

Press Release

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Facebook consultation as much of a sham as their democracy

Last night, the social networking website Facebook gave its users seven days to approve the new Facebook Principles and Statement of Rights and Responsibilities. Researchers from the University of Cambridge, specialising in social network privacy issues, believe the vote is a sham: Facebook has taken no heed of user feedback and continues to promote its agenda regardless of views in opposition to it.

In February, Facebook was forced to abandon changes to its terms and conditions that would have made it owners of any content posted on its website. Its CEO blogged his contrite apologies and announced a new governance structure that would seek user involvement, allowing them to comment and vote on changes.

One of the most detailed responses to the consultation on Facebook's proposals came from a group of security experts from the University of Cambridge's Computing Laboratory. PhD students Jonathan Anderson and Joseph Bonneau have been researching Facebook privacy and publishing papers on its flaws. In a nine page report they provided a series of detailed criticisms of the minutiae of the policy. The general problems they identified were:

1. The voting process is full of loopholes, and was essentially a publicity stunt that they called "democracy theatre";
2. Facebook absolves itself of any responsibility for data security, leaving user information at the mercy of third parties;
3. Simple principles at the start of the Facebook documents are later on, deceptively, overridden by detailed legal language that users are unlikely to understand.

After a three week silence, Facebook has released a trivial reply to the criticisms raised by the Cambridge group and others. None of the substantive points has been addressed, and the revised document is effectively identical to the original version, with merely superficial changes. Facebook has given its users seven days in which to vote to either accept the new terms or to stick with the old version.

Said Joseph Bonneau, "I was shocked to see what minor revisions Facebook made after the public review process. Calling this a community-drafted document is insulting".

Said Jonathan Anderson, "Users ought to be really angry that Facebook thinks they can be so easily fooled; this vote is a sham, a meaningless choice between two documents written by Facebook which incorporate no user feedback".

Said Dr Frank Stajano, "whatever the outcome of the vote, Facebook gets the terms it wanted and then claims they were chosen by the users".

Said Professor Ross Anderson, "Facebook has wasted the opportunity to create a new structure for a social networking site. We shouldn't be surprised that corporations don't want to give power to their users, but pretending that the site is democratic when it isn't is offensive – it's reminiscent of the old German Democratic Republic which was actually a Russian colony and not democratic at all".

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Notes for Editors

1. The difference between the originally proposed Statement of Rights and Responsibilities and the “revised” version can be found at:

<http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/~jcb82/fb-terms-revision.html>

a. The original version is at:

<http://www.facebook.com/topic.php?uid=67758697570&topic=7569>

b. The “revised” version is at:

http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=183538190300

2. The detailed report on the proposed Statement of Rights and Responsibilities, “Democracy Theatre: Comments on Facebook’s Proposed Governance Scheme” by Joseph Bonneau, Sören Preibusch, Jonathan Anderson, Richard Clayton and Ross Anderson, can be found at:

<http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/~jcb82/2009-03-29-facebook-comments.pdf>

3. Facebook's response to users can be found at:

http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=183535615300

4. Some academic papers on social networks published by the authors of this report:

a. “Eight Friends are Enough: Social Graph Approximation via Public Listings”, presented at the *Second ACM Workshop on Social Network Systems*, 2009:

<http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/~jra40/publications/2009-SNS-public-listings.pdf>

b. “Not That Kind of Friend: Misleading Divergences Between Online Social Networks and Real-World Social Protocols”, presented at the *Seventeenth International Workshop on Security Protocols*, 2009:

<http://www.cl.cam.ac.uk/~jra40/publications/2009-SPW-misleading-divergences.pdf>

c. “External Data Collection From Online Social Networks”, accepted to the *2009 International Conference on Advances in Social Networks and Data Mining*, 2009;

d. “Privacy Preserving Social Networking Over Untrusted Networks”, accepted to the *Second ACM SIGCOMM Workshop on Online Social Networks*, 2009;

e. “The Jungle: A Field Study into the Market for Privacy in Social Networks”, accepted to the *Eighth Workshop on the Economics of Information Security*, 2009.