

Facebook weakness



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BUSTER**

As Facebook expands, with 250 million users posting 1 billion pieces of content every week, the site continues to draw sharp criticism from privacy advocates, lawyers, and governments over how it uses the data that members regularly - and often cavalierly - post onto the site. This week five California Facebook users joined the chorus of critics. In a lawsuit filed Monday, they charge that Facebook - the Web's dominant social networking ecosystem - unlawfully used their private information or intellectual property without consent.

What's more, they claim, Facebook is merely a data mining and marketing machine that masquerades as a social networking service. Facebook has become omnipresent on the Web. "At least one family member in nearly every internet-savvy household is on it," says Leslie Harris, CEO of the Center for Democracy and Technology, writing this week on Wired.com. The breakneck growth of the site over the past five years has come with intense scrutiny.

Facebook has been criticized for how it has shared user information not only with third-party vendors but also between users not in one another's network. Facebook does collect user information to share with third parties, according to its terms of service. Some users have complained that their images have been usurped unknowingly and used in advertisements that appear on the site.

One married user's image was recently placed on an ad for "hot singles" - an ad that subsequently appeared on her husband's Facebook page. Only about 20 percent of members use Facebook's privacy settings to control who can

view their personal information. But even with strict privacy controls, it's tough to prevent how your images will be used, experts say. Privacy groups and some of the site's own members have vigilantly monitored Facebook policies.

When Facebook changed its terms of service earlier this year - a revision that appeared to give it broad ownership over users' content even after they deleted their accounts - the Electronic Privacy Information Center in Washington threatened to file a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission. Facebook retreated and agreed to allow for greater user participation in drafting new policies. A Canadian commission has also challenged Facebook over its policies. It recommended that the site make it easier for users to remove accounts and all related personal information. It also asked the company to more explicitly explain to