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Editorial: The state of online self-disclosure in an era of commodified privacy

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Introduction

Social media revolve around self-disclosure. To present oneself, to start and expand one's social circle, and to share content, a user has to disclose personal data. Self-disclosure, seen as the "process of making the self known to other persons" (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958, p. 91), helps people to find common ground to start and also to deepen (online) relations with others (Roessler, 2015). At the same time, personal data revealed in the context of online self-disclosures also fuel the commercial purposes of social media and hence serve the commercial and financial interests of social media providers. This duality is the focus of increasing research, while public and policy debates discuss how a balance can be found between commercial uses of online self-disclosures and individuals' control over the use and sharing of their personal information.

Keeping control over personal data is at the core of privacy. Privacy can be seen as a process of managing the boundary between an individual and his or her context: deciding what information to share and not to share, and deciding upon those to share that information with (Altman, 1975; Westin, 1967). Privacy is not seclusion; privacy is control. To put it in Altman's words, "Privacy is the selective control of access to the self" (Altman, 1975, p. 24). Still, this control is dynamic. On social network sites (SNSs) and other digital platforms, privacy is a dialectic process wherein individuals seek a balance between openness and closeness to specific persons, groups, or organizations at a given time (Archer, Christofides, Nosko, & Wood, 2015). The desired level of privacy may start as a personal choice, but it is further negotiated with others. Moreover, this negotiation is even more challenging in an online networked environment. What is disclosed, and to whom, becomes a shared responsibility as connected individuals exchanging personal information become co-owners (Petronio, 2002).

When sharing personal information, social media users usually picture an "imagined audience" for these self-disclosures—that is, a mental image of individuals with whom they are exchanging personal information on these digital platforms (Litt & Hargittai, 2016, p. 331). This imagined audience is usually either a very broad notion of a general audience or more targeted audiences consisting of personal ties, professional ties, or even phantasmal ties (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). However, for a great number of users, commercial organizations are not part of this imagined audience. People either are not aware or do not care that their data can also be used for commercial purposes.

The iceberg metaphor comes to mind here. Although users have a general notion of whom they share personal information with, this notion is just the tip of the iceberg. The way that personal information trickles down to other parties largely remains below the surface. Using privacy controls on SNSs by restricting profile visibility to, for instance, friends only simply gives some control over the visible part of the iceberg (Debatin, 2011; Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, & Hughes, 2009). The exact and often subtle way in which personal data fuel commercial purposes often remains invisible and is nearly impossible to control.

The providers of the digital platforms that are massively embraced by internet users also process, analyze and use personal data for a variety of purposes. First, it allows them to personalize their services. Second, it helps them to increase the fit between a user's profile and commercial messages. Third, many providers try to further commercialize the data by selling users' information to interested third parties. In this way, personal data become commodified (Campbell & Carlson, 2002). The more users disclose, the more refined consumer profiles can become to offer the benefits of personalized service.

However, next to corporate audiences, there are also other potential invisible publics, namely future audiences of personal data. As personal data posted on SNSs are, among other qualities, persistent and easy to replicate and share (boyd, 2008), personal data taken out of their temporal and relational context may lead to conclusions on an individual that may be outdated or offer only a partial view. Therefore, the debate concerning the "right to be forgotten" highlights the need for a counterweight to the persistence of digital data. Throughout an individual's life, pictures and other personal data are being shared online by the person him/herself, and data may also be published in a child's early years through "sharenting" (the divulging of children's personal data by their parents). Individuals themselves fuel corporate databases through collaborating to establish a "quantified self" (Wolf, 2007) by processing physical activities and health metrics through wearables. This processing of sensitive personal data also raises questions on their secure storage and the purposes for which these data are and could be used.

Moreover, as youth are embracing these digital media in their daily lives, it is important to investigate how they deal with their own personal data online. While presenting themselves and sharing content, they start creating their digital double. Therefore, how youth take up privacy challenges, and other issues they can be confronted with online, is increasingly questioned and studied (Walrave, Ponnet, Vanderhoven, Haers, & Segaert, 2016). Additionally, investigating how young social media users possibly differ from older ones in self-disclosure and data-protecting behavior could shed new light on how privacy is perceived and valued through the lifespan.

The Papers of This Issue

In light of these interrogations, a call for papers was launched in October 2015. Following this call, we have received more than forty submissions of research abstracts. Of these forty submissions, eighteen were allowed to go to the next round to submit a full paper. The six final papers that are included in this issue were selected as the strongest papers. All of them have been thoroughly reviewed by respected scholars in the field. Moreover, as you will notice when reading this special issue, all submitted papers are innovative and clearly serve as a contribution to the research field of online self-disclosure and privacy.

Four of the six papers (De Wolf, 2016; Jia & Xu, 2016; Kezer, Sevi, Cemalcilar, & Baruh, 2016; Steijn, Schouten, & Vedder, 2016) included within this special issue take Facebook, the largest SNS, as the setting for their research. One paper (Lin, Levordashka, & Utz, 2016) focuses on users of Twitter. The fact that five out of six papers in this special issue take social media as their research context indicates how the contemporary research field has been shaped by this social media revolution. The final paper (Brinson & Eastin, 2016) of this special issue reminds us of the fact that not only is online privacy an important good in social media, but internet users are still confronted with data collection practices and personalized advertising during their daily surf sessions online, even when they are not logged in to their favorite social media platforms.

The authors of the first paper (Kezer et al., 2016) in this special issue note that empirical research has mainly focused on online privacy as experienced by teenagers and young adults. This tendency to focus on youth quite naturally follows from the fact that younger people were the first and most enthusiastic users of SNSs. SNSs are increasingly being used by people of all ages, however. A considerable portion (35%) of internet users above 65

have an active account on SNSs (Perrin, 2015). This study takes into account the increased access to social media by all age groups by examining several central concepts in the privacy literature across three age groups: 18- to 40-year-olds; 41- to 65-year-olds; and those over 65. This generates some interesting new thought-provoking results: Although young adults disclose the most on Facebook, the study shows that this age group was also the most likely to engage in online privacy-protective behaviors. With respect to the notion of the privacy paradox, this study further clarifies the compelling opposition between users' attitudes and actual privacy-protective behaviors. It shows that the impact of privacy-related attitudes on privacy-protective behaviors is stronger among mature adults.

The second paper (Steijn et al., 2016) reports on a study that aims to investigate the underlying mechanisms that may explain differences in privacy concerns between younger and older people and between users and non-users of social network sites. The results show that the difference in perceived risk-benefit balance partly mediates the relationship between use or non-use of SNSs and concern. SNS users are less concerned about privacy because they perceive more benefits relative to risks. Concern regarding privacy between young and old users was mediated by their differences in privacy conceptions. Older individuals were more likely to associate situations related to personal information with privacy. In turn, these individuals reported more concern regarding their privacy.

The third paper (Jia & Xu, 2016) starts from one of the central ideas in communication privacy management theory: Online privacy is not just a matter of deciding whether or not to keep one's own information secret or not, but we are also co-actors in protecting or violating the privacy of those in our social environment (Petronio, 2002). Therefore, online privacy is constructed with other people surrounding us in the online environment. This certainly applies to online privacy regulation on Facebook, where the connection with others is more visible than ever before (and also the violation of others' privacy is more likely to occur). Privacy concerns have so far mainly been interpreted from a personal perspective, while the collective perspective is just as important. This paper develops an empirically validated scale that is able to measure collective privacy concern in order to allow future research to study privacy as a collective notion and a social process, an idea expressed not only by Petronio (2002) but also by Altman (1975), another privacy theorist long before the dawn of social networking technology.

The fourth article (De Wolf, 2016) presented in this special issue is a qualitative study that investigates privacy management as a group process. Twelve focus groups were held with adolescents and young adults enrolled in local youth organizations. Similar to paper 3, this work alludes to the recent shift in privacy literature from individual to collaborative privacy practices in managing personal information online. The fourth paper of this special issue fits nicely within this new wave of studies, showing that protecting one's privacy online is more than just a personal issue by exploring the idea of group privacy among members of Flemish youth organizations. It examines how individuals in youth organizations manage group privacy online and offline and discusses the strategies they employ. The study shows the different rules that these groups employ as well as the challenges they face in making these rules explicit.

The fifth paper (Lin et al., 2016) focuses on how self-disclosure on Twitter might create ambient intimacy, defined as a "feeling of closeness toward certain others developed mainly following their status updates on social media." Although the concept of ambient intimacy was investigated already in the context of social media in previous research, this study contributes to the research field by (1) distinguishing the concept of ambient intimacy from ambient awareness and (2) examining to what extent users of the microblog Twitter may experience feelings of ambient intimacy just by following the Twitter feed of a particular user.

The final paper (Brinson & Eastin, 2016) of this special issue is an experimental study that aims to further disentangle the complex nature of the privacy paradox. The authors investigate how awareness of personal data collection and aggregation practices affect users' attitudes toward advertisers. Ad personalization and the use of ad recognition cues (i.e., the AdChoices Icon) may trigger certain processes in consumer attitudes, like ad skepticism and a reduced liking of an advertisement. Although one would expect that a consumer's knowledge of an advertiser's persuasive attempt would strongly trigger the consumer's skepticism toward the ad, this study suggests that the inclusion of the recognition cue actually improves the attitude toward the ad, pending on the fact that the consumer knows what the AdChoice Icon stands for. If the consumer does not know what the icon stands for, the attitude toward the advertisement deteriorates.

As guest editors of this special issue, we would like to thank the authors for submitting their inspiring and valuable work and the reviewers for their extensive and helpful feedback on the papers. We would also like to thank the editors and editorial assistant of *Cyberpsychology* for the swift collaboration in preparing this special issue.

We hope that this special issue will inspire privacy debates about online disclosure and the use of personal information as well as further research in these issues.

We wish you a thought-provoking read.

Michel Walrave, Sonja Utz, Alexander Schouten and Wannes Heirman

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Issue Content

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