Examining Privacy and Disclosure in a Social Networking Community

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ABSTRACT

The popularity of social networking websites such as Facebook and the subsequent levels and depth of online disclosures have raised several concerns for user privacy. Previous research into these sites has indicated the importance of disclosures between users as well as an under-utilization of extensive privacy options. This study qualitatively examines college students' disclosure and privacy behaviors and attitudes on Facebook.com. Results support current research into social networking and privacy and provide user-generated explanations for observed disclosure and privacy trends. Implications for future research into privacy software are discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The booming popularity of social networking websites and the subsequent levels of online disclosures raise well-publicized privacy concerns including stalking, identity theft, and legal or administrative repercussions. The Facebook site (http://www.facebook.com) alone maintains over eighteen million user profiles, with 80% [1] to 90% [4][8] of college undergraduates actively participating. Users are allowed to disclose in more varied information fields on Facebook [8], as well as have more granular control over the accessibility of this information [1], compared to similar networking sites MySpace.com and Friendster.com. User motivations for participation on the site include the desire to increase awareness of others bounded within their physical communities [4].

Large-scale analyses of the utilization of Facebook privacy features in college networks indicate a majority (87% on average) of students have default or permissive privacy settings. [5][6]. While the significant majority of users indicate awareness of the Facebook privacy options, less than half report ever altering their default settings [5].

Several explanations for users' under-utilization of privacy settings are offered by current privacy research, including signal detection theory [3], poor interface design, peer pressure and herding behavior [6], and inherent trust in network structured by an offline, college community [5].

The potentials for the development and applications of social networking sites are numerous due to their social impact, connectivity, and appeal. In order to encourage safe participation, the sites must maintain standards of privacy and user-friendly profile controls and set-up. However, increasing privacy may negatively impact these communities, as the disclosure of personal information and personality features support online popularity and perceived social attractiveness [7][9][10]. Thus, before developing strategies to increase privacy utilization and cooperation between users, actual user motivations, behaviors, and sense of trust and privacy within the network must be evaluated.

This study qualitatively examines individual, college-aged user behavior on Facebook through direct interviews and profile reviews. The results of this study both validate the significance of previously identified trends, identify behaviors and explanations not observable through large-scale analysis and survey distribution, and demonstrate users' real-time utilization of the site and its features.

2. METHODS

Thirteen undergraduate students enrolled in general psychology at UNC Charlotte were interviewed during the 2007 spring semester. Twelve participants possessed active Facebook accounts and were included in data analysis.

Participants completed demographic surveys and a personality inventory (NEO-FFI). Participants then reviewed and were interviewed regarding their own profile. Participants then viewed profiles of two fellow participants, and two introduced by the researcher. Participants evaluated these other profiles using selected questions from the NEO-FFI, and answered additional interview questions.

3. INITIAL RESULTS

Data analysis for this preliminary study is ongoing, however we report on several initial results that support explanations of privacy under-utilization, interface intricacies, and desire to self-communicate.

In general, participants logged into their Facebook profiles once daily and updated personal information one to three times a week. Sixty-seven percent of participants maintained public profiles and did not limit the accessibility of personal information to "only friends." The remaining 33% had restricted access to their profiles from anyone not on their friends list. No participants with public profiles utilized the granular privacy controls over specific profile features. Participants often demonstrated difficulty with the Facebook interface during interviews. One participant indicated that he had purposefully set his privacy settings to "private" although the profile was fully accessible to the social network. Participants reported being unaware of the ability to remove tagged photographs and Wall posts from their profiles, delete or control Newsfeed alerts, or alter their privacy settings in general.

The Newsfeed feature was criticized by 42% of participants; however three of these participants reported they had "just gotten used to it" instead of changing their privacy settings.

While participants reported awareness of some of the privacy concerns associated with Facebook and managed their disclosures and/or privacy with these concerns in mind, many participants remained at risk for over-disclosure and privacy invasions due to an underestimation of extent and activity of their social network. Personal profile information was consciously presented and maintained to ensure appropriate disclosures, yet participants were significantly less active in maintaining their friends list, posted pictures, and Wall posts. Only one participant required an established offline relationship before accepting a friend while all others confirmed requests after one offline interaction or word of mouth. Less than half of the participants reported ever removing a confirmed friend for any reason.

Although full analysis of all disclosure fields is forthcoming, twenty-five percent of participants did not disclose information in any personal fields, while 67% responded within all. Participants' evaluations of other profiles were significantly affected by the amount of personal information disclosed through the profile. Personal disclosures in fields such as interests, favorites, and "about me" were positively correlated with the rating of trustworthiness participants gave to the profiles' authors at the $p<.05$ level. Participants commonly referred to the basic, contact, and education fields when asked if important disclosures were missing, indicating that all types of allowed disclosures are important to users.

Participants exhibited "all or none" approaches to personal disclosures and social performances. Disclosure in one personal field was positively correlated with disclosures in others at the $p<.05$ level. When asked why they had disclosed their personal information, participants often responded, "I'm not really sure" and "I'm so used to filling out [personal] information, I didn't think twice about it." Similarly, utilization of one method of social performance was positively correlated with utilization of other methods at the $p<.05$ level. Pictures were indicated by all participants as having a significant effect on self-presentation and evaluation; 67% of participants referred to this feature as the most communicative aspect of a profile and 25% rated it second to "interests and activities." These participants reported shared interests/activities and friends in common as important indicators of personality and trustworthiness.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

While data analysis is ongoing, initial results support existing research and conclusions about social networking communities privacy use and self-presentation.

Participants demonstrated the importance of personal disclosures in profile evaluation. Interestingly, this study found that these disclosures were not a major consideration in users' own self-presentations and profile maintenance. Possible explanations for this trend include college students' habituation to personal disclosures both online and in their academic and social circles, homogeneity of personal information and disclosure types within

users' personal networks, and/or the selective disclosure of "safe" and "impersonal" information to counteract the under-utilized privacy settings.

While users do not underestimate the privacy threats of online disclosures, they do misjudge the extent, activity, and accessibility of their social networks. These findings support the concept of the "imagined audience" and its effects on users' privacy choices. The complexity and ambiguity of the Facebook interface was also found to be a significant inhibitor of appropriate privacy utilizations. New privacy software such as visualization tools might increase the utilization of privacy options by providing clear representations of social networks, friend proximity, and availability of profile features. Such a tool might also encourage users to disclose practical information such as courses or political and religious views to appropriate friends while maintaining their sense of privacy within their personal networks.

We will be continuing our examination of user privacy in popular social networking sites through additional interviews and focused attitude surveys. Our results will then inform the development of user-friendly privacy mechanisms to increase privacy utilization in online social communities.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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