

Ethics and Social Networking: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Evaluating Online Information Disclosure

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ABSTRACT

Thanks to recent technological advancements, social networking has seen unprecedented growth. Services such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn have evolved from niche communities to active cyber-societies. In addition to an increase in the diffusion of social media, there has also been an increase in the amount and type of information that participants share in these online environments. In this paper, the authors integrate decision making research from three disciplines -marketing, theology and information systems - to explain information disclosure in online communities. They use these disciplines to provide a comprehensive review of existing literature and present innovative recommendations for research and practice. In particular, the authors recommend Potter's Box as a useful framework for evaluating the ethical implications of online information disclosure.

KEYWORDS

Ethics, Information Disclosure, Potter's Box, Privacy, Social Networking

INTRODUCTION

Participation in social networking has grown at an exponential rate in recent. In 2013, approximately three quarters of Internet users in the United States U.S. use social networking sites; this percentage is up from 67% in 2012 (Brenner & Smith, 2013). A new member joins LinkedIn every second (Qualman, 2011). And if Facebook was a country, it would be the world's third largest country (Qualman, 2011). Social networking sites have become mainstream with hundreds of millions of global members. Recognizing this trend, many companies have implemented social media tools for marketing, advertising, and employee recruitment. Approximately 93 percent of marketers use social media for business (Qualman, 2011). However, social networking goes beyond users and/or organizations simply signing up for an account. It involves user generated content delivered in a way that creates value for individuals and organizations by allowing them to make connections with others (Jantsch, 2010). As a result, services such as Facebook and Twitter have evolved from niche communities to active cyber-societies.

In addition to the unprecedented adoption rates among individuals, so, also is the information participants freely reveal within their "social community". Category based representations of an individual's broad interests are a uniform feature across most networking sites (Liu & Maes, 2005). These categories include, but are not limited to a person's hobbies, literary background, political views to name but a few. In addition, personally identifiable information (such as contact information) is

often times provided and intimate pictures of a person's private life and social circle are often displayed as well (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). This openness to reveal personal information to vast networks of loosely defined "friends" calls for a closer look at the ethical implications of the decision at hand. IS researchers have explored social networking in diverse contexts (Granovetter, 1973; Granovetter, 1983; Milgram, 1967, 1977; Watts, 2003). Specifically, (Boyd, 2003) investigates issues of trust and intimacy in online social networks, (Boyd, 2004; Donath & Boyd, 2004) focus on participants' strategic representation of themselves to others; and (Liu & Maes, 2005) discuss harvesting online social network profiles to obtain recommendations. In this study, we focus on the ethical decisions involved in participating in a social networking site. The implications on an individual's privacy are undeniable regarding the posting of personal information in an open environment as a social networking site, but to date the ethics involved with the decision to actively participate have not been examined. Previous research has demonstrated that online relationships develop in social networking sites despite perceived trust and privacy safeguards being weak (Dwyer, Hiltz, & Passerini, 2007). The implications of which become magnified and are of particular interest to both the private sector (marketers, clients, investors) and the public (legislation of privacy issues).

While social networking has received increasing attention over the last decade, few studies have juxtaposed the theories, findings and approaches used to study diverse social media initiatives. Further, there is a need to synthesize and organize extant literature to identify evolutionary patterns in the research and develop a cohesive and comprehensive research agenda to guide researchers worldwide in their quest for a better understanding of online information disclosure in online communities. This study provides an innovative approach to evaluating online information disclosure. We utilize three disciplines to provide a comprehensive review of existing literature and present innovative recommendations for research and practice. Our review of the literature identified the need for more qualitative studies from referent disciplines, such as theology. Hence, we present Potter's Box as a useful tool for future research on ethics, privacy and social networking.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss fundamental social networking concepts. Then we present a historical review of existing literature in information systems, marketing and theology. Next, we respond to the gaps in the literature by recommending Potter's box as a useful tool for future research.

SOCIAL NETWORKING, ETHICS AND PRIVACY: FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS

While social networking sites share the basic purpose of online interaction and communication, specific goals and patterns of usage vary significantly (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). The most common model is based on the presentation of the participant's profile and the visualization of his or her network of relations to others, such is the case with Facebook and Google+. For the purposes of this study, we define a social networking site as a web based service that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and share their social networks (D. M. Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This can result in connections between individuals that would not otherwise be made, but that is often not the goal, and these meetings are frequently between "latent ties" (Haythornthwaite, 2005) who share some offline connection. On many of the large social networking sites (SNSs), participants are not necessarily "networking" or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network. Online social networking sites can therefore morph into a variety of things including online classifieds at one end of the spectrum and blogging at the other.

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