Facebook, the EU and Privacy – who do we trust? (guest blog)

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Polis Intern Sorcha Pollak reports on the latest developments in privacy regulation in Europe and asks can we trust the authorities, or ourselves?

We complain incessantly about how Facebook has stolen away our privacy, how we no longer have the ability to keep our lives hidden from the all-seeing, all-knowing public eye. We complain, but do we change the way we disseminate our personal information? Do we stop posting that myriad of personal photographs on online forums? Would we go so far as to consider the possibility of closing our Facebook accounts? No matter how much we loosen our grasp on our IP (Intellectual Property), we do not step back from this ubiquitous social networking phenomenon.

'The protection of personal data is a fundamental right of all Europeans, but citizens do not always feel in full control of their personal data' according to EU Commissioner Vivien Reding speaking in relation to the Data Protection Audit. This was undertaken in October 2011 and published before Christmas. With the European headquarters for Facebook, Google and Microsoft in Dublin, it was the Irish Data Protection Commissioner who took on the mammoth task of scrutinizing the detailed, fine-print privacy policies of Facebook in order to establish what all the complaints were about.

The results of the Irish audit have been outlined in a series of 'recommendations' for the policy makers behind Facebook in Europe. In reality, the data commissioner could not find any real breach with EU privacy regulations and so concluded the report with a series of pointers including the all-important 'Right to be Forgotten'.

This recommendation means that Europeans will be entitled to request the removal of any personal information or photos they no longer want publicised. The fine print behind this is that these recommendations have yet to be approved by the European Parliament and could in fact take up to two years to implement. With the rate of technological change taking place, who knows what the world of social media will look like by 2014.

With a CEO who sees privacy as an outdated concept, is it any surprise that Facebook is not focused on protecting the privacy rights of its users? Mark Zuckerberg claims that a clear explanation regarding the organisation's privacy policies is available to all users in the terms and conditions laid out by the organisation.

However, I would imagine very few people have ever actually taken the time to read the whole 3,100 words which explain what Facebook sees as its rights and responsibilities regarding its user community.

So if the Irish Data Commissioner is correct and Facebook is adhering to data protection laws, we should have nothing to worry about. Perhaps Facebook isn't the scapegoat we would like it to be. Could it be that we, the public, are to blame?

Zuckerberg is providing a networking service for us, a means of connecting with friends, family, even strangers (if that's what we want). Facebook creates a platform for our thoughts and ideas – we're the ones who make use of it on a daily basis. Without the public there would be no Facebook. Without Facebook we would get our privacy back. But is that what we really want?

This report by Polis Intern Sorcha Pollak

Click here to see video and links to blogs about the lecture by Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg at Polis in 2010.