Facebook and Social Networking Security

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Introduction

For those who are not familiar with social networking as a phenomenon, I will describe how
Facebook works and why more than 300 million people are active users, according to
Facebook.[1] A social network is a website that allows members to create a personal profile and
then share it with other members. Besides Facebook, the other classic social network is

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[1]Other current statistics are also mind-boggling:

<u>General Growth</u>
More than 300 million active users
More than 150 million users log on to Facebook at least once each day
The fastest growing demographic is those 35 years old and older
<u>User Engagement</u>
Average user has 130 friends on the site
More than 8 billion minutes are spent on Facebook each day (worldwide)
More than 45 million users update their statuses at least once each day
<u>Applications</u>
More than 2 billion photos uploaded to the site each month
More than 14 million videos uploaded each month
More than 2 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photos, etc.) shared each week
More than 3 million events created each month
More than 45 million active user groups exist on the site
<u>International Growth</u>
More than 70 translations available on the site, with more than 40 in development
About 70% of Facebook users are outside the United States

MySpace. There are other websites and services that can be considered social networking, for example Twitter, where members post journal entries that are shared, or YouTube, where individuals upload videos.

What is Facebook?

Facebook is an interactive electronic bulletin board. When you set up an account (which is free), you have access to a workspace where you can use a variety of software applications – all online – to personalize your workspace. The illustration below shows the public Facebook page for Enrique Allen, which was found by doing a Google search.

Enrique Allen's Public Profile on Facebook

Now that we have found Mr. Allen's page, we can see a list of his friends (even though we are not logged in to Facebook). I found a public Facebook page for Brandi Felsky (no relation) and here is a list of her 170 friends (the illustration only shows the first few names):
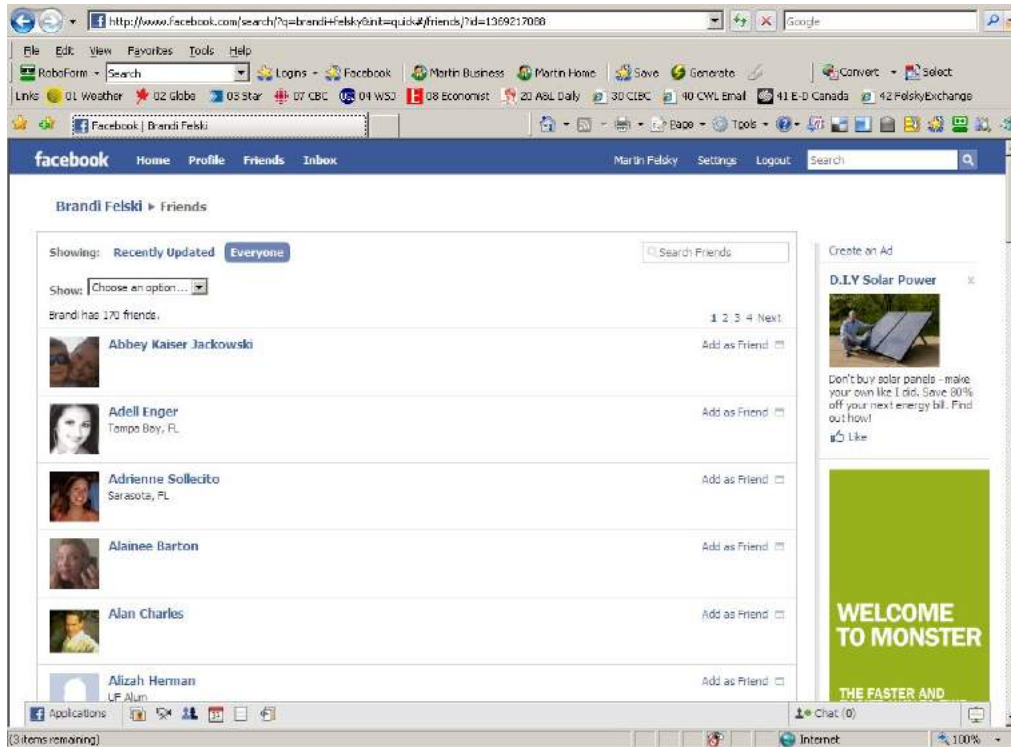
Brandi Felski's Friend List on Facebook

Facebook allows you to share many aspects of your life:

- Your personal profile (as little or as much as you input)
- Your favourite books and movies
- Your travel history and plan
- Your I.Q.

The whole point of having the workspace or "Wall" as it is called is to share it with others. There is no point to Facebook if your Wall is not open to others, and therein lies one of the major privacy issues. My Facebook profile is illustrated in part below. This is the profile that only my "friends" can see; it is not supposed to be publicly accessible:
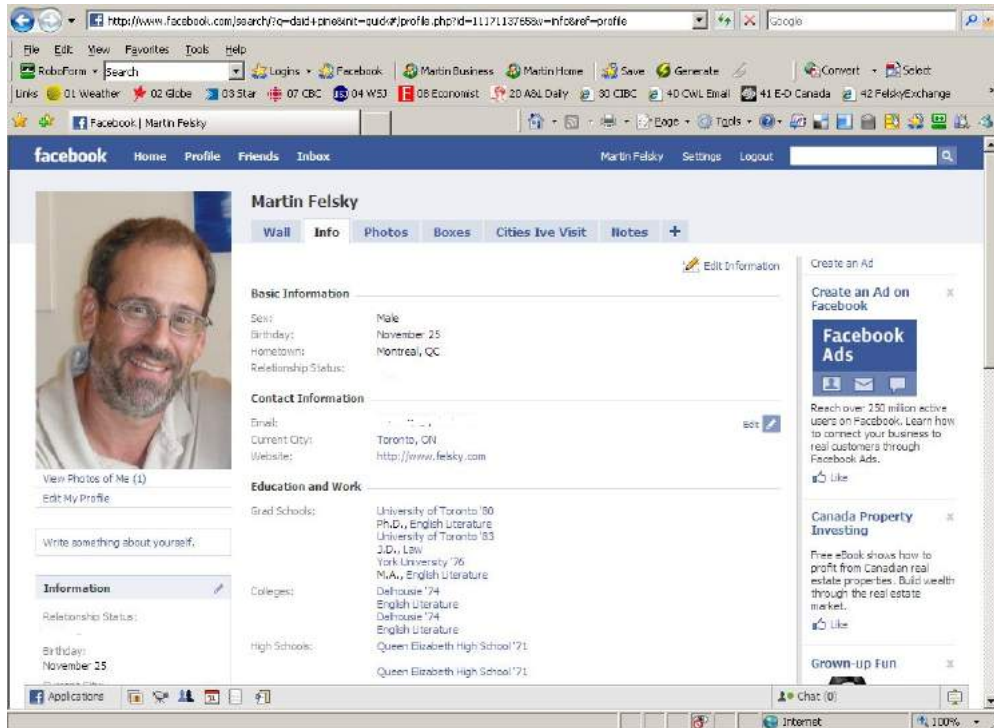
The Author's Profile on Facebook

Though care must be taken to minimize sensitive information on your public profile, the benefit of a single database containing millions of names from around the world can be enormous – you can find people by various means, for example:

- Show me all the people who graduated from my high school in 1970.
- Show me all the people who work at Tim Horton's in Fredericton.
- Show me all the people who like jazz music and are students.

By searching in this fashion you are able to reconnect with long lost acquaintances, and you are also able to find people who have the same interests as you do. Anyone can form a group and make it quickly and widely accessible: for example:

- Alumni of schools or companies
- Fans of a rock star or movie celebrity
- Supporters of abortion right
- Fans of Stephen Harper

One of the key security issues with Facebook is that its very popularity, and the fact that it contains so much personal information, makes it an attractive target to hackers and unscrupulous marketers. There are viruses and worms designed specifically to breach Facebook security, and many companies and government organizations have banned or consider banning the use of social networking through business networks.

Privacy Settings

Because Facebook makes no sense without sharing, there are basic bits of information about yourself that must be considered public, and you have the limited ability to control who sees what. However, the controls are confusing, counter-intuitive and for many users too complicated to implement effectively.[2]
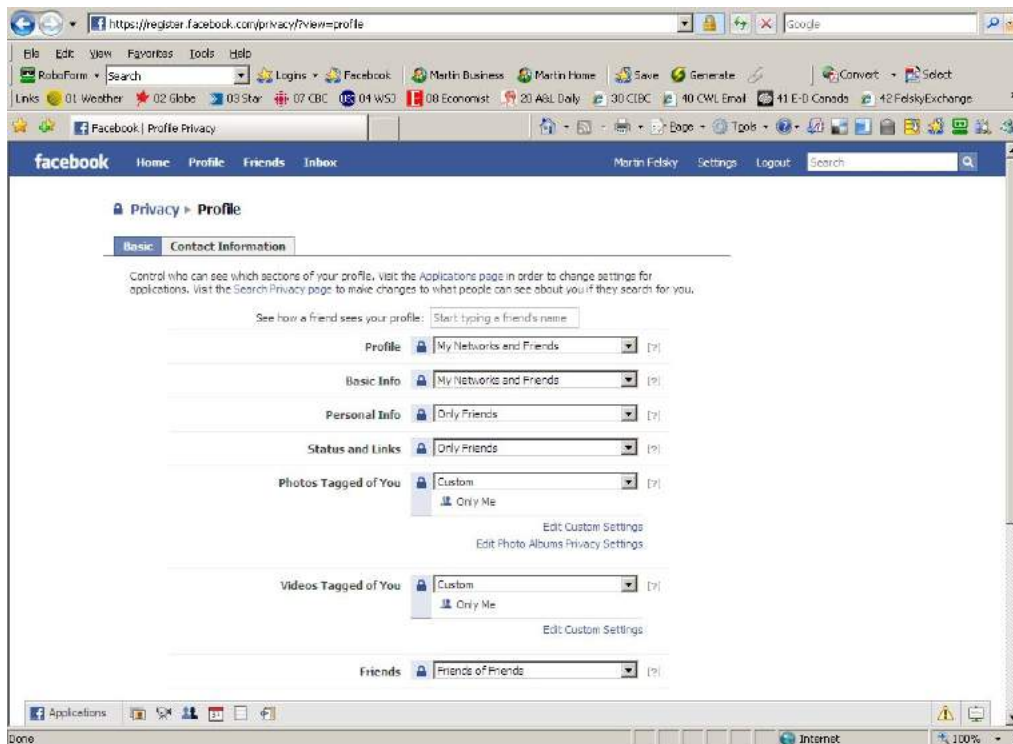
The following screenshot shows some of the basic privacy settings available. You can see this screen in Facebook by clicking **Settings** and then **Privacy Settings**.

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[2] You do not have control over what other people say about you, or what photographs of you are posted online.
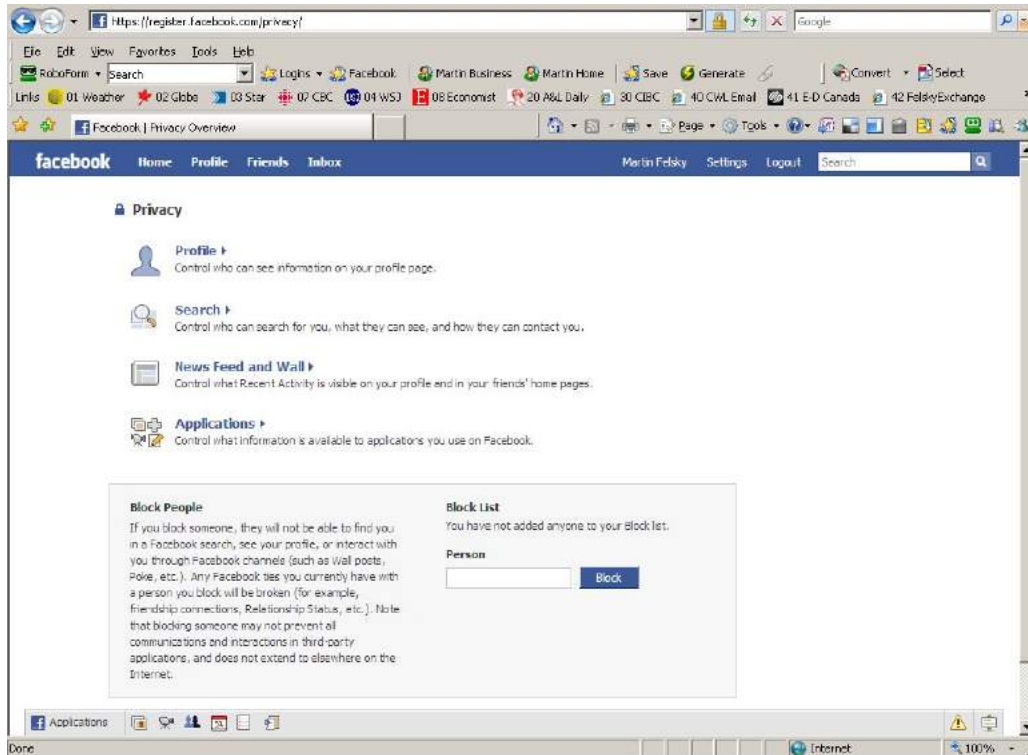
Facebook Privacy Settings

To dig down more deeply, I have more control, as shown below:

Facebook Profile Settings

Maintaining your privacy on Facebook requires vigilance and attention to detail, and an understanding of how it works. The Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario has developed a helpful guide to privacy settings on Facebook: http://www.ipc.on.ca/english/Resources/Educational-Material/Educational-Material-Summary/?id=615.

Friends

If you think of it, there is a great convenience in posting a message on your wall, say, that you won the lottery, rather than emailing each of your contacts in a mass email or one by one. So, on your wall you enter "I just won the lottery", and all your friends are notified on their walls. At the same time, however, because of the openness of the network, this type of announcement will no doubt attract unwanted attention.

Part of the concern with Facebook lies in the definition of "friend". A Facebook friend is merely someone with whom you have chosen to share certain information about yourself, and your other friends. In a recent case, a woman complained bitterly about her job and her boss, not remembering that her boss was a Facebook friend. The "friend" ended up firing her:


A Famous Example of Inappropriate Behaviour on Facebook

Applications

One of the key privacy issues with Facebook is the integration of third party applications. This is the feature that inspired Canada's Privacy Commissioner to successfully negotiate changes with Facebook's approach. [3]

How do applications work? Your Wall consists not only of simple text messages, but can include software programs that function to enhance the content. For example, let's say I want my friends to keep up with my travel schedule. I could simply enter a list of places I've been, but that wouldn't connect me to the social network. On the other hand, if I used a mapping program, and integrated that with my Facebook profile, my friends could use the same program and share the results. For example, I use a tripadvisor application to track my travels:
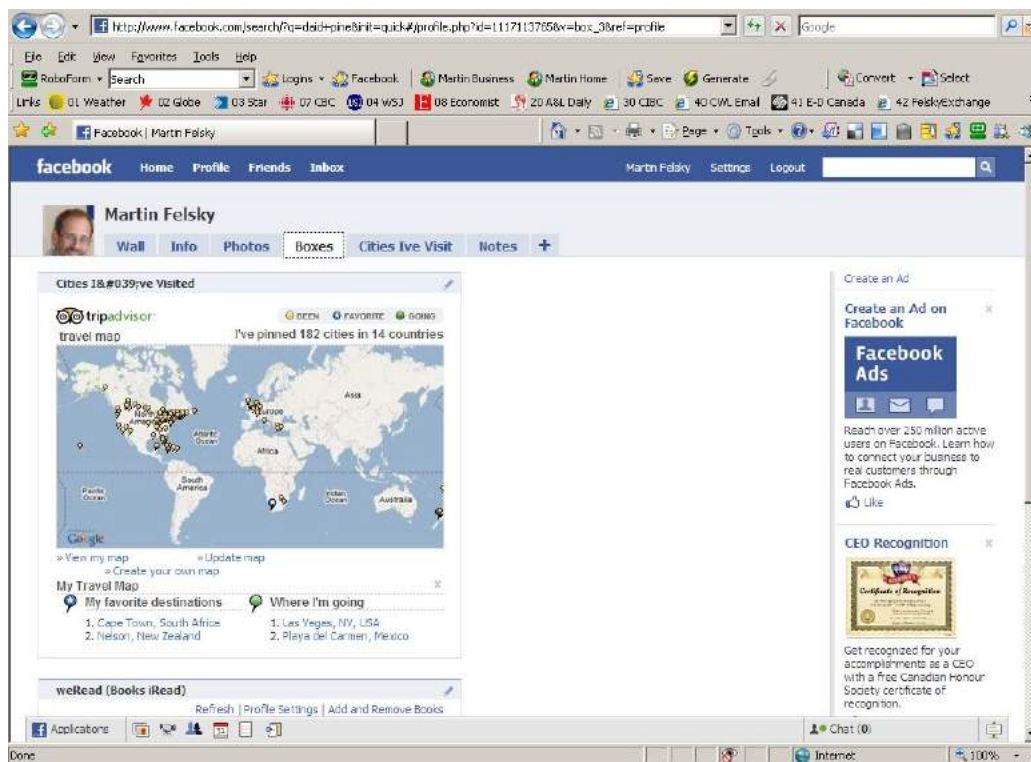
**The Author's Tripadvisor Application on Facebook**

The concern of the Privacy Commissioner is that Facebook shares my personal information with the providers of applications such as these, without sufficient controls on what is shared or how it is managed.

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[3] See "Facebook agrees to address Privacy Commissioner's concerns,"
August 27, 2009, http://www.priv.gc.ca/media/nr-c/2009/nr-c_090827_e.cfm.

Twitter

Twitter, which was recently used in two Canadian trials on a live or real time basis, one criminal and one civil, is gaining popularity. It is public forum for issuing short web log ("blog") entries, an online diary. As a child, I had a diary and one of the things that differentiated my diary from any other notebook was the lock and key that protected its contents. Today's diaries are not only public, but broadcast to the world through news feeds and search engines. Why use Twitter?

Some people like the features of Facebook that allow them to keep their friends up to date on what's happening and do not need or want the myriad applications, features or complexity of Facebook. Twitter allows members (it is also free) to keep their friends posted on what is new to a maximum of 140 characters per entry or "tweet". If you want to know what Harry is up to, you follow him – which is like being a friend on Facebook, but possibly less intimate. When you go to Twitter you can see all the tweets, search for any text or person, and choose to follow anyone, and see if you yourself are being followed. For example, without logging in, a search for "Michael Bryant" turn up the following:
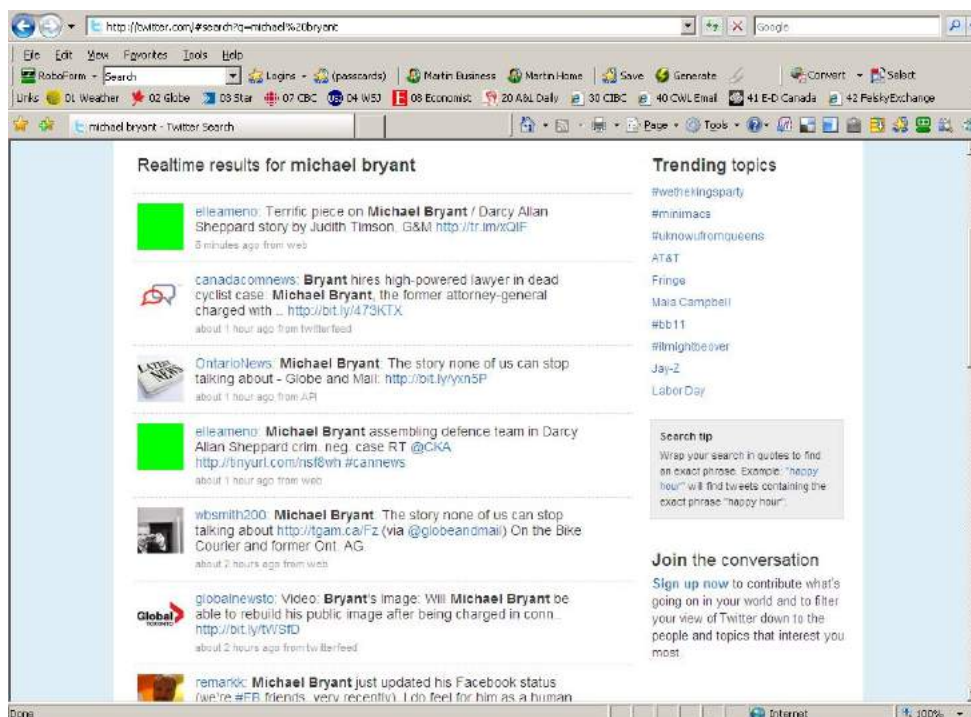
A Sample Twitter Stream

Should I Use Facebook?

Facebook is not only for the young or the hip. It can also be quite enjoyable for a judge who wants to connect with family members, see photos of children or grandchildren and keep up with classmates from high school. But Facebook must be used with caution and shall we say judiciously. One of the key dangers of Facebook is that while you have a fair bit of control over your own workspace, you have very little control over what others say or do. For example, people can upload a photograph of you and then tag it so your name is searchable. (Unless you take steps to stop it – if you can figure out how). Another danger is hacking. People do hack into Facebook and so the information that you thought was shared only by your carefully selected group of insiders is now in the hands of an attacker.

To some extent judges in Canada already have a social network – it's called JUDICOM. Though it lacks many of the features commonly associated with social networks, it is a community billboard, post office and best of all it is private and restricted membership. Even on JUDICOM you must be cautious about what you say!