

New Facebook principles aim to soothe users

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Facebook on Thursday revised its terms of service and opened them up to user input, responding to a wave of criticism that it was stealthily taking ownership of its users' content.

The social networking site announced two new governing documents: the Facebook Principles and the Statement of Rights and Responsibilities. Both will be open to review and comment by users for several weeks, after which Facebook may make additional changes based on feedback.

Allowing users to help shape company policy is "a milestone in internet governance", said Marc Rotenberg, executive director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center. "They've done something that other companies have not."

In a conference call announcing the changes, chief executive Mark Zuckerberg said the company was taking these steps to make clear its intentions after users and privacy advocates criticised the company last week for eroding users' rights. "A lot of the feedback was fair," he said. "We took last week as a strong signal of how much people cared about Facebook."

The new documents and review process culminate a controversy lasting several weeks that left Facebook open to criticism that it was betraying its users' trust.

Last week, the Consumerist blog called attention to minor but potentially wide reaching changes in Facebook's terms of service. The revised terms suggested that Facebook would be able to use any uploaded content in whatever way it pleased, including for marketing purposes, even after users deleted that content from their accounts.

The changes had been made on February 4 but went unnoticed for two weeks. Following Consumerist's post, Facebook groups protesting at the new terms of service were created overnight. On the micro-blogging service Twitter, "TOS" became one of the most-searched phrases.

Hours before the Electronic Privacy Info Center, a privacy advocate group, was to file a formal complaint against the new terms of service with the Federal Trade Commission, Facebook took down the new terms and reinstated its old policy, and EPIC backed down.

By amending its policies to assuage critics, Facebook, which now has more than 175m members, signalled that it is taking seriously users' concerns about privacy and content ownership.

Privacy, in particular, has remained a controversial issue for Facebook. Last year, the company came under fire for retaining user content after accounts were deleted. In 2007, it revised its Beacon service, which shared users' activity on other websites with their Facebook friends.

Financial Times, London, 27 fev. 2009, Companies, online. Disponível em <www.ft.com>. Acesso em: 2 mar. 2009.