Facebook is forever, some users complain

By Maria Aspan

Are you a Facebook member? You may have a lifetime contract.

Some users have discovered it is nearly impossible to remove themselves entirely from Facebook.com, setting off a fresh round of concern over the social network's use of personal data.

While the website offers the option to deactivate an account, Facebook servers keep copies of the information indefinitely. Many users who have requested that their accounts be deleted have not succeeded in erasing their records.

"It's like the Hotel California," said Nipon Das, 34, a director at a biotechnology consulting firm in Manhattan. "You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave."

It took Das about two months and several e-mail exchanges to erase most of his information from the site, which occurred after he sent an e-mail threatening legal action. But even after that, a reporter was able to find Das' empty profile on Facebook.

A cottage industry of help pages devoted to escaping Facebook has sprung up online.

"I thought it was kind of strange that they save your information without telling you in a really clear way," said Magnus Wallin, a 26-year-old patent examiner in Stockholm who founded the group "How to permanently delete your Facebook account." It has almost 4,300 members.

The technological hurdles set by Facebook have a business rationale: They allow ex-Facebookers who choose to return resurrect their accounts effortlessly. According to an e-mail from Amy Sezak, a spokeswoman for Facebook, "Deactivated accounts mean that a user can reactivate at any time, and their information will be available again just as they left it."

But it also means that disenchanted users cannot disappear without leaving footprints. Facebook's terms state that "you may remove your user content from the site at any time," but "you acknowledge that the company may retain archived copies of your user content." Its privacy policy says that after someone deactivates an account, "removed information may persist in backup copies for a reasonable period of time."

Facebook's website does not inform departing users that they must delete information from their account in order to close it fully - meaning they may unwittingly leave anything from e-mail addresses to credit card numbers.

Only people who contact Facebook's customer service department are informed that they must painstakingly delete, line by line, all of the information.

"Users can also have their account completely removed by deleting all of the
data associated with their account and then deactivating it,” Sezak said.

"Users can then write to Facebook to request their account be deleted and their e-mail will be completely erased from the database."

“Most sites, even online dating sites, will give you an option to wipe your slate clean,” Das said. ■