What Happens When Architectural Questions Are Not Asked?

by Thom Haller, Associate Editor for IA

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This past fall, I disappeared from Facebook. It wasn’t intentional; I like the connections with old friends, the content friends send my way and posting my own photos and observations. Last November, for example, I posted all sorts of interesting photos – vivid foliage, images from my 11.11.11 adventures and unusual signs (such as one with an arrow that said “dirt”). During this period, I dropped in random content about my urban life (such as my experience sharing a bus stop with a man who muttered while peeling hard-boiled eggs). Important Facebook content, right?

But, did these images or comments receive any comments or likes?

Nope. Nothing.

How sad. I battled ennui and loss for a while but then wondered if the lack of content had to do with a recent Facebook upgrade. I decided to investigate. First I inquired via email. “How come I never hear from you anymore on Facebook?” I asked a friend.

“How come you no longer post?” she responded.

Aha. Something was amiss. I went sleuthing into new privacy options to find out more. The privacy screen (Figure 1) gave several options. In one cluster I had the choices Public, Friends, Only Me and Custom. In another cluster of information I had these choices: All, Close Friends and See all lists.

What’s the difference between these labels?

In my head, I faced these questions: “What’s the difference between Public and All?” “Why am I offered two groupings?” “Are these classification schemes different or the same?” “Are there hierarchical or associative relationships between the first and second set of links?” “Has anyone at Facebook considered this architectural quandary?”

I selected All. I made this choice because I didn’t care to filter content and figured I would allow All to see my content. Wrong. In this Facebook interface, All means nothing.

What was going on with the architectural relationships in these screens? I posed my questions online, and one of my former students, Jeremy Cluchey, sent this response:
“I believe All in the second grouping refers to all your Lists – which you would need to have set up, assigning friends to different lists, for that to work effectively. Lists were FB’s answer to Google’s Circles, but I don’t think they have been widely understood or used.”

When I work with students to structure information, we often ask what clusters of labels might be called. Typically, we find mutual understanding about why information is clustered together if the content has an understandable label.

So I asked, if the second cluster of information shows Lists, what would the first cluster be called? Jeremy provided his perspective:

“I guess I’d call the first group Who can see this? That should be the default options list for users, with choices like Everyone, Friends of Friends, Friends, No one (just yourself) and a custom option that lets you exclude specific people by name… such as share with all my friends EXCEPT for these friends.”

What’s the relationship between these clusters of information?

What about the relationship between the two clusters, Who Can See This? and Lists? Obviously, that’s the architectural challenge that prompted my user error. Even with new labels, I have to ask, “Don’t the choices Who Can See This? and Lists mean the same thing? Or is there a hierarchy? These are questions that all developers of communication products need to ask, even if they do not go by the label “information architect.”

This Facebook example shows what happens when these questions are not asked. If they were, the information might reveal hierarchical relationships rather than equivalent groupings that confused me. My student Jeremy suggested a hierarchy that could be viewed by users via a secondary prompt, such as Use Friend Lists. Here’s his suggestion:

You could offer choices like Everyone, Friends of Friends, Friends and Custom. If you select either Friends or Custom, I’d then offer a secondary prompt, something like USE FRIENDS LISTS. Clicking that would reveal all friend lists set up by the user, and you could narrow among your friends this way (if you wanted to).

Update on My Facebook Status

I’m not surprised to learn that Facebook has changed the way people can adjust their privacy settings. As it has shifted more toward new Timeline views, it has also narrowed my choices for who can see what. Gone is the nefarious All option that caused my hardship. But the unnecessary complications remind us that information architects have the opportunity to make the complex clear. And there’s a lot of work to be accomplished.”