

Chapter X

Privacy or Performance Matters on the Internet: Revisiting Privacy Toward a Situational Paradigm

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces a situational paradigm as a means of studying online privacy. It argues that data subjects are not always opponent to data users. They judge contexts before disclosing information. This chapter proves it by examining online privacy concerns and practices with two contexts: technology platforms and users' motivations. It explores gratifications of online photo album users in Taiwan, and finds the distinctive "staging" phenomenon under the theory of uses and gratifications, and a priori theoretical framework, the spectacle/performance paradigm. The users with "diffused audience" gratifications are concerned less about privacy but not disclose more of their information. Furthermore, it finds that users act differently in diverse platforms, implying that studying Internet as a whole is problematic. The author proposes that studying online privacy through the use of a situational paradigm will help better research designs for studying privacy, and assist in understanding of users' behaviors among technology platforms.

INTRODUCTION

The common assumptions of the online privacy concerns literature claim that net users who have

higher privacy concerns disclose less information and that data subjects are always adversarial to data users. Thus, researchers with these assumptions ignore online environments, take privacy

concerns as privacy practices, and follow the off-line literature reviews to study what kind of persons (demographical variables) are concerned more about their privacy. This is called the adversarial paradigm, which does not take social contexts into account (Hine & Eve, 1998; Hsu, 2006; Raab & Bennett, 1998).

What does go wrong for online privacy research with an adversarial paradigm? Researchers fail to explain why users asserting to have higher privacy concerns still disclose sensitive information and fail to verify why some claim that those belonging to particular demographical variables are concerned more about privacy, which is not always the case in other research studies. Thus, researchers instead have to find more social contexts which are essential to users' privacy concerns and practices on the Internet as well as study what makes users disclose more of their information—the so-called situational paradigm (Hsu, 2006; Raab & Bennett, 1998).

In this study, the author tries to find more proofs for the main argument of the situational paradigm, in which assumption is human relativism—a new approach for examining online privacy especially for the newly-emergence phenomena. What are the newly-emerging phenomena on the Internet? The author raises an example of online photo Web sites. Online photo album Web sites were originally started for sharing digital memories with friends and relatives. This trend is encouraged by commercial online photo album Web sites which provide “free or fee” spaces. In Taiwan, online photo albums (usually with additional blog functions) are also popular among Internet users.

As a communication scholar, the author alleges that communication is a post-disciplinary “in which the rigid walls of disciplinarity are replaced with bridges (Streeter, 1995).” Online privacy is such an interdisciplinary topic, whereby communication could contribute with others. Given that the Internet is a mass media (Morris & Ogan, 1996), the author assumes that uses and gratification theory may pave the way for a

situational paradigm in online privacy research. The study suggests that media use is motivated by needs and goals that are defined by audiences themselves, and that active participation in the communication process may assist, limit, or influence the gratifications associated with exposure. Thus, different goals lead to diverse participation and gratification. Current online privacy research seldom takes users' motivations of Internet behaviors into account. How do these different uses, motivations, and gratification influence their online privacy concerns and privacy practices? This is necessary subject to investigate.

In addition to normal usage of online photo albums, there is a distinct “staging” or “performing” phenomenon in Taiwan. For example, I-Ren Wang, a now-famous celebrity, was recruited as an anchor by TVBS, a cable news network, due to her incredible popularity on the largest online photo album, Wretch (Jhu & Yung, 2006). Other girls, such as “Cutiecherry” and “Fing,” were invited to participate in noted TV programs and turned into commercial stars.

For the majority of Internet users who have not yet become celebrity, they may enjoy having a reputation among users, getting on a popular list, or being discussed on the online chat system and BBS. It also seems that online photo album Web sites have developed into a “stage” for those who want to become stars and celebrities. This implies that the motivations for some online photo album (a new media use context) users are quite different from net users in previous studies.

Online photo album users are more like diffused audiences, the concept from the spectacle/performance paradigm (SPP) (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). Adopting the diffused audience cycle into the online photo album context, some users are drenched with mediascapes, integrate what they learned from the mediascapes into everyday life, and perform them for users' own visibility. Others are drenched with mediascapes that facilitate discussions and help to attach themselves to some idols. No matter what purpose users hold,

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