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# Facebook Eases Privacy Rules for Teenagers

By **VINDU GOEL**

SAN FRANCISCO — Facebook has loosened its privacy rules for teenagers as a debate swirls over online threats to children from bullies and sexual predators.

The move, [announced on Wednesday](#), allows teenagers to post status updates, videos and images that can be seen by anyone, not just their friends or people who know their friends.

While Facebook described the change as giving teenagers, ages 13 to 17, more choice, big money is at stake for the company and its advertisers. Marketers are keen to reach impressionable young consumers, and the more public information they have about those users, the better they are able to target their pitches.

“It’s all about monetization and being where the public dialogue is,” said Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy, a group that lobbies against marketing to children. “To the extent that Facebook encourages people to put everything out there, it’s incredibly attractive to Facebook’s advertisers.”

But that public dialogue now includes youths who are growing up in a world of social media and, often, learning the hard way that it can be full of risks. Parents, too, are trying to help their children navigate the raucous online world that holds both promise and peril.

“They’re hitting kids from a neurological weak spot. Kids don’t have the same kind of impulse control that adults do,” said Emily Bazelon, a journalist and author of the book “Sticks and Stones: Defeating the Culture of Bullying and Rediscovering the Power of Character and Empathy.”

Facebook said numerous other sites and mobile apps, from big players like Twitter and Instagram to lesser-known ones like ask.fm and Kik, allowed teenagers to express themselves publicly.

“Across the Web, teens can have a very public voice on those services, and it would be a shame if they could not do that on Facebook,” Nicky Jackson Colaco, Facebook’s manager of privacy and public policy, said in a phone interview.

But unlike those other services, Facebook requires users to post under their real identities, which some privacy advocates said would make it much more difficult to run away from stupid or thoughtless remarks.

“It’s risky to have teenagers posting publicly,” Ms. Bazelon said. “The kids who might be the most likely to do that might not have the best judgment about what they post.”

Facebook also said it made the change to let its most knowledgeable users — socially active teenagers like musicians and humanitarian activists — reach a wider audience the way they can on blogs and rival services like Twitter.

Facebook changed another aspect of its rules for teenagers, for which it drew praise. By default, new accounts for teenagers will be set up to share information only with friends, not friends of friends as before. Ms. Colaco said the company would also educate teenagers about the risks of sharing information and periodically remind them, if they make public posts, that everyone can see what they are sharing.

But fundamentally, Facebook wants to encourage more public sharing, not less.

The company, which has about its 1.2 billion users worldwide, is locked in a battle with Twitter and Google to attract consumer advertisers like food, phone and clothing companies. Those brands want to reach people as they engage in passionate public conversation about sports, television, news and live events.

Twitter, which has been emphasizing its virtue as a real-time public platform as it prepares to make a public offering of stock next month, has been particularly effective at persuading marketers that it is the best way to reach audiences talking about the hottest television show or the week’s National Football League games.

Facebook is reducing children’s privacy even as lawmakers are moving in the opposite direction, grappling with difficult issues like online bullying and the question of whether to allow people to erase their digital histories.

In September, a 12-year-old Florida girl, Rebecca Ann Sedwick, committed suicide after extensive bullying on Facebook, Kik Messenger and ask.fm. This month, Florida authorities charged two youngsters with aggravated stalking in the case.

Gov. Jerry Brown of California recently signed a law that allows residents to erase online

indiscretions posted while they were teenagers. And European lawmakers are preparing to vote on changes that would give European residents far more control over their online privacy.

In Britain, one of Facebook's largest international markets, local policy makers have highlighted how social networking sites have been used to target children for either sexual grooming or online bullying.

About half of online child sexual exploitation now occurs on social networks, said Peter Davies, chief executive of the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Center, a British government body.

"Facebook is a major one but not the only one," Mr. Davies told British politicians on Tuesday. "The medium is not to blame; the medium might be managed better, so that it is safer for its users. What is to blame is human behavior."

British lawmakers also are focusing on the online bullying of children after a series of prominent cases.

Around 70 percent of children have suffered from some form of bullying online, according to a recent survey of 10,000 children conducted by the British charity [Ditch the Label](#).

Facebook has encountered controversy over its privacy policies in the past and is now facing additional scrutiny from the [Federal Trade Commission](#), which is conducting an inquiry into other proposed changes to the company's privacy policies. Those policies would give Facebook automatic permission to take a user's post, including a post made by a teenager, and turn it into an advertisement broadcast to anyone who could have seen the original post.

Privacy advocates have complained to the F.T.C. that with those proposals, Facebook was violating a 2011 order that required the company to obtain explicit permission from its customers before using their data in advertising. Facebook said it still had certain privacy safeguards in place for teenagers that make it harder for strangers to search and find them, but it declined to be more specific.

*Mark Scott contributed reporting from London.*



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