

Facebook's "Real Name" Policy and Its Ethical Implications

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IFMS 304.6380

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Many issues surround Facebook's privacy policies and its use of personal user information (Electronic Privacy Information Center, n.d.-a), but one issue in particular is its "real name" policy. Facebook required users to provide their real names when creating an account, and claims that using real names allows users to "always know who you're connecting with" (Facebook, n.d.). Real names, as Facebook explains, should be the name a person uses in everyday life, and may need to be verified by submitting evidence, such as a government-issued ID or a utility bill. However, users may have legitimate needs for using a name that does not match a legal name, and could be penalized on or suspended from Facebook (Kayyali & York, 2014; Zip, 2015).

Ethical issue: Facebook requires users to provide "real name" on their accounts			
Stakeholders	confidentiality	non-maleficence	understanding
Facebook, Inc.	They have the duty to respect the privacy of the user's information.	They have the duty to cause no harm to the user, through action or inaction.	They have the duty to understand why the user's real name might not match the legal name, and accept it as the user's real name.
the account holder	They have the right to keep their personal information private.	They have the duty to cause no harm through use of a pseudonym.	They have the duty to understand and accept Facebook's viewpoint on authenticity.
friends and family of the account holder	They have the duty to respect the privacy of the user's information, and the right to interact with the user under their real name.	They have the duty to cause no harm to the user, by only interacting with them under their real name.	They have the duty to respect the user's real name, even if it does not match the legal name.

current or potential employers of the account holder	They have the duty to respect the privacy of the user's information.	They have the duty to cause no harm to the user or to Facebook.	They have the duty to respect the user's real name, even if it does not match the legal name.
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Table 1: Ethical issue matrix of Facebook stakeholders to normative ethics categories

Facebook's goal of authenticity of user engagement is a valid concern in the argument advocating use of real names. The company strives to build a social network where users have genuine interaction with other users (Facebook, n.d.; Zip, 2015). However, account holders have valid reasons for using a name on Facebook other than a legal name — for example, pseudonyms for abuse victims or stage names of performers; one affected group in particular is the transgender community. A trans user may, in everyday life, be known by an authentic name that does not match their legal name, and changing the name on the account to match a person's legal name may put them in danger of discrimination, harassment, or violence (Kayyali & York, 2014; Zip, 2015).

Confidentiality is one factor in the ethical consideration regarding Facebook's "real name" policy. Facebook marks several pieces of user information public by default — including user name, profile picture, gender, and list of friends — without the option to hide this information from public view (Electronic Privacy Information Center, n.d.-b); if Facebook has a duty to protect the privacy of its users, should it allow users to choose the privacy settings of that information, or allow users to sign up under a pseudonym?

This point leads to another factor for ethical consideration, non-maleficence. While users have the duty to cause no harm to other users or to Facebook through the use of a pseudonym (or other name that does not match the legal name), Facebook is also under obligation to cause no

harm to its users. A Facebook account under a user's real name could put that user at grave risk (Electronic Privacy Information Center, n.d.-b; Kayyali & York, 2014). Would forcing the user to display their legal name on their account put the user at risk for harm, and is Facebook liable for that risk?

The third factor for ethical consideration is understanding and tolerance. The founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, holds a place of privilege as a white, cissexual, heterosexual man, and may not fully understand the viewpoints of marginalized people, such as those in the transgender community, who have varied reasons for using names other than their legal names (Kayyali & York, 2014; Hassine and Galperin, 2015). Should Facebook be required to accept any name entered by a user, regardless of the user's legal name?

Compliance with the current "real name" policy on Facebook puts trans users in a difficult situation, in having to choose between entering their legal name, which may not match their real name or their gender; entering their real or everyday name, which may not match their legal name and puts them at risk for being kicked off the website; or not signing up for Facebook at all.

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Policy for Names on Facebook

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In my previous paper, I outlined the ethical dilemma with Facebook's insistence on its users providing their "real names" when creating and using their Facebook accounts. Although Facebook claims that a user's real name doesn't necessarily need to match their legal name, Facebook may still require supporting documentation as evidence of a user's name (Facebook, Inc., n.d.). The following policy proposes changes to Facebook to allow users to be known under any name, within limits as described below; this would better outline what user names are allowed and would also address Facebook's concerns over authenticity and online safety.

Overview of the Policy

Facebook.com is an online, interactive community, and its goal is to provide a space where all users can feel safe; to do that, users engage with each other using their authentic identities (Facebook, Inc., n.d.). A user's real name is the one in use every day in real life..

A user's real name is not required to match their legal name. Google+ has already changed its name policy to allow legal names, other authentic names, or pseudonyms (MacKinnon & Lim, 2014); its success in this regard has proven how the organization and its users can work together to create a name policy that works for everyone.

To encourage interaction among users and to foster the growth of community, anonymity is not permitted on Facebook; however, a pseudonym is considered a real name — if it is one in use consistently and one that reflects a person's authentic personality (Kaste, 2011) — and is an acceptable name on this website.

Inappropriate use of a username, or harassment of another user for their username, will not be tolerated, and could result in the suspension or deletion of a user's account.

Purpose

Facebook, Inc. is committed to the values of understanding, non-maleficence, and confidentiality in its goal for providing a safe online experience for its users. The purpose of this name policy is to outline the roles and responsibilities of both Facebook, Inc. and its users, and to set guidelines on acceptable use of names on Facebook.com, in keeping with the organization's core values. With this policy, users will have confidence that Facebook, Inc. recognizes their varied needs for using real names that match their authentic identities, if not their legal names, and Facebook, Inc. will trust its users to follow these guidelines and not abuse the use of usernames.

Scope

This policy applies to the use of names on Facebook.com; other profile or account issues are addressed elsewhere. Facebook, Inc., registered account holders, and non-registered users (such as people browsing Facebook.com without having their own Facebook accounts) must abide by this policy.

Policy Points

Commitment of Facebook, Inc. to Ethical Behavior

Facebook, Inc. has the duty to understand why a user's real name might not match their legal name, and accept it as the user's real name. Users hold the best evidence of their own lived experiences, and it is Facebook's responsibility to respect their identities. Facebook, Inc. also has the duty to respect the privacy of the user's information, and if a user's legal name and account user name do not match, it is required to respect the user's real name and to not disclose the user's legal name. Through this, Facebook, Inc. has the duty to cause no harm to the user,

through action or inaction, and in allowing other authentic names or pseudonyms, Facebook, Inc. provides a safe online experience for its users.

Commitment of Registered Account Users to Ethical Behavior

Registered account users of Facebook.com have the duty to understand and accept Facebook's viewpoint on authenticity; however, they also have the right to keep their personal information private. To accomplish both of these tasks, users will provide their real names when creating and using their Facebook accounts. These names will be the names the account holders use in everyday life, whether legal name, other authentic name, or pseudonym. Additionally, users have the duty to cause no harm through use of a pseudonym, and commit to only using their real names in an authentic manner, and not in a deceptive or hurtful manner.

Commitment of Non-registered Users to Ethical Behavior

Non-registered users of Facebook.com — users who view the site without signing up for or using a Facebook account — have the duty to respect a user's real name, even if it does not match their legal name. They must understand that users have varied reasons for interacting and engaging with other users with a name that may not match their legal name; to achieve this, non-registered users have the duty to cause no harm to the user, by only interacting with them under that account's user name, and they have the duty to respect the privacy of the user's information, but also the right to interact with the user under their real name.

Compliance with the Policy

1. The name on a registered account holder's user profile should reflect their real name, that is, the authentic name that they use in everyday life. This name is not required to match the user's legal name.

2. Nicknames or diminutive forms of names are acceptable; e.g. Bob instead of Robert.
3. Additional names can be listed on the account; these include, but are not limited to birth names, married names, nicknames, or professional names.
4. Users can hide their names in part or in full from public view if they do not want to be listed in public searches.
5. Users with only one name enter their name as a first name, with a period (.) in lieu of the last name; e.g. (first name) Madonna (last name) .
6. Symbols and numbers cannot be included; acceptable punctuation includes the hyphen, the period, and the comma.
7. Impersonation of another individual — living or dead, fictional or real — is not permitted.
8. Profiles are for individual use only; a Facebook Page is meant to represent businesses, organizations, professional personas, musicians or bands, families, or other similar uses.
(Electronic Privacy Information Center, n.d.; Facebook, Inc., n.d.; Google, Inc., n.d.)

Sanctions

Facebook, Inc. reserves the right to suspend or delete the account of any user who violates this policy, including but not limited to the following:

1. impersonating another individual — living or dead, fictional or real;
2. adopting a false name with the intent to harass or threaten another user;
3. publicly posting the legal name of a user who has chosen to keep that information private;
4. creating a Profile page for a business or organization.

Users who find another user engaging in the above behavior may report that user to Facebook as violating this policy. Facebook will then investigate the claims. However, users belonging to marginalized communities are especially at-risk targets for harassment and violence (Zip, 2015); therefore, anyone who maliciously reports another user for using a false name, with the intent to have that user's account suspended or deleted, will have their account suspended or deleted.

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