December 10, 2009

The Incredible Danger of Facebook's New Privacy Policy - And How to Protect Yourself

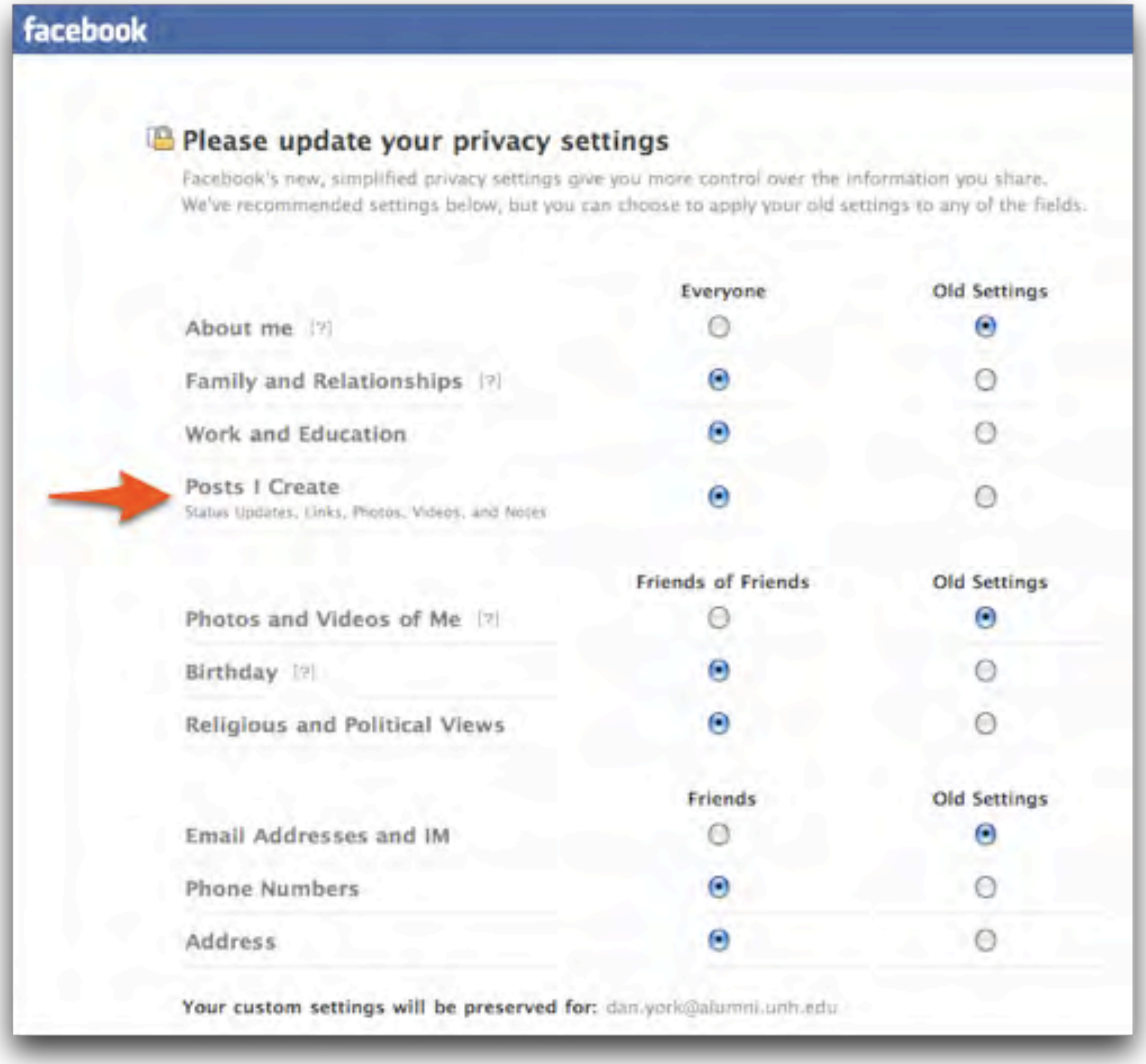
Let's be *very* clear. No matter what the blog post or letter from Mark Zuckerberg may say (or update blog posts), Facebook's new privacy settings have far less to do with "making privacy simpler" than they do with one simple fact: Facebook has "Twitter-envy".
Twitter is essentially the center of the *public* "real-time web" and is getting all the attention, hype and buzz. Facebook is *not* getting that attention and wants to be your *single portal to the Internet*.

*Facebook wants you to **share your information PUBLICLY**.*
The new "Privacy Policy" is not so much about *protecting your privacy* as it is about *getting you to make more information public*.

Let's be clear. **THAT** is the goal. If Facebook were serious about making it easier to protect your privacy, the recommendations would be different. The "making privacy strong" theme is spin. And judging by articles I'm seeing in the mainstream media, it's working. Now, to be fair, there are *some* improvements, like the ability to change the privacy settings of *each* post you make, but that improvement is overshadowed by the larger danger.

THE DANGER

The fundamental issue is that when you are brought into the new "privacy transition tool", the "*recommended settings*" are that you share all your status updates, links, photos, videos and notes *publicly*. Not just with other Facebook users, but with the *entire Internet*. By accepting the recommended settings, you are agreeing to make all the info you put into Facebook accessible through search via Google, etc.:



Please update your privacy settings

Facebook's new, simplified privacy settings give you more control over the information you share. We've recommended settings below, but you can choose to apply your old settings to any of the fields.

	Everyone	Old Settings
About me [?]	○	●
Family and Relationships [?]	●	○
Work and Education	●	○
Posts I Create Status Updates, Links, Photos, Videos, and Notes	●	○
	Friends of Friends	**Old Settings**
Photos and Videos of Me [?]	○	●
Birthday [?]	●	○
Religious and Political Views	●	○
	Friends	**Old Settings**
Email Addresses and IM	○	●
Phone Numbers	●	○
Address	●	○

Your custom settings will be preserved for: dan.york@alumni.unh.edu

So all those silly status updates you wrote? Found in Google. All those "private" photos of your family that you previously just shared with friends? Found in Google. All those longer notes that you were sharing with your friends? Found in Google. Whether or not you are single or married? Found in Google.

It is a fundamental shift in information sharing from being inside a private walled space to being in an open public space.
Everything you publish - available to everyone on the Internet.

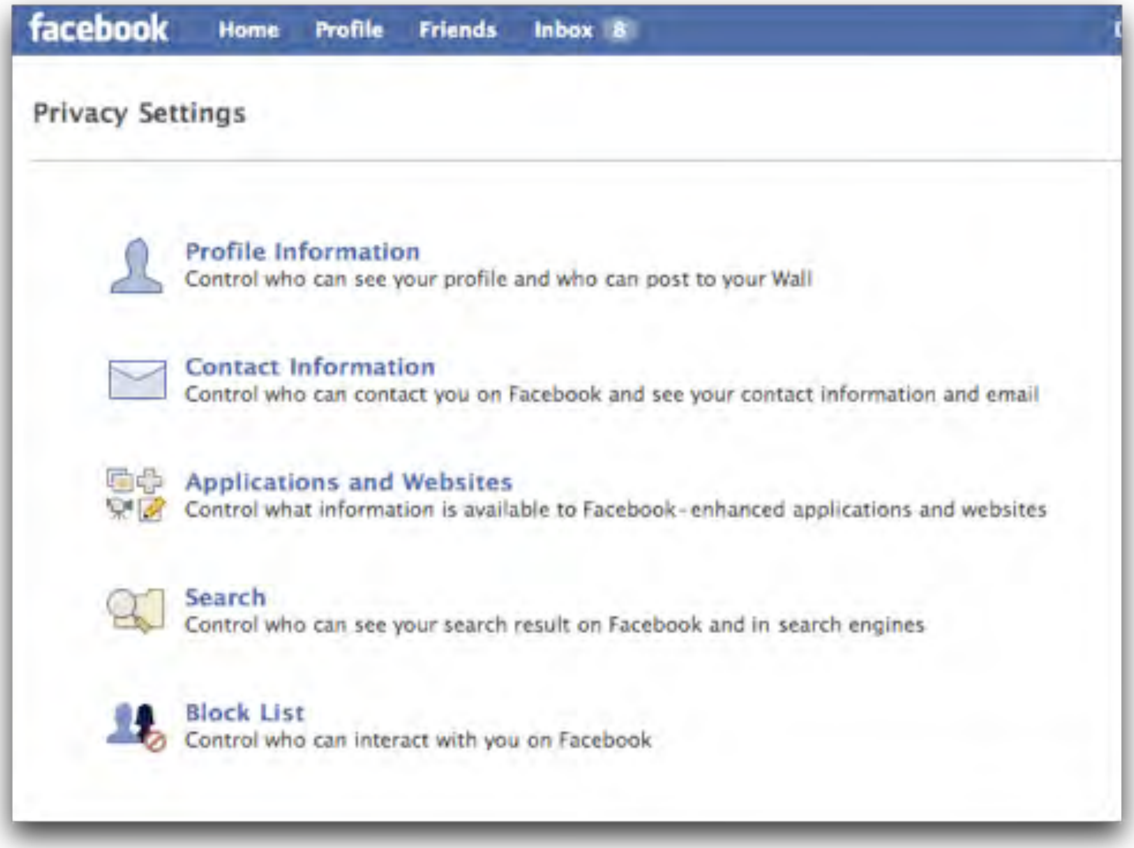
The danger I see is that *many, if not most, people will simply* ***accept the recommended settings***. And suddenly information they *thought* was kept more private will be shared with the world.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

My recommendations are very simple:

1. Do NOT accept the recommended settings. Choose "Old Settings" in the Transition Tool.

2. Go into the Privacy settings and examine all settings. Click the "Privacy" link at the very bottom of a Facebook page or going into "Settings" in the upper right corner and then click on "Privacy".



Privacy Settings

Profile Information
Control who can see your profile and who can post to your Wall

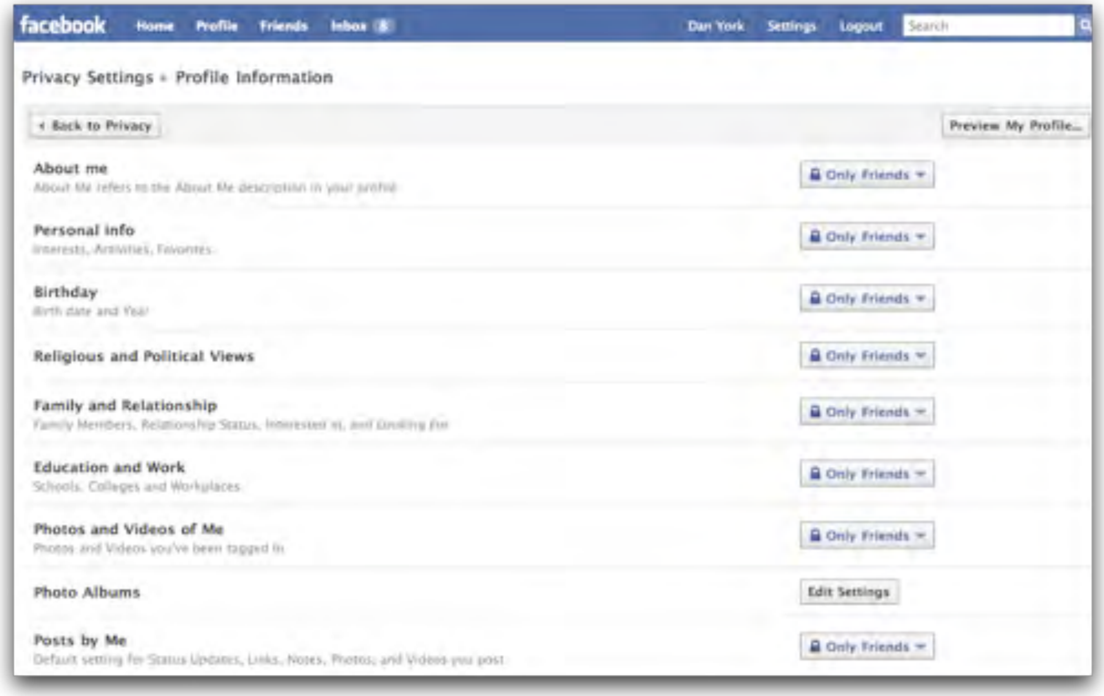
Contact Information
Control who can contact you on Facebook and see your contact information and email

Applications and Websites
Control what information is available to Facebook-enhanced applications and websites

Search
Control who can see your search result on Facebook and in search engines

Block List
Control who can interact with you on Facebook

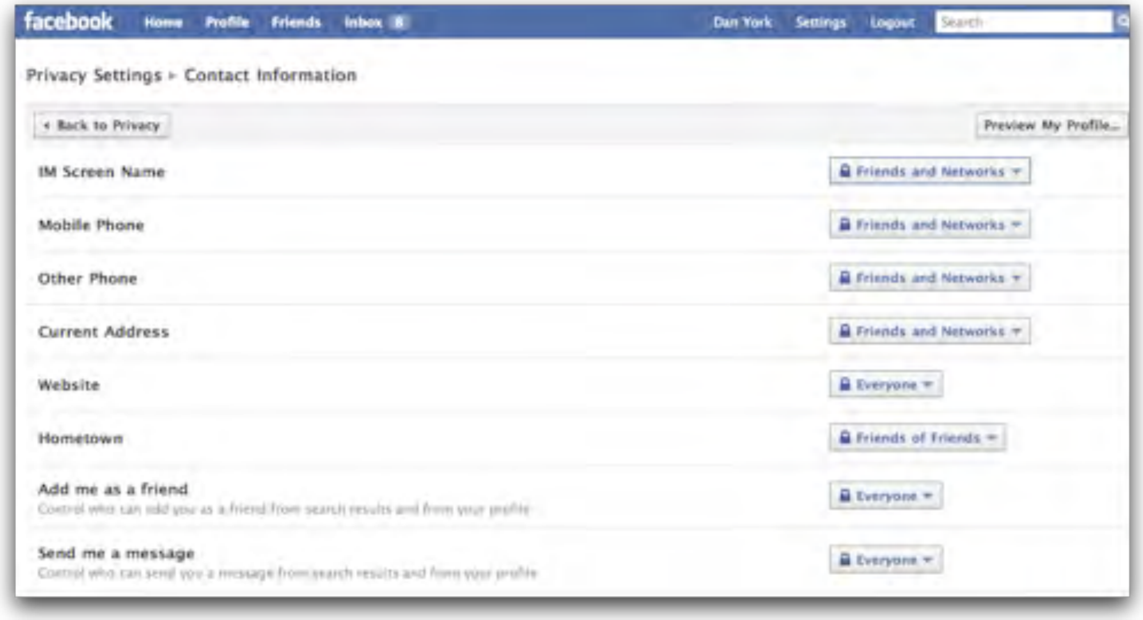
3. Change who can see your profile information. Click on "Profile Information" to decide who you want to see information about you.



Privacy Settings ▸ Profile Information

About me About Me refers to the About Me description in your profile	Only Friends
Personal info Interests, Activities, Favorites	Only Friends
Birthday Birth date and Year	Only Friends
Religious and Political Views	Only Friends
Family and Relationship Family Members, Relationship Status, Interested in, and Looking For	Only Friends
Education and Work Schools, Colleges and Workplaces	Only Friends
Photos and Videos of Me Photos and Videos you've been tagged in	Only Friends
Photo Albums	Edit Settings
Posts by Me Default setting for Status Updates, Links, Notes, Photos, and Videos you post	Only Friends

4. Change you can see your contact information. Click on "Contact Information" to decide who can see your contact info:

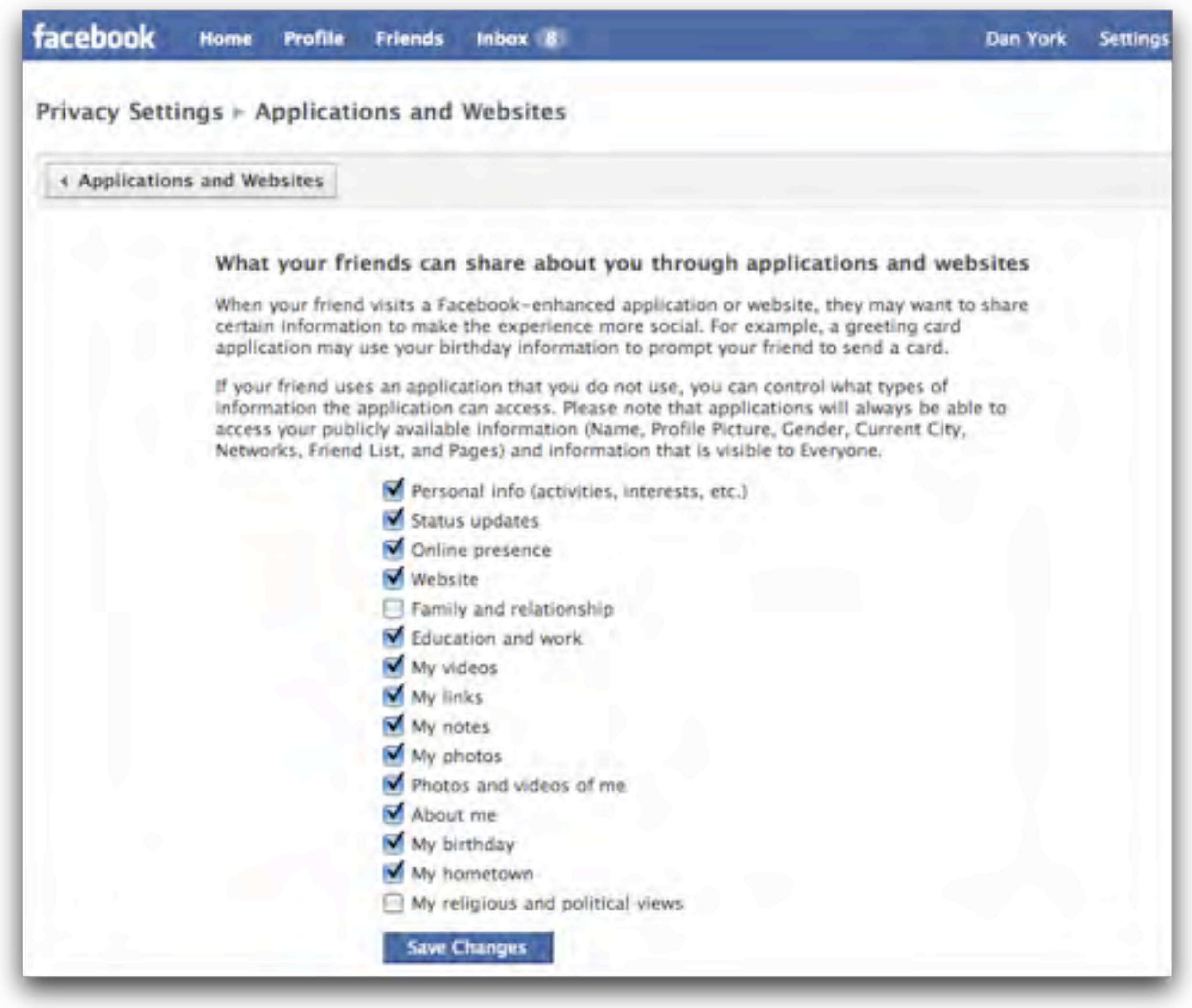


Privacy Settings ▸ Contact Information

IM Screen Name	Friends and Networks
Mobile Phone	Friends and Networks
Other Phone	Friends and Networks
Current Address	Friends and Networks
Website	Everyone
Hometown	Friends of Friends
Add me as a friend Control who can add you as a friend from search results and from your profile	Everyone
Send me a message Control who can send you a message from search results and from your profile	Everyone

5. CHANGE WHAT YOUR FRIENDS SHARE ABOUT YOU! This is a critical one. Whenever ***your friends*** go off and play one of those games like Mafia Wars or Farmville, or take one of those zillion quizzes, ***they are sharing information about you***, including with "game developers" who have questionable backgrounds. Every time any friend of yours adds *any* Facebook "application", they are sharing info about you.

Click on "Applications and Websites" to see where you can turn it all off:



Privacy Settings ▸ Applications and Websites

◂ Applications and Websites

What your friends can share about you through applications and websites

When your friend visits a Facebook-enhanced application or website, they may want to share certain information to make the experience more social. For example, a greeting card application may use your birthday information to prompt your friend to send a card.

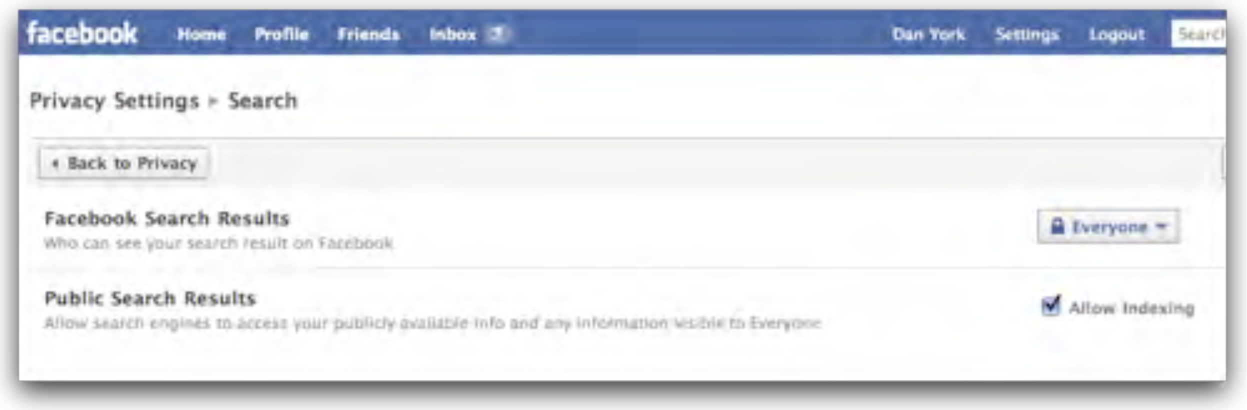
If your friend uses an application that you do not use, you can control what types of information the application can access. Please note that applications will always be able to access your publicly available information (Name, Profile Picture, Gender, Current City, Networks, Friend List, and Pages) and information that is visible to Everyone.

☑ Personal info (activities, interests, etc.)
☑ Status updates
☑ Online presence
☑ Website
□ Family and relationship
☑ Education and work
☑ My videos
☑ My links
☑ My notes
☑ My photos
☑ Photos and videos of me
☑ About me
☑ My birthday
☑ My hometown
□ My religious and political views

Personally, I've unchecked all of these items. If one of my "friends" on Facebook decides to start interacting with a new Facebook application, that is *their* choice. But I don't necessarily want that external company or organization to get all this information about *me*.

I admit that I find it rather annoying that Facebook provides no way in its new "Privacy Transition Tool" to change these settings. You have to go into these settings to change it.

6. Change what information is accessible via search. Click on "Search" to change whether you want your information to be found via a Google Search:



Privacy Settings ▸ Search

Facebook Search Results
Who can see your search result on Facebook — Everyone ▾

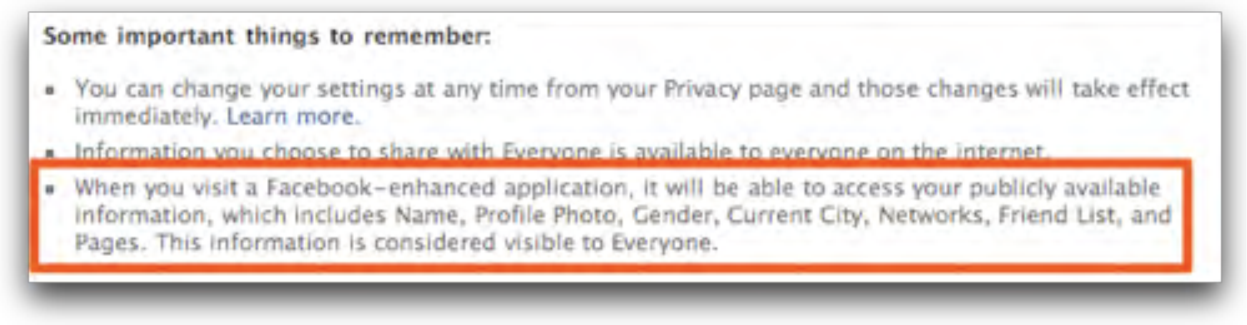
Public Search Results
Allow search engines to access your publicly available info and any information visible to Everyone — ☑ Allow Indexing

If you go through each of these panels and make sure the changes reflect how *you* want your information shared, you'll wind up in a much better space with regard to privacy.

THE EVEN GREATER DANGER

There is an even greater danger to privacy lurking in the fine print:

Facebook *has reclassified what is "publicly available information"*. Your name... profile photo... and *friend list* are now "*visible to everyone*". And guess what?



Some important things to remember:

- You can change your settings at any time from your Privacy page and those changes will take effect immediately. Learn more.
- Information you choose to share with Everyone is available to everyone on the internet.
- When you visit a Facebook-enhanced application, it will be able to access your publicly available information, which includes Name, Profile Photo, Gender, Current City, Networks, Friend List, and Pages. This information is considered visible to Everyone.

There's nothing you can do about that (except, perhaps to not use any applications). It's just the price of using a walled garden service like Facebook where a single company is in charge.

THE DISAPPOINTMENT

I understand Facebook's business need to push people to share more information. They feel they need to be the center of the "real-time web"... and they feel that Twitter is in a better place to be that. But I find it annoying and frustrating that so many users are now going to find their "private" information publicly accessible out on the public Internet simply because they accepted the "recommended" settings.

Bad move, Facebook.

From:

Disruptive Conversations

Dan York
http://www.disruptiveconversations.com/2009/12/the-incredible-danger-of-facebooks-new-privacy-policy---and-how-to-protect-yourself.html