Saying It 'Messed Up,' Facebook Modifies Controversial Feature

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Facebook, a popular Web-based hangout for students, revamped its site last night to let users disable or modify a new feature that had touched off protests from hundreds of thousands of members.

The changes came a few days after the site launched a service that prominently displayed changes members made to their Web profiles on the pages of others in their Facebook social networks - a move that critics said called too much attention to personal information, such as when a relationship ended.

"We want people to know we messed up," Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's chairman and chief executive, said yesterday.

Zuckerberg said he planned to personally write a letter and post it on Facebook apologizing for not being more explicit about the new feature and explaining that users will have control over information, such as when a relationship ended.

"We have control over information, such as when a relationship ended," he said.

Facebook, which has 9 million members, including high school and college students, as well as some professionals, already has privacy controls that allow users to determine who can view their personal pages. Someone attending a particular school, for example, could prevent faculty or alumni from that school from seeing personal photos, blog posts and other information, such as when a relationship ended.

"People's privacy and feeling like they have control over information is really important for the site," Zuckerberg said he planned to personally write a letter and post it on Facebook apologizing for not being more explicit about the new feature and explaining that users will have control over information, such as when a relationship ended.

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Now, however, Facebook is adding a new layer of privacy settings that will allow members to determine beforehand how much of their information they want delivered to friends through the new feature, added Monday. Initially, the "news feed" feature was active on all member pages, allowing everyone in a user's circle of friends to receive automated updates on their latest Facebook activities.

Last night, however, Facebook tweaked it so members can opt out of that feature altogether, meaning that no new changes would be visible to their friends.

Users also may now designate which kinds of information they would like to be displayed on their friends' pages.

Originally, the feature automatically culled all changes made on each person's profile and served them to friends. Users could delete information posted about themselves, but only after it already was posted.

Zuckerberg said the size and swiftness of the uproar caused by the new Facebook feature -- and the formation of huge online protest groups -- surprised him.

"The magnitude is what surprised me most," he added. Protesters were using the new Facebook feature to publicize their discontent, proving that it was very effective, he said.

Although Facebook may make further alterations to the design and operation of the feature, the Palo Alto, Calif.-based company has no intentions of eliminating it entirely, he said.

In fact, Facebook is experimenting with using a similar feature to deliver news from The Washington Post, Newsweek and online magazine Slate to members as part of a new business relationship with The Washington Post Co., which owns all three publications. Facebook hopes to expand the news experiment.

"We're making changes because we feel it's important to react to this quickly," Zuckerberg said. "But we think it's a good product, and we're not taking it down."
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