# When everyone's a friend, isanything private?

*As the distinction blurs between one's few close friends and the many who are not, it seems pointless to distinguish between private and public*

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Below: Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. Right: This screenshot shows a page from Facebook featuring French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

PHOTOS: AFP
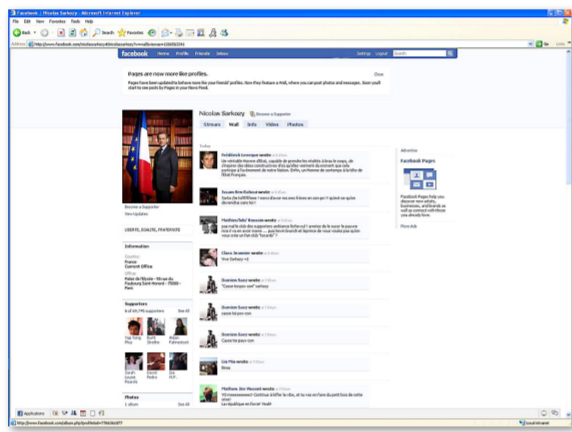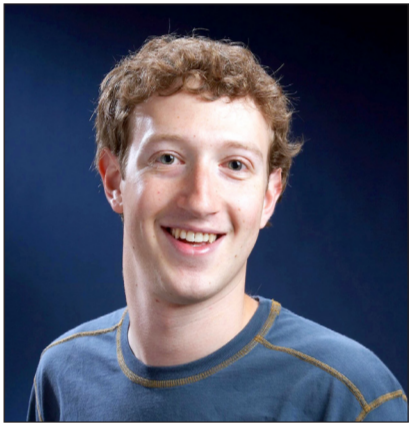


Facebook has a chief privacy officer, but I doubt that the position will exist 10 years from now. That's not because Facebook is hell-bent on stripping away privacy protections, but because the popularity of Facebook and other social networking sites has promoted the sharing of all things personal, dissolving the line that separates the private from the public.

As the scope of sharing personal information expands from a few friends to many sundry individuals grouped together under the Facebook label of "friends," disclosure becomes the norm and privacy becomes a quaint anachronism.

Facebook's younger members — high school or college students, and recent graduates who came of age as Facebook got its start on campuses — appear comfortable with sharing just about anything. It's the older members — those who could join only after it opened membership in 2006 to workplace networks, then to anyone— who are adjusting to a new value system that prizes self-expression over reticence.

Facebook says it is the world's largest social network, with 175 million members. But in the US, most members are still relatively young; Facebook offers advertisers a target of 54.4 million members of all ages. But if an advertiser wants to narrow its target audience to those 25 or older, the number drops to 28.8 million. Narrow it to those 30 or older, and Facebook has 20.3 million to offer.

Many over-30 graybeards have yet to sign up, so Facebook has a chance for astonishing growth. Each week, a million new members are added in the US and 5 million globally; the 30-and-older group is its fastest-growing demographic.

Members are becoming more gregarious, too. In December, the average number of "friends" per member, worldwide, was 100. It has now jumped to 120, according to a company spokesman. Among members, a Law of Amiable Inclusiveness seems to be revealing itself: Over time, many are deciding that the easiest path is to routinely accept "friend requests," completing a sequence begun when one member seeks to designate another as a Facebook friend.

In other words, they are defining "friend" simply as any Facebook member who communicates a wish to be one.

The growth of membership and of individual networks seems impervious to gaffes at the company during its brief, five-year history. One of those instances occurred last month, when it fiddled with its terms of service. New language that seemed to assert Facebook's "irrevocable" right to retain and use a member's personal information, even after the member had closed his or her Facebook account, deserved a little more editing.

The outcry was loud — only a sliver of members need raise their voices to create a din — and Facebook restored the old language. A few days later, it offered a draft of principles for the company and another draft, of rights and responsibilities, to be put to the membership for ratification.

Facebook offers members a plentitude of privacy options. I count 43 settings that can be tweaked, not including a bunch for limiting information that can be seen by software applications installed by one's Facebook friends.

Facebook's default settings for new accounts protect users in some ways. For instance, the information in one's profile is restricted to friends only; it is not accessible to friends of friends. But Facebook sets few restrictions by default on what third-party software can see in a network of friends. Members are not likely aware that unless they change the default privacy settings, an application installed by a friend can vacuum up and store many categories of a member's personal information.

David Evans, an associate professor of computer science at the University of Virginia, says he wishes that Facebook would begin with more restrictions on the information that outside software developers can reach. For 15 of 19 information categories, Facebook sets a default setting of "share," which means the information can be pulled out of Facebook and stored on servers outside its control. These 15 categories include activities, interests, photos and relationship status.

"Facebook could set defaults erring on the side of privacy instead of on the side of giving your information away," he said.

Chris Kelly, Facebook's chief privacy officer, defends its current settings, saying it "gives users extensive control over the applications they choose to interact with." He also said Facebook had removed "thousands" of applications that members deemed untrustworthy.

In Evans' view, however, banishment of malevolent software comes too late: "Once the application has got the data, it's got it, stored on someone else's machine."

The defaults turn out to be crucially important, because few users go to the trouble of adjusting the settings. Asked how many members ever change a privacy setting, Kelly said 20 percent.

Facebook does let members create customized subsets of friends. Members can selectively restrict access to some items, such as photo albums and videos. But customizing permissions for this or that, via multiple clicks, is no one's idea of a good time.

For many members, "friends" now means a mish-mash of real friends, former friends, friends of friends, and non-friends; younger and older relatives; colleagues and, if cursed, a nosy boss or two. Everyone accepted as a "friend" gets the same access.

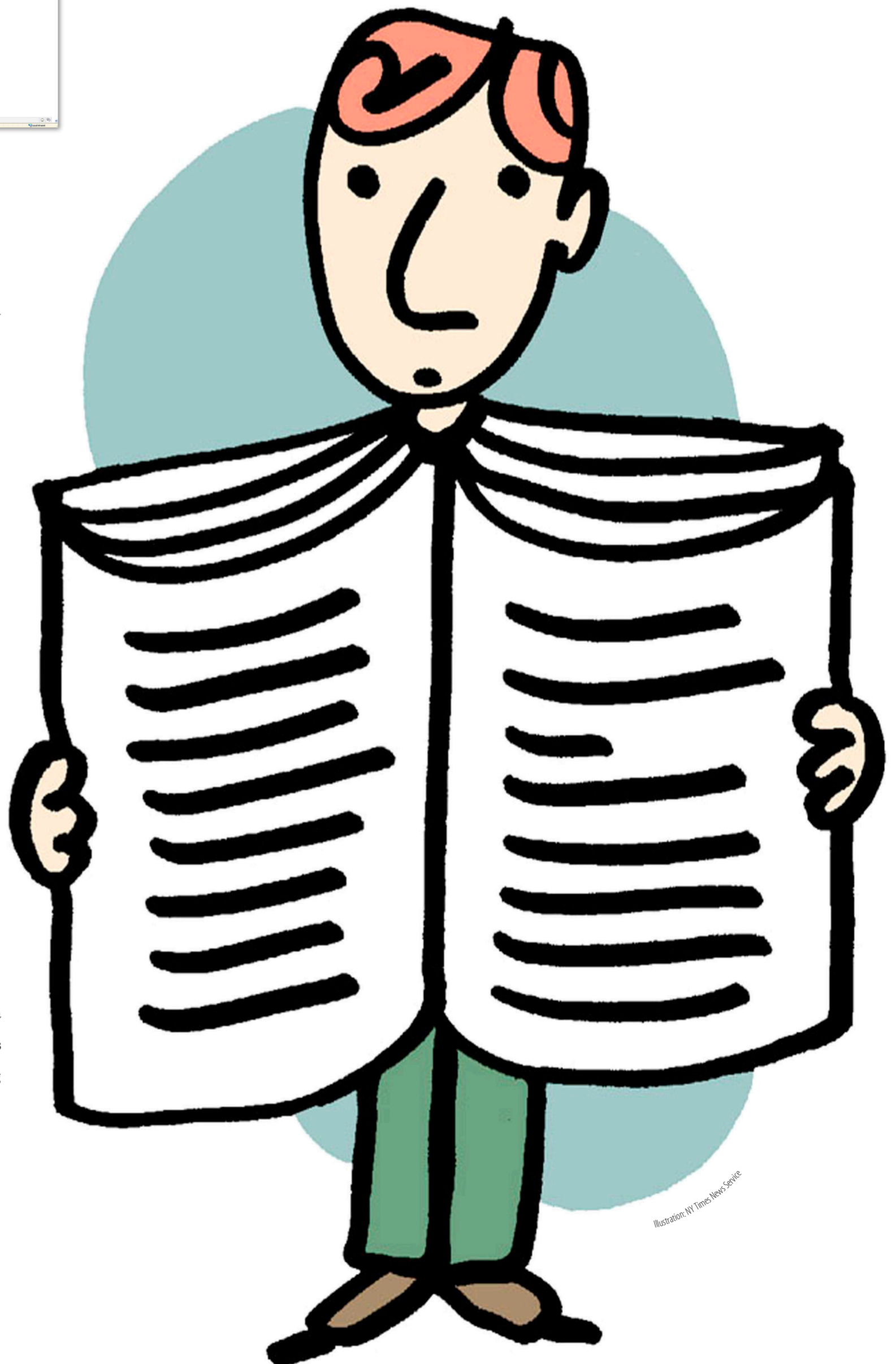When the distinction blurs between one's few close friends and the many who are not, it seems pointless to distinguish between private and public.



Illustration: NY Times News Service