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## **FROM ANONYMITY TO SELF-DISCLOSURE; RECONTEXTUALISATION OF COMMUNICATION IN NEW MEDIA**

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### **Abstract**

Social Web applications are becoming an important communication tool for managing diverse personal and other information among users. The so-called participative culture is a brand new setting calling for intense interactivity. Well-informed citizens with ideas for collaboration is welcomed. The collaboration and sharing of ideas, information and opinions are well documented even in more personal Social Web applications, such as Facebook. Here we are confronting with the problem of privacy and potential harmful or risky behavior. Multimedia production with multimedia convergence of different online communication tools (Social web, forums, online chat, digital photography) has unified communication channels and converged different communication setting. Once strongly separate divisions among different communication setting (private-public) has disappeared. The so-called »privacy paradox« states that while internet users are concerned about privacy, their behavior do not reflect these concerns. Additionally, the divisions between different social groups (friends, parents, employers) are blurring, primary because of interconnectivity of different Social Web applications. Facebook users hardly guess who are their exact audience. The transmission of information intended for one group can be transferred into other context. It has to be mentioned that Facebook users are highly diverse and so are diverse their attitudes toward privacy concerns and willingness to self-disclose. Research indicate that users are to some extent aware of privacy problems, but researches also indicate that general social relevance of particular Social Web applications and personal aspects of general willingness to self-disclose are the major contextual factors influencing users how to communicate in social networking sites such as Facebook.

**Key words:** Social Web, self-disclosure, privacy paradox, Facebook

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## **Introduction; anonymity is a past**

Anonymity is nowadays not any more the main attraction of new media. We are faced with kind of reframing of certain activities on-line. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the main goal why participate in virtual worlds (discussion forums, chat-rooms) was to hide, to mask, to disguise ourselves. Disembodiment (especially anonymity) was – as already mentioned – the main attraction. Today we are faced with so-called collaborative culture based upon Web 2.0. Accordingly to this new climate we are faced with different kind of activities performed by on-line individuals: to share, to collaborate, to link, to like (as it is in the case of Facebook). There are many researches trying to explain communicative motivations and characteristics of social media, even the construction of »popularity« on social networking sites, which is reflected through the number of Facebook friends.<sup>2</sup>

In the early ages of the Internet one of the greatest motivations why study and research life online was the specific set of new environment parameters, such as virtuality, different status of spatiality, disembodiment. Disembodiment for example signifies »that a person's online identity is apparently separate from their physical presence, a condition associated with two features: textuality and anonymity« (Slater, 2004: 533-537). Textuality as a precondition for identity switching, for masking identities and as a kind of a »safe« playground for reinventing our own identities is well documented in early researches, as well as fully elaborated in scientific works (Praprotnik, 2004). These brand new contextual parameters has driven the early researches and considerations in the field of computer-mediated communication (to name a few: Baym, 1998; Cooper, 1997; Danet, 1998, Jones, 1997; Parks, Floyd, 1996; Praprotnik, 2003; Rheingold, 2000; Turkle, 1995).

## **Participative culture**

One of crucial and defining elements and activities of new media cultures established via Web 2.0 is collaboration. This has influence upon transforming key activities and statuses, specially in the light of individuals: we know the traditional media category, such as the category »audience«, and subsequently new media category named »user«. New media technology with its possibilities shapes and fosters new cultural connections and relations, previously more or less overlooked. The process of multimedia production has been introduced

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<sup>2</sup> The role of popularity in social networking sites such as *Facebook* is discussed in detail in: Scott, Graham G., More Than Friends: Popularity on Facebook and its Role in Impression Formation, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 19, 2014, p. 358-372.

through a different types of inclusion promised in the technological forms. We are faced with the transformed »intimacy« of new media cultures too, which presents further evidence for a new and unstable, to a some respect a blurring divisions between public and private sphere of communication. World Wide Web as a multimedia form has absorbed many other media (Praprotnik, 2014, 138-139). So-called participative culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civil engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices (Jenkins, 2011). We are going to focus attention to one form of participative culture, that is affiliations (formal and informal memberships in online communities, Facebook). The popular word for Facebook and for other toward social interaction oriented applications is Social Web.

### **The blurring social media, the blurring context**

The social media, specially social networks, such as Facebook are very popular because their common objective is foremost social interaction and user-generated content. These social networks consist of the user's experiences, photographs, knowledge, but also rather private information such as contacts, private photographs and so on. The divisions between private and public space, the divisions between leisure and labor and divisions between private and public communication correspondingly has almost disappeared. Additionally the awareness of the individual that he is »on stage« or »off-stage« and his efforts for impression formation (cf. Goffman, 1959) has been also disappeared. More exactly, individuals are always »on-stage«, always on-line.

User-generated information and photos, opinions and other material are digitally stored and therefore persistent, replicable, searchable as well as shareable (Taddicken, 2014: 250). Newest research has shown that users are indeed concerned about their privacy within the Social Web, but do not apply these concerns to their usage behavior correspondingly. »Facebook is deeply integrated in users' daily lives through specific routines and rituals. Users claimed to understand privacy issues, yet reported uploading large amounts of personal information. Risks to privacy invasion were ascribed more to others than to the self« (Debatin et al, 2009: 1). Such behavior is commonly known as the »privacy paradox«. Research generally indicate that privacy concerns hardly impact self-disclosure, i.e. providing personal information in the Social Web (Taddicken, 2014, 248).

## **Communication and self-disclosure are grounds for establishing relationships; What about Facebook?**

To communicate means to provide information as well as to build relationships. Let us quote Duncan: »people do not relate then talk, people relate in talk« (Duncan, 1967: 249). Communication has informational as well as relational aspect. By communicating with You, I establish relations with You too. Communication is the place where relationships are build and transmission of information about oneself or one's own thoughts and feelings is needed to produce social ties. In transmission of such information and observations we transmiss also relational aspect of the relationship, for example: »I see you as a trustworthy person so I decide to provide you with my deepest thoughts and feelings«. The level of disclosure reflects the level of the relationships. Deep relationship, deep self-disclosure.

Self-disclosure is the result of the consideration of risks and utility and there is often a tension between the desire to self-disclose on the one hand and the desire to protect privacy on the other (Taddicken, 2014, 249). Self-disclosure is a dynamic element in a process of building and maintaining relationships. The reciprocity of self-disclosure is crucial element. Additionally the desire to control who collects and distributes information about the self is important too, so privacy is a dynamic process of negotiation between retreat and disclosure.

Now we have to rethink what happened in virtual environment of social media, such as Facebook? The potential availability of the self-disclosed information over space and time is – specially due to digitalization-significantly greater on the internet. Information are digitalized and therefore persistent and permanently searchable. Digitalization enables and simplifies the combination of different information from various applications and this leads to a problem of recontextualisation of self-disclosure (Taddicken, 2014: 250).

### **Recontextualisation of self-disclosure in social networking sites (Facebook)**

The huge and unlimited discursive space of the social networking sites (which can be labeled the Social Web because their common objective is primary social interaction) means also the heterogeneity of the audience. In face-to-face communication, for example, we are faced with more or less fixed, unchangeable and controlled audience. Congruently to our (more or less homogenous) audience we also perform our verbal and nonverbal performance, i.e. our verbal and non-verbal information transmitted to our audience. Our selection of information is primary oriented toward our audience and their expectations towards us. Every

audience transforms our performance a little bit. In a workplace we construct our communication in line with expectations of our co-workers, in playing with our children we again transform our performance toward expectations of sons and daughters and so on. Social expectations we are trying to fulfill depend in large proportion upon people we are interacting with. What happened in social networking sites? Do we still have homogenous audience when communicating via Facebook wall or when we publish our thoughts to our Facebook friends? Do we still know for sure which persons constitute our intended audience?

As has been already acknowledged communication and self-disclosure on social networking sites frequently occurs in heterogeneous setting consisting of different social relationships, for example friends, family members, colleagues. Therefore self-disclosure is manifested to a heterogeneous audience and it is often unclear who and how many persons are included among audience due to spatial and temporal separation (Taddicken, 2014: 250). This phenomena is known as »context collapse«. What does it mean? The very context at least partly direct language use, therefore the type of information we proceed to our audience. The loss of fixed context means that the audience that is assumed or intended by the self-discloser may differ from the audience that is actually reached. Because of interconnectedness the actually reached audience is usually bigger than intended audience. The problem arises: »What was introduced in the context of close friends, for example, party pictures or opinion about sensitive topics, can become a problem in communication setting with other reference groups such as parents or employers« (Taddicken, 2014: 250).

### **What kind of personal information users disclose in Facebook? Which factors predict their level of self-disclosure?**

Different studies indicate different percentage of self-disclosure in social networking sites. Additionally, there are different types of internet platforms; among others blog or weblog is the most popular. Here the self-disclosure is rather self evident. Researches indicate that personal experiences and private information make up the majority of blog content. As some research suggest »bloggers who exhibit both extraversion and self-disclosure traits tend to maintain larger strong-tie social networks and are more likely to appropriate blogs to support those relationships. Age, gender, and education have no relationship to network size, blog content, or the use of blogs as a relationship maintenance tool [...] rather than promoting isolation, computer-mediated communication tools such as blogs often function to enhance existing relationships« (Stefanone, 2008: 1). Given the fact that different Social Web applications have converged into unified platform (consisting

the option for uploading the photographs, to write a blog, to chat...) it is more useful to differentiate between different forms of self-disclosure than between different Social Web applications. In doing so we are approaching towards individual, socio-psychological and cultural motivations for self-disclosure. In focusing on individual motivations we also reject the tempting approach to interpret different types of self-disclosure in light of technologic characteristic of various applications, which leads toward technological determinism.

Firstly we have to point out that all personal information are not sensitive at the same level. Information that can easily be found or that might be obvious (gender, age), must not be treated the same as more intimate information such as private photos or feelings. The perception of information as sensitive is highly dependent upon person. We have to differentiate special settings, for example wider, public access (unknown audience) or self-disclosure to only specific individuals who are friends. This is very common distinction.

It is more or less obvious that users who are concerned about their online privacy will present no or just a few personal information on the Social Web; persons therefore to a great extent transmiss already established communication practices into Social Web. There is an ongoing transfer of mental and experience patterns that are typical of situations outside virtual culture, also into spaces, relationships and communication interactions within computer-mediated communication. The matrix of Internet situations and meanings consequently represents nothing more but an up-to-date continuation of the »original« matrix, i.e. the matrix of pre-virtual worlds, since the individuals in front of PC screens have not, in fact, undergone any change whatsoever. And this is why virtual culture is still regarded more as an element or extension of real culture, rather than an absolute alternative to it (Praprotnik, 2003: 164). Generally speaking Social Web users consider protection of their privacy to be important but – contrary to expectations – rarely allow their privacy concerns to affect their online behavior, for example to reveal less information (Taddicken, 2014: 251; Debatin, 2009).

### **Social context (social relevance of Social Web applications) and communication partners as a factor for self-disclosure**

»Privacy behavior is an upshot of both social influences and personal incentives. Students are more likely to have a private profile if their friends and roommates have them; women are more likely to have private profiles than are men; and having a private profile is associated with a higher level of online activity« (Lewis et al, 2008:1)



What are social and individual motivations for self-disclosure, which is apparently not in line with proclaimed awareness about dangers of self-disclosure in social networking sites? Research suggest different explanations for such behavior, ranging from personal characteristics (a lack of problem or risk awareness, lack of knowledge about protection - such as changing the privacy settings -, or lack of knowledge concerning published information due to ignorance of data protection guidelines) to a more social guided motivations. As Monika Taddicken elaborates, privacy concerns are under strong influence of the social context, not only under personal attitudes toward privacy and self-disclosure. To be sure, the level of personal information one is disclosing depends on the communication partners (cf. Lewis et al, 2008) and on the specific communication situations. Additionally a reciprocity is a major force for self-disclosure. Namely people are more attracted to revealing personalities and have tendency to match each other in exchanging discourses. This process proceeds on a basis of equality – “You tell me and I tell you” (Taddicken, 2014: 252). These kind of reciprocity was documented even in rather anonymous social networks, in communication contexts such as discussion forums. The research by Barak and Ofry (2007:1) revealed that »reciprocity of self-disclosure was evident, yielding positive correlations between the measures of self-disclosure in messages and responses to them; some differences appeared in level of reciprocity of self-disclosure between male and female participants, with female respondents tending to be more reciprocal than male respondents«.

Additionally individuals experience social pressure to participate in the Social Web applications when their social environment is using it, so that they do not feel socially excluded. These kind of social pressure is frequently documented among scholars, which use specific media contents to fulfill communication patterns and to involve themselves into their own social environment. David Z. Mindich in his book *Tuned Out; Why Americans Under 40 Don't Follow the News* made a series of interviews with young people in order to understand better the problem of media use by young generations, especially it investigated their disengagement with news. Instead of news they intensively follow various reality shows, such as American Idol. The book tries to explain what are young people consuming instead of news and what drives their decisions about what to consume. Mindich explained why so many more people tune into entertainment than news and one of the main reason is a social (conversational) one. One scholar put the problem in a following way: »when your age peers do not follow the news, there is less incentive for you to do so, too« (Mindich, 2005: 64-65). News is not a

topic to talk about and is not a topic by which to enter and be in line with social group.

In light of this conclusions it is quite logical that users whose social environments assesses a specific Social Web application as important are also more likely to use and self-disclose within the same Social Web application. Additionally we have to acknowledge that young people are in a process of identity searching; therefore they wish to indicate their belonging to social group of friends, who are their so-called important Others. To be in line with your social group, it is crucial to perform the same type of activities, which count as an evidence of membership. To put this in a perspective of identity, we shall borrow a sentence from Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz: »identity inheres in actions, not in people« (Bucholtz, Hall, 2003, 376).

Social relevance of the group influence social relevance of the particular Social Web application. So the perceived relevance of the Social Web in one's social environment has to great extent considerable influence on one's level of self-disclosure. As Monika Taddicken states, »the perceived social relevance is assumed to be more important for the self-disclosure of sensitive information, such as thoughts and feelings, which are more intimate (Taddicken, 2014: 252).

Given the consideration of social relevance of different Social Web applications we have to distinguish between different applications, since a variety of applications asks for a variety of personal information, specially factual information. Therefore we can assume that individuals using different forms of Social Web applications disclose more factual information than users who concentrate on specific applications. Additionally we have to stress a general willingness to self-disclose, i.e. to let other people know something about oneself as a dispositional personal characteristic. As has been already stated persons to a great extent transmiss already established communication practices into Social Web. This observation shifts focus from technologically constructed environment to a more personal related issues in order to explain better communication (and consequently also personal) characteristics of users.

Let us conclude with quotation of Susan Herring: »technological determinism is problematic in that it glosses over contextual factors and social motivations that shape human behavior. Peer groups and social relations are arguably more influential during youth than at any other life stage, and young people use and think about technology differently

according to their cultural, economic, and family contexts« (Herring, 2008: 76).

Individual general willingness to self-disclose is therefore one of the factors for low/high self-disclosure. What about other so to say relevant individual characteristics, such as age?

We can assume that younger users have been more effectively domesticated Social Web applications. It is also assumed that individuals who use the Social Web more intensively are to expect to reveal more personal information. Social Web applications can be seen as a setting suitable for developing oneself through constant social interaction. The basis for this assumption can be found in characteristics of Social Web application (Facebook), which offers less-skilled young users additional environment for practicing and improving their »art of impression management« (Goffman, 1959). The high interactivity of such applications with constant feedbacks of friends and other people classified as friends offer an excellent environment to improve skills such as learning how to adjust their self-presentation according to the responses of others. Additionally, users are always Facebook friends of other users so constant comparison of strategies for impression management is available.

It is suspected that primary young users show a high degree of self-disclosure on the Social Web, specially the self-disclosure of sensitive information. Research conducted by Monika Taddicken surprisingly did not prove such assumption, namely age has hardly any effect on self-disclosure. Additionally, younger users do not use significantly more different Social Web applications, even though they have grown up with these. What is for us even more intriguing: research has shown that younger users only in small proportion disclose more personal information (Taddicken, 2014: 265).

### **Does gender count? Do users still reflect gender-based differences in social networking sites?**

It is also assumed that gender differences concerning the pattern of communication and type of information both gender are communicating with different social groups will be reflected on Social Web applications. Namely, in self-disclosure research women were found to be generally more willing to reveal personal information and more often than men, specially to known persons. Women more often tend to have a private social networking sites profile and they also seem to be more cautious about to whom they grant access to their profile information. It was also found that women are more sensible about privacy issues than men

(Taddicken, 2014: 265). Contrary Barak and Gluck-Ofri (2007) found only minor gender based differences in their analysis of discussion forums. It is worth to repeat quite indicative communication practice reflecting gender based pattern: »female respondents tending to be more reciprocal than male respondents« (Barak, Gluck-Ofri, 2007:1). This conclusion is somewhat in line with influential book written by Deborah Tannen *You Just Don't Understand; Women and Men in Conversation* (Tannen, 1990). Tannen has used a sociolinguistic approach in understanding male-female (mis) communication. Deborah Tannen has approached an array of male-female communication as a type of cross-cultural communication. Namely, Tannen believes that the best way to describe communication between the genders is in a cross-cultural format. Women and men use communication for different purposes, or, put differently, women and men understand communication as a manner for establishing (maintaining) different kind of things. Women use rapport talk to establish meaningful connection with others, while men use report talk to gain status in relation to others. Women engage in communication to build and maintain relationships with others, men are more likely to engage in talk to gain or preserve their status of independency. Women express emotions, share personal feelings, relate stories, and listen empathically (rapport talk). Men engage in competitive joking and assertive speech that wins control of the conversation (report talk). Men are (usually) good in directing other people, but they don't want to accept suggestions and commands from other people (specially from women). This kind of cross-cultural communication is well documented in various research concluding that gender differences concerning communication style is prevalent in online settings too. Besides gender based differences it is also gender harassment that has been a major problem in early years of computer-mediated communication (Herring, 1999). In the same vein we can assume that self-disclosure will be highly diverse as well. It is important to acknowledge that personal perception of intimacy is highly diverse; people differ in the content and variability of information they are providing in public/private settings. Tannen states that men tend to talk in high proportion in circumstances which are perceived as public, whereas women are generally more open and willing to self-disclose in more private, intimate circumstances, where the number of people in audience is smaller (Tannen, 1993). Quite interestingly, research have only in small proportion proven gender based differences concerning privacy issues and willingness to self-disclosure. In Monika Taddicken research »these gender differences only exist regarding the disclosure of sensitive information with access to the public« (Taddicken, 2014: 268).

## **Conclusions**

In exploring the privacy concerns of Social Web applications we have to differentiate between various forms of personal information; among them some are obligatory in many applications (such as names and profession). So-called sensitive private information are much more complex issue and these information are disclosed by considerably fewer users. It is worth noted too that self-disclosure are subject of different individual and social circumstances. Social relevance of application tool is by no means the crucial factor influencing users to self-disclose. Friends and other social relevant users affect upon user's attitudes toward self-disclosure. It is useful to differentiate various applications on the ground of private/public access. Namely it is crucial to distinguish between public self-disclosure and self-disclosing behavior in clear defined communities where users feel safe. We have to differentiate various privacy concerns, from so-called fear of identity theft and the fear of privacy invasion from known people (Taddicken, 2014) (the question of context collapse, blurring divisions between different audience, for example information intended for friends, which are distributed to boss). At the end we have to point out the general factor: personal characteristics and general willingness to self-disclose is a major factor in the field of self-disclosure. The compelling conclusions found in recent researches are also that age is not so important factor in self-disclosure, since it is usually assumed (and in media press broadly covered) that younger users are more generous in transmitting their personal information and less concerned about their privacy<sup>3</sup>. However it is important for further development of Social Web applications to clearly differentiate applications concerning privacy issues. It is important for users to know exactly who is their audience. Nevertheless it is possible that personal details merges into other contexts. Individual attitudes, willingness and »openness« of the users is quite unpredictable variable; much more it has to be done in the field of implementing successful manual for different Social Web applications.

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<sup>3</sup> These concerns are discussed in detail in Herring, 2008.

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