

Conference Crafting 'Bill of Rights' for Social Networks

June 16, 2010

I'm spending the week in sunny San Jose, California for the [Computers, Freedom, and Privacy \(CFP\) conference](#) [1]. Social networking is clearly the focus this week; [a stated goal](#) [2] of the conference is the creation of a social network users "Bill of Rights," that would create a set of "best practice" guidelines that would guide the actions of responsible social networks.

Similar bills of rights have already been published by [EFF](#) [3], [Jack Lerner and Lisa Borodkin](#) [4], [Marc Sullivan](#) [5] of PC World, [free-association.net](#) [6], and others . Here at CFP, the authors of those documents, conference attendees, and participants in the Twittersphere (#BillofRights) will be collaborating on a version that can be voted on this Friday.

The process started yesterday, with a panel titled "Bills of Rights for Social Network Sites." During the session, panelists and attendees began drafting those user rights and explaining the philosophy behind creating such a document in the first place. A good post describing the rights that participants identified has already been posted on the [CFP blog](#) [7]. Some of these rights include the [rights to informed decision making](#) [3], free speech and fair use, [pseudonymity](#) [8], control of one's information, freedom to leave, - including a degree of data portability, [due process](#) [9], accountability and transparency of business policies and practices, defaults that align with [user expectations](#) [10], and the right to use privacy enhancing technologies ([free-association.net](#))

But perhaps more fundamental than even outlining rights was the discussion of why participants are creating this document in the first place. The process reflects growing acceptance that the social network is more than a tool of procrastination: it has become a tool of activism, publicity, and even productivity. Many social networks are now mainstream – grandparents are on Facebook – and mainstream services have important responsibilities. No longer scrappy start-ups, many social networks hold incredibly detailed dossiers on millions, or even [hundreds of millions](#) [11], of users.

But the growth of social networks has not always been matched by a maturation of business practices. Multiple social networks have been caught playing fast and loose with user data, but without a set of clearly defined best practices, discussions about improving the track record of these nascent social media sites has floundered.

A Bill of Rights would provide a benchmark for social networks and a consistent starting point for conversations about user expectations. Ideally, company privacy policies and terms of service would have provided this starting point, but some social networks have gotten into the habit of changing these documents--literally overnight--rendering them useless as tools for user empowerment. A Bill of Rights would create a set of clearly defined rules that social networks could strive to implement and that users could seek to defend.

- [user empowerment](#)
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- [tbp](#)

- [social networks](#)
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- [bill of rights](#)

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Links:

- [1] http://www.cfp2010.org/wiki/index.php/Main_Page
- [2] <http://cfp.acm.org/wordpress/?p=341>
- [3] <http://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2010/05/bill-privacy-rights-social-network-users>
- [4] <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/05/21/EDMT1DHE16.DTL>
- [5] http://www.pcworld.com/article/196798/a_bill_of_rights_for_facebook_users.html
- [6] http://free-association.net/index.php?option=com_associations&task=displayAssociation&id=793
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