

Sticky Membership on Facebook

Are you a member of Facebook.com? You may have a lifetime contact. Some users have discovered that it is nearly impossible to remove themselves entirely from Facebook, setting off a fresh round of concern over the popular social network's use of personal data.

While the web site offers users the option to deactivate their accounts, Facebook servers keep copies of the information in those accounts indefinitely. Indeed, many users who have contacted Facebook to request that their accounts be deleted have not succeeded in erasing their records from the network.

"You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave."

It took a user about two months and several e-mail exchanges with Facebook's customer service representatives to erase most of his information from the site, which finally occurred after he sent an e-mail threatening legal action. But even after that, a reporter was able to find his empty profile on Facebook and successfully sent him an e-mail message through the network.

In response to difficulties faced by ex-Facebook members, a cottage industry of unofficial help pages devoted to escaping Facebook has sprung up online—both outside and inside the network.

"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 a Facebook group, "How to permanently delete your facebook account". The group has almost 4,300 members and is steadily growing.

The technological hurdles set by Facebook have a business rationale: they allow ex-Facebookers who choose to return the ability to resurrect their accounts effortlessly. According to an e-mail message 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 from the site without leaving footprints. Facebook's terms of use state that "you may remove your user content from the site at any time", but also that "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 Web site does not inform departing users that they must delete information from their account in order to close it fully—meaning that they may unwittingly leave anything from e-mail addresses to credit card numbers sitting on Facebook servers.

Only people who contact Facebook's customer service department are informed that they must painstakingly delete, line by line, all of the profile information, "wall" messages and group memberships they may have created within Facebook.

"Users can also have their account completely removed by deleting all of the data associated with their account and then deactivating it," Sezak said in her message. "Users can then write to Facebook to request their account be deleted and their e-mail will be completely erased from the database".

But even users who try to delete every piece of information they have ever written, sent or received via the network have found their efforts to permanently leave stymied. Other social-networking sites like MySpace and Friendster, as well as online dating sites like eHarmony.com, may require departing users to confirm their wishes several times—but in the end they offer a delete option.

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

Das, who joined Facebook on a whim after receiving invitations from friends, tried to leave after realizing that most of his co-workers were also on the site. "I work in a small office," he said. "The last thing I want is people going on there and checking out my private life."

"I did not want to be on it after junior associates at work whom I have to manage saw my stuff," he added.

Facebook's quiet archiving of information from deactivated accounts has increased concerns about the network's potential abuse of private data, especially in the wake of its fumbled Beacon advertising feature.

That application, which tracks and publishes the items bought by Facebook members on outside Web sites, was introduced in November without a transparent, one-step opt-out feature. After a public backlash, including more than 50,000 Facebook users' signatures on a MoveOn.org protest petition, Facebook executives apologized and allowed such an opt-out option on the program.



Tensions remain between making a profit and alienating Facebook's users, who the company says total about 64 million worldwide (MySpace has an estimated 110 million monthly active users).

The network is still trying to find a way to monetize its popularity, mostly by allowing marketers access to its wealth of demographic and behavioral information. The retention of old accounts on Facebook's servers seems like another effort to hold onto—and provide its ad partners with—as much demographic information as possible.

"The thing they offer advertisers is that they can connect to groups of people. I can see why they wouldn't want to throw away anyone's information, but there's conflict with privacy," said Alan Burlison, 46, a British software engineer who succeeded in deleting his account only after he complained in the British press, to the country's Information Commissioner's Office and to the TRUSTe organization, an online privacy network that has certified Facebook. Burlison's complaint spurred the Information Commissioner's Office, a privacy watchdog organization, to investigate Facebook's data-protection practices, the BBC reported last month. In response, Facebook issued a statement saying that its policy was in "full compliance with U. K. data protection law".

A spokesman for TRUSTe, which is based in San Francisco, said its account deletion process was "inconvenient," but that Facebook was "being responsive to us and they currently meet our requirements".

"I kept getting the same answer and really felt that I was being given the runaround," Burlison said of Facebook's customer service representatives. "It was quite obvious that no amount of prodding from me on a personal level was going to make a difference".

Only after he sent a link to the video of his interview with Britain's Channel 4 News to the customer service representatives—and Facebook executives – was his account finally deleted.

Steven Mansour, 28, a Canadian online community developer, spent two weeks in July trying to fully delete his account from Facebook. He later wrote a blog entry—including e-mail messages, diagrams and many exclamations of frustration—in a post titled "2504 Steps to closing your Facebook account".

Mansour, who said he is "really skeptical of social networking sites," decided to leave after a few months on Facebook. "I was getting tired of always getting alerts and e-mails," he said "I found it very invasive."

"It's part of a much bigger picture of social networking sites on the Internet harvesting private data, whether for marketing or for more sinister purposes," he said. His post, which wound up on the link-aggregator Digg.com, has been viewed more than 87,000 times, Mansour said, adding that the traffic was so high it crashed his server.

And his post became the touchstone for Walin, who was inspired to create his group, "How to permanently delete your Facebook account," after joining, leaving and then rejoining Facebook, only to find that all of his information from his first account was still available "I wanted the information to be available inside Facebook for all the users who wanted to leave, and quite a few people have found it just by using internal search," said Wallin about the group. Wallin Facebook has never contacted Wallin said he has heard through members that some people have successfully used his steps to leave Facebook. But he is not yet ready to leave himself.

"I don't want to leave yet; I actually find it really convenient," he said. "But someday when I want to leave, I want it to be simple." □

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Courtesy – The Financial Express, 17.2.2008.

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