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How Facebook's Newest Feature Could Change the Internet

By *Derek Thompson*

Did Facebook just conquer the Web?

Once a mere online yearbook, Facebook has recently grown to become the most trafficked domain on the Internet. But that was just the prelude. The next chapter starts this week, with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg announcing a new application that could plant Facebook plug-ins on every square inch of the Internet and let publishers share and collect the public data of each user. "Facebook is basically going to be the Web," wrote Slate tech columnist Farhad Manjoo on Twitter.

Here's the change you'll notice: websites like Yelp and Slate and CNN will start dropping social "plug-ins" -- little Facebook widgets -- into their sites. This way, you can see what your friends have read and liked. As Slate's editor David Plotz [explained](#) in a note to readers, "just press the Facebook 'Like' button at the bottom of any story, add a comment if you want, and approve it: A post saying that you have 'Liked' the story will appear on your Facebook wall and as part of your news feed." If that doesn't sound terribly revolutionary, it's because it isn't. Plug-ins for other social media sites like Digg already exist on many websites.

But wait, there's more.

Facebook will allow website developers to collect and use our information when we connect to a site. When I press the "like" button, that goes into [social clearinghouse](#) of information. Other sites can see the articles I like on CNN, the music I like on Pandora, the food I like on Yelp ... and that's in addition to any information I make public on my Facebook profile. The Facebook team calls this application "Open Graph." You can call it the future of marketing.

What does this mean for privacy? Open Graph initially sounds pretty invasive. But remember that everything that flows into this reservoir of content is already public. Facebook's new policy doesn't make your private information public. It makes your public information *a lot more public*. Content that was once between you and your pal's news feed is now playing all your friends' CNN Facebook plug-ins and sloshing around in a matrix of information. "Public no longer means public on Facebook,"

says Mashable's Christina Warren. "It means public in the Facebook ecosystem. My advice to you: Be aware of your privacy settings."

What does it mean for websites and advertisers? That's the billion-dollar question. For now, the honest thing is to say we don't know. The Facebook ecosystem will run on a living, breathing [semantic memory](#) of its users' likes. Sounds like an ad goldmine. Maybe this could pave the way toward true targeted advertising: browsing CNN on my smart phone in Dupont, a mobile ad pops up with a happy hour coupon for a restaurant I said I liked on Yelp. Or imagine a better news aggregation site: a waterfall of links with all of the articles "liked" by friends who self-identify as conservative on Facebook. [Facebook search engine](#)? It's not out of the question.

Facebook, I once wrote, is a bit like a Middle Eastern country sitting on top of an ocean of oil. But instead of oil, it holds information. Facebook feels a business-driven pressure to let outsiders (ad companies) drill deep into its reserves to learn about our music and activities and news-reading habit, so they can shove Coldplay tickets in front of Coldplay fans and job listings in front of college seniors, and so forth. Open Graph is a step in that direction.

Zuckerberg thinks public information is the new "social norm." So he assumes we do, as well. But most Americans are pretty jealous about their private information. That's precisely why the nation erupted in apoplectic howling when our photos and numbers were [suddenly upchucked](#) onto the World Wide Web as Facebook purged regional networks. That anger will only be magnified if we suspect that advertisers are pooling our public information in the name of "customizing user experience."

Facebook envisions the Internet as a fundamentally, inescapably social experience. That's Zuckerberg's vision. The question is, will we *like* it?

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