

Social Media, Privacy, and Self-Disclosure: The Turbulence Caused by Social Media's Affordances

Social Media + Society
April-June 2015: 1-2
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DOI: 10.1177/2056305115578681
sms.sagepub.com


Sabine Trepte

Abstract

The struggle we currently perceive in terms of social media privacy may be the result of the incompatible natures of “warm” and “cold” affordances. Whereas social media’s warm affordances reflect long-standing privacy routines and expectations, cold affordances seem to challenge and sometimes violate them. Sharing under the realm of warm affordances means sharing according to the routines and habits we know. Sharing under the realm of cold affordances means understanding social media’s terms and conditions and how they reflect on our relationships and experiences - similar to assimilating to a new culture that seems opaque and constantly in flux.

Keywords

privacy, self-disclosure, affordances, social media

Privacy and the negotiations bound to it are elements of all social interactions. Can I say what I think, and do I mean what I say? Who knows my secret? Will I get support in bad times? Some of the most moving questions we face in life reflect questions of privacy. But also, day-to-day questions refer to privacy, such as the following: Do I feel I have to hide my diary or my photo archive? Is there somebody I can talk to about what happened at home this morning?

With respect to privacy, communication can be understood as an optimizing process in which we strive to achieve our ideal level of privacy while assessing our achieved level of privacy. Whereas this behavioral calculus happens more or less in the backs of our minds, disclosure is the overt behavior at the front-end. With self-disclosure, we adjust and steer our privacy needs. Privacy is optimized as we tell others about ourselves or withdraw from them. We negotiate physical boundaries as well as psychological, social, or informational boundaries.

Social media challenge our understanding of privacy and our privacy routines. The former boundaries between what is public and what is private become blurred. Interacting with peers in different peer networks becomes complicated. Social media seem to have two kinds of affordances, in other words, potential forms of use. First, social media offer affordances that refer to social media functions. These affordances invite us to comment on others’ status updates on social network

sites, upload pictures, and tag friends or the restaurant we visited. These affordances are easy to grasp and are similar to human experiences with relationships. They may be termed “warm affordances,” which allow us to network, share, keep in touch, or interact. In this warmth, the peers we refer to are “personal publics,” the felt and subjective audience of friends. Second, social media rely on a legal architecture that is laid down in a website’s terms and conditions of use. These imply the users’ and the website’s agreement about privacy. Here, they agree on who owns the data that users upload, to whom such data may be sold, and who has the right to delete this information. This agreement is an integral part of social media use, and as such, an affordance of use. The social media architecture of how the website and the user share and interact determines how friends interact on social media. For example, a picture I uploaded on a social network site now belongs to the web service and no longer belongs to me. Whenever my friends see the picture, I make a decision for them that is based on the terms and conditions of the web service. However, these affordances seem more complex,

University of Hohenheim, Germany

Corresponding Author:

Sabine Trepte, School of Communication, University of Hohenheim,
70599 Stuttgart, Germany.
Email: sabine.trepte@uni-hohenheim.de



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obscure, and often counterintuitive—far from users' daily experience. In contrast to the experiential quality of warm affordances, they may be termed "cold affordances."

I suppose that the struggle we currently perceive in terms of social media privacy is the result of the incompatible natures of warm and cold affordances. Whereas social media's warm affordances reflect long-standing privacy routines and expectations, cold affordances seem to challenge and sometimes violate them.

Challenges to privacy are not new, though. Throughout the socialization of an individual, privacy needs and behaviors are constantly challenged by face-to-face interactions or over the course of individual development. During an interaction, a privacy breach (e.g. revealing a friend's secret) can happen. Here, the privacy breach causes turbulence and challenges the behavioral calculus of what level of privacy is ideal with the friend and how the relationship is further defined. Such turbulence is solved by communicating with the microsystem of friends or by making individual adjustments, such as never telling this person a secret again.

Whereas the challenges to privacy routines in interactions and socialization are as old as our understanding of privacy, the turbulence caused by social media is somewhat new. Communicating in social media means experiencing warm affordances such as sharing and networking on the one hand. On the other, it means communicating under conditions of cold affordances and as such accepting that all is shared with an unknown company that sells personal information at an unknown price. It implies the risk that information can be forwarded to unknown third parties, saved, retrieved, and might never be forgotten. As stated above, the challenges to privacy demand communication with the microsystem and individual adjustments. However, with social media turbulence, the solution is more complex. When facing social media privacy breaches, we also need metacommunication—communication about communication: How do we handle private information online? Do we share pictures of our friends? Do we forward information from last night? An overall understanding of how things are handled in social media requires negotiation. In addition, users must interact

with the website provider, for example, adjusting privacy settings and understanding that nothing can be deleted and that all content now belongs to the website. By adjusting our privacy settings on a social network site, managing our friends lists, or opting out of certain services, we are negotiating privacy with the website. At the same time, this determines how we lead and maintain our relationships. Then, finally, metacommunication in public contexts is needed. People today negotiate about what they think is acceptable to share publicly in the media, public discussion forums, schools, law-making, and politics and whether their needs are reflected by social media affordances.

Social media cause turbulence in our privacy, and such turbulence results in communication. We engage in a large amount of privacy talk while sharing online. There is so much we are constantly learning. I suspect that the turbulence we are experiencing now in social media will become a part of our collective privacy calculus and that now is the time to negotiate.

Acknowledgements

This article was inspired by and based on the work of Joseph Altman, danah boyd, Judee Burgoon, Nicole Ellison, Eszter Hargittai, Robert S. Laufer, Maxine Wolfe, Zizi Papacharissi, Sandra Petronio, Jessica Vitak, Werner Wirth, and Thilo von Pape.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Author Biography

Sabine Trepte (PhD, University of Music, Drama, and Media, Hannover, Germany) is a Professor for Communication at the University of Hohenheim (Germany). Her research interests include privacy, self-disclosure, and political knowledge.