner Jennifer Stoddart speaks to the media about changes to the popular social networking site Facebook during a news conference in Ottawa Thursday, Aug. 27, 2009. (Adrian Wyld / THE CANADIAN PRESS)

The Office of the Privacy Commissioner had investigated Facebook for more than a year and had communicated a number of privacy concerns to the California-based company.

The Canadian privacy watchdog had told Facebook that one of its biggest concerns was with the amount of personal information it shared with third-party developers who built applications -- like online games and quizzes -- for the popular social networking site.

In response, Facebook said it would retrofit its website with new controls that would limit the personal information that the estimated one million worldwide developers could access.

Another change will see Facebook make it clearer to users that there is a difference between deleting an account and making it inactive.

Also, the company will permanently delete the personal information of Facebook users who have deactivated their accounts

On Thursday morning, Canada's federal privacy commissioner, Jennifer Stoddart, said she was "very pleased" with the way that Facebook had addressed her concerns.

"We're satisfied that with these changes, Facebook is on the way to meeting the requirements of Canada's privacy laws," she said in French at a news conference in Ottawa.

In a statement released on its website, the company said the service changes would improve service for its users and put Facebook at the forefront of its industry when it handling privacy concerns.

"We believe that these changes are not only great for our users and address all of the commissioners' outstanding concerns, but they also set a new standard for the industry," Facebook's vice-president of global communications and public policy, Elliot Schrage, said in the statement.

Stoddart said some 12 million Canadian users -- or more than one-third of Canada's population -- have accounts on Facebook.

But she said the changes the company was making to its website could benefit the more than 200 million Facebook users around the world.

"All of these users will have a far clearer picture of how their personal information is being shared once Facebook implements our recommendations," Stoddart said in French.

"They will also have much more control of what they are sharing and with whom."

Stoddart said that privacy officials in Europe and Australia have begun their own investigations into Facebook's operations, though Canada is the first country to do so.

Assistant privacy commissioner Elizabeth Denham talked at the same news conference about the third-party developer issue, which she reiterated was the privacy watchdog's "top concern."

"We were alarmed by the lack of adequate safeguards to effectively restrict those developers from accessing users' personal information as well as the information of their online friends," Denham said.

"The notion that some teenager working in a basement halfway around the globe, that could have access to all of this personal information, was unsettling to say the least," she added.

Denham said the new changes will prevent applications from accessing personal information unless the user has provided "express consent" to do so.

The changes will also prevent an application from accessing the personal information of the user's friends without similar permission.

"We've taken a very close look at these issues and we've concluded that this approach is reasonable and it's in compliance with Canadian privacy law," Denham said.

It will likely take Facebook a year's time to make these changes, Denham said.

Toronto-based privacy lawyer Fazila Nurani said Facebook had indications that the federal privacy commissioner might pull the company into court over the issue if it did not comply with its requests.

For that reason, it made more sense to work with the privacy watchdog than against it.

With files from The Canadian Press