

# Facebook – A Personal Responsibility©

Alan J. Rosenthal, 2010

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## Interview of Alan J. Rosenthal

- 1. SB: An estimated 500 million people are on Facebook, but most of them probably don't consider the privacy risks associated with it. In your opinion, is Facebook a positive tool or is it dangerous?**

AR: Facebook is neither safe nor dangerous. It is neutral. People are the components which make Facebook, other social networking and dating sites dangerous. With that statement, the average person thinks about "bad" people and criminals. It is better to consider yourself and how you open the door to victimization on these sites.

Here is a metaphor that makes this idea clear. If you park your car in a dark area of the parking lot and leave your wallet or purse on the front seat with the doors unlocked, you can expect to come out from the store and find your wallet or purse missing. If your doors were locked, you may have to replace the smashed window. Usually, your wallet or purse has personally identifiable information which opens you to the potential for identity theft. If we accept the fact that there are bad people out there doing bad things to other people, then we must accept some responsibility for protecting ourselves. Just as we can choose to take our wallets with us and not park in a secluded area, we can be careful about what information we leave on our cyber dashboard and who sees it. Still, even parking in a well-lit area doesn't mean one's car won't be stolen but it decreases the chances of victimization.

- 2. SB: We've heard a lot lately about the privacy risks associated with Facebook. In your experience, what are some specific privacy risks of having Facebook profiles?**

AR: Among many others, Facebook and other social media sites where individuals are providing personal information have ties to crimes which include identity theft, property theft, fraud, embezzlement, stalking, home break-ins, infidelity, blackmail, crimes against children, rape, runaways, kidnapping, murder, assault, bullying, and women and child sex trafficking, to name a few.

Other non-crime issues are not limited to a general loss of privacy, loss of employment opportunities, loss of social standing, and embarrassment. Every day, all over the world, professional hackers for governments and international criminal organizations are looking for ways to gain access to your personal information. Since you are so kind to put it in a public space, you have made the trespasser's job easier.

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### 3. **SB: As a private detective and privacy consultant, do you advocate Facebook profiles or do you discourage individuals from posting their personal information on the Internet?**

AR: I have a Facebook profile AND I discourage individuals from posting personal information on the Internet. As privacy issues surrounding Facebook change, I alter my privacy settings. When people are in trouble, I often counsel them to go private. They don't have to delete their profiles but they can tighten their privacy settings. There is an inverse relationship between one's overall privacy awareness and their privacy settings. The less aware and active about one's own privacy, the tighter their privacy protections should be.

From purely an investigator's point of view, it is helpful for me when everyone has a full profile of accurate personal information.

### 4. **SB: How can people protect themselves on Facebook? What do you recommend for using Facebook safely?**

AR: Think of the guy hiding in the darkened doorway waiting to rob someone. He is not looking for the gang of strong, armed men walking down the street. Rather, he is looking for that single woman or couple who are laughing and not paying attention. He is looking for senior citizens who cannot protect themselves. He is sizing up his prey. Internet predators use the same tactics. Rather than hide in doorways, they are in the comfort of their homes reading profiles, making contact and gaining trust while they plan their next attack. Perpetrators are both known and unknown to their victims.

Always ask yourself if the information you are posting could possibly be harmful if a criminal got hold of it. Ask yourself if it is necessary for that information to be on your Facebook page. Take the time to set all of the Facebook privacy settings. It's a pain but a good thing to do. Of course, do not friend people who don't have some connection to you already. Use good sense. If you have hundreds of friends, 50 percent of them never communicate with you. Feel free to *unfriend* these people. If they get upset, just send them a nice note with a short explanation. Most will never even realize you are gone. It is better to have 40 people who you really like and enjoy than 400 people who are only there so you will have a lot of friends listed on your Facebook page.

Many people enjoy the games and applications on Facebook. I do not. There is only one reason these applications exist and that is to gather personal information for marketing purposes. These are usually third-party associates of Facebook. Facebook has no control over the collection or security of the data stored at these other companies. Downloading applications and toolbars often opens your computer to malware such as viruses, trojans and keyloggers.

Others can connect you to Groups without your knowledge. These groups can access your friends list and see your personal data. It is a good practice to review your friends, groups and likes and remove any unknown or outdated connections. Again, this is not a fun task but a useful one.

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**5. SB: Many companies today, including credit card companies, offer identity theft protection. Is it possible to steal someone's identity through Facebook?**

AR: Yes, one's identity (personally identifiable information) can be compromised using information found on Facebook. There is key data that is needed to steal one's identity for the purpose of financial fraud. This data includes name, date of birth, current address, previous address, social security number, employer, relatives and photo. A thief only needs some of these, not all of them. With easy to purchase personal reports and a little social engineering, a thief could easily impersonate another person. This could result in fraudulent driver's licenses, birth certificates, passports, credit cards and even the transfer of real estate and bank accounts.

Once identity theft has taken place, numerous problems begin to snowball. One client was receiving court summonses and fines for his parking tickets and failures to appear in court. None of these were his in reality. The identity thief made a photocopy of my client's driver's license when he checked into a motel. After the thief took the photocopy to a corrupt New Jersey Motor Vehicles agent, he then bought vehicles using my client's credit. It took a long time to repair the damage to his credit and court records. After I located the identity thief in Newark, NJ, I gave the file to the U.S. Postal Inspectors. He was prosecuted and sent to prison.

On credit card identity theft protection, those offers you get from credit card companies or late night television ads are a waste of money. They do not protect you and they do not really pay if you have a problem. It is a federal law that you are entitled to receive one free credit report each year. The only site to get this at is [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com). You are the one who must review and analyze your data periodically. Otherwise it is like driving a car with air bags but not buckling your seat belts.

**6. SB: Also, why do you think Americans are so quick to share personal information on the Internet through Facebook?**

AR: Facebook has a lot of positive aspects. I've found old friends. I let my clients know when I am speaking and what investigative information might be important to them. I receive news, politics, sports and entertainment information on Facebook. Many people and organizations communicate with me through their postings. So, Facebook has a positive side.

People enjoy these positive aspects. Unfortunately, people tend to fill out forms simply because there is a space for the information, thinking that they are obligated to provide personal data or services and benefits will not be available to them. People are generally trusting and do not take time to consider how to thwart criminals.

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### 7. **SB: Why do you believe college students are so open to publicly displaying their private information online?**

AR: Many of the positive aspects I just spoke about are the same for college students. Still, many people have lost a sense of community. Many of you have experienced walking through the mall with your friends and everyone is talking or texting on their phones. They are standing or driving right next to their friends yet they are occupying themselves with someone many miles away. Facebook allows people to connect with others while keeping their distance. Another aspect is the need to be noticed. People want to be social. To be social is to give out some amount of information to the world. People are voyeuristic; they want to see what others are doing. From my experience in classrooms, Facebook and Twitter allow students to be somewhere else while their professor is trying to teach them.

### 8. **SB: How often do you deal with a Facebook related issue? What is a typical Facebook situation like?**

AR: Private investigators and police departments all over the world use Facebook to help solve a myriad of cases not limited to the long list discussed earlier.

Investigators use Facebook to help people. A defamation of character case I consulted on recently included reading years of Facebook and Twitter postings to determine who was harming my client's character and who had relationships with whom. MySpace and dating sites are also helpful in finding people or finding out about people. A few years ago, a corporation was vandalized. I was able to view the social networking site of the vandals. They posted their photos of the crime, drugs and the vandals standing next to the damage. These photos were provided to the company for prosecution. A recent child rape case required my reading the rapist's Facebook postings to make connections to his friends.

### 9. **SB: Overall, what is your opinion of Facebook in general?**

AR: Facebook has advantages and disadvantages. We don't want to live our lives in fear. We want to be social and have fun. It is the individual's responsibility to learn about safety online which includes the ins and outs of Facebook. We should maintain a healthy balance of social and security. It is the same as texting while driving. Texting is fine. Driving is fine. Texting while driving will kill you, a loved one or a stranger. Reading texts is texting. Highway or Facebook, you need to navigate the roads and cyberspace responsibly.

*Alan J. Rosenthal, an Asheville, NC resident, is a former private investigator and process server with thirty-five years of experience assisting litigants and victims and over two decades in transportation. Alan is an Investigative and Personal Privacy Consultant. He is also a residential and commercial Realtor. Alan teaches Realtor® Safety at the Land of the Sky Association of REALTORS®. Please call to book consulting appointments and speaking engagements.*

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