

Facebook offers new way to sort friends, copy info

MICHAEL LIEDTKE - AP Technology Writer - Associated Press

Facebook is trying to make it easier for people to share their updates selectively and draw distinctions between friends, family members and co-workers on the Web's biggest social hub.

Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's founder and CEO, unveiled the latest changes Wednesday at a press conference that marked his first public appearance since last Friday's debut of "The Social Network," a movie tracing Facebook's origins and evolution.

The movie depicts Zuckerberg as a misanthropic genius who relied on a combination of talent and treachery to build Facebook into a cultural touchstone since he began working on it in a Harvard University dorm room more than six years ago.

Zuckerberg told reporters Wednesday he wouldn't discuss the critically acclaimed film, which has been a box-office hit so far. He has previously scoffed at the movie as a gross exaggeration and said he didn't intend to see it.

The 26-year-old billionaire was much more excited about Facebook's features, which he said Facebook's engineers had been working on during the past two months while in "lockdown" mode.

The project was aimed at making it easier to sort Facebook friendships into separate clusters, such as college chums, drinking buddies, co-workers, neighbors and family. That, in turn, is intended to make people more comfortable about posting observations and pictures for which they only want a limited audience.

Facebook already offers a way to do this through a "lists" feature. But only about 5 percent of Facebook's more than 500 million users take the time to use this tool to carve up their friendships.

"No one wants to make lists," Zuckerberg said.

The new feature is called "groups" and started rolling out Wednesday; it could take a few days for everyone to get the new tools. It will allow people to set up pages consisting of people who share the same interests or family affiliation. Group members can post information that only other members can see, and they will be able to convene in chat rooms. Members also will be able to plan events together.

Each step on the road to making Facebook an indispensable way to communicate makes it more attractive to advertisers. That, in turn, helps bring in revenue as the

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privately held company gears up for an initial public offering expected within two years.

Zuckerberg believes 80 percent of Facebook users eventually will be touched by the group feature in some fashion, either by creating groups or being sorted into groups.

"We aren't trying to be hyperbolic in saying that this is going to be a fundamental shift" in how people will use Facebook, Zuckerberg said. He also predicted the new feature will "blow away" other Internet products offered by more established companies, such as Google Inc., and Yahoo Inc., that allow people with similar interest to bond together in online groups.

The groups tool is an implicit acknowledgement that many users' social circles on Facebook now includes dozens, or even hundreds, of people with whom they really don't know that well. Zuckerberg is betting users would open up more if there are more convenient ways to sort their musings into different silos.

Facebook imported some of the ideas for the groups feature from a startup called Hot Potato that it bought during the summer. Hot Potato founder Justin Shaffer is the product manager for the groups tool.

To give users even more peace of mind about what they are sharing, Facebook is making it possible for them to download digital copies of all the personal data they have on the website. This conceivably could empower people to transfer their information to other social hangouts.

Facebook also introducing a dashboard to monitor personal information used by games, quizzes and other applications distributed on Facebook.

To guard against hackers downloading other people's personal information, Facebook will request confirmation through the user's e-mail account on file whenever information requests are made. It will also take a series of other security steps.

Unlike some of the other changes that Facebook has made in recent years as it tried to prod people to put more of the personal lives online, the new downloading and groups features won praise from one major Internet privacy watchdog.

The "potentially game-changing" innovations offer controls that establish Facebook as a force to be reckoned with on matters of user privacy," Erica Newland, a policy analyst for the Center for Democracy & Technology, wrote in a Wednesday blog post.

Newland has particularly high hopes for the tool to download personal data because it should make it easier to transfer information and images to blogs and other popular services such as Yahoo's Flickr site for photos and Google's YouTube site for videos. "This is a very bold step that will spur innovation by third-parties," Newland wrote.

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