



## Blog scrubbing: Exploring triggers that change privacy rules

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### ABSTRACT

An increasing number of individuals of all ages maintain important interpersonal relationships through blogs. Wide variation exists in how people disclose and manage their privacy on these blogs, particularly concerning the choices made about leaving information permanently visible on blogs or retrieving it sometime after an initial posting. This study applies Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory to explore the process of privacy rule adaptation for blogging by examining situations that have triggered bloggers to change their privacy rules to enact blog post deletion practices (“blog scrubbing”). Overall, open-ended responses from 356 bloggers were content analyzed. Chi-square analysis revealed differences in the frequency of triggers that changed the blogging post privacy rules and the proactive versus reactive nature of blogging privacy management deletion practices. Bloggers’ critical incidents that activate privacy rule changes demonstrate that impression management triggers, personal safety identity triggers, relational triggers, and legal/disciplinary triggers resulted in greater alteration of individual privacy rules used to protect these bloggers from the privileged online community of individuals granted access to an individual’s blog. Thus, bloggers essentially “scrubbed” their blog site and adapted their typical privacy rules with new ones that better protected them from the online community regarding that particular blogged information.

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### 1. Introduction

Young adults today frequently disclose and interact with a wide range of people on their blogs, including family members, face-to-face friends, online friends, and unknown others (Child & Agyeman-Budu, 2010; Child, Pearson, & Petronio, 2009; Child & Petronio, 2011; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Guadagno, Okdie, & Eno, 2008; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Blogs often function as an outlet for people to get their thoughts and feelings out and consequently, they share all types of information that can reflect a range of private and personal information.<sup>1</sup> Thus, they may disclose their beliefs, opinions, passing thoughts, and evaluations of others (Child et al., 2009; Lenhart, 2005; Lenhart & Madden, 2005). As individuals blog they often reexamine posted information, reconsider their original motivations for revealing information, second guess what the recipients might do with their information, and even regret disclosing on their blog.

Consider the following situation. Suppose an employee becomes angry about a comment his boss makes to him at work. He decides to blog about the incident he had with his boss. He infuses his post with interpretations and criticism of the boss’ ability to manage the employees. Later, after venting his feelings, he remembers that several of the other employees could feasibly access his blog. He begins to feel uncomfortable about his posts concerning his boss and decides to remove some of the more egregious statements just in case others do not feel the same about the boss. Or, even worse, they relay the information to others within the organization, including the boss. This example illustrates *blog scrubbing*, or the act of removing information that has already been posted on one’s blog. Unlike face-to-face interactions, the person, if quick enough, can potentially head off the damage by removing the posted information before someone reads it or, at the minimum, reduce the number of people who see the information. The simple act of considering the impact of posted information may seem contrary to current assumptions about the way people manage online disclosures (Child & Petronio, 2011). However, it seems evident that blog scrubbing occurs, yet it is not clear what conditions lead to removing posts (Child & Agyeman-Budu, 2010; Child & Petronio, 2011; Child et al., 2009). Perhaps, as is the case with face-to-face disclosures, social media users may use post hoc privacy management decision criteria to monitor their disclosures once they have revealed information (Child & Petronio, 2011; Petronio, 2002). Accordingly, it is useful to identify a system to understand decision-making that regulates access to personal and private information disclosed on blogs.

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<sup>1</sup> We consider all disclosed information to represent a range of what people consider private revelations. The definitional parameters of private information is based on Communication Privacy Management theory (Petronio, 2002), which argues that people believe they own and control their private information. Private information constitutes anything disclosed or given access to that is perceived by the owner to result in potential vulnerability.

Further, identifying the practices people use to correct choices they initially make with posts when they perceive disclosures to be obviously problematic *after* they have posted is important to better understand the motives and related actions of bloggers.

While the range of motives that drives bloggers to make post deletions may be unclear, research supports the fact that there are practices emerging with users of social media where they actively monitor their own *digital footprints* (Lewis, Kaufman, & Christakis, 2008; Madden & Smith, 2010; Westerman, Heide, Klein, & Walther, 2008). Consequently, in response to the increased societal attention placed on blogging and learning social media practices (Fletcher, 2009; Stross, 2007, 2009; Westerman et al., 2008), 71% of young-adult social media users say they have taken steps to restrict their privacy settings; 47% of young-adult users engage in blog scrubbing through deleting comments and posts; and 41% of these same users often scrub and disassociate their personal identity from photos of them available online (Madden & Smith, 2010). Collectively, this evidence suggests that learning more about the incidents of blog scrubbing is increasingly relevant, because the practical and common response for reasserting greater protection of privacy online appears to be through the use of deletion practices.

To investigate the phenomenon of blog scrubbing, this study explores the circumstances that trigger changes to the rules bloggers use to manage the impact and consequently the privacy of their messages through blogging post deletion practices, or what we refer to as “blog scrubbing.” To better understand bloggers’ characteristic privacy management practices and circumstances when there are changes in users’ customary privacy choices, we examine issues that motivate bloggers to reconsider, alter, and modify their previously determined privacy rules about providing public access to certain private and personal information on a blog (Child & Petronio, 2011). Thus, this study aims to understand the process and practice of “blog scrubbing.” As such, this research is designed to advance a greater understanding about how and why people reassert protection of privacy online through blog scrubbing practices.

## 2. Review of literature

### 2.1. Blogging and disclosure

Blogging provides a vehicle for disclosure and interaction with others online. Various social media platforms support the capacity for disclosure, interaction, and blogging with others (i.e., MySpace, Xanga, LiveJournal, Blogger, and Facebook).<sup>2</sup> One of the fundamen-

<sup>2</sup> Through 2008, two of the three most popular social media sites were diary-based blogs with Blogger.com registering 222 million unique visitors and MySpace.com with 126 million unique visitors (Schonfeld, 2008). Among adults, MySpace is currently the most popular type of blog (Lenhart, 2009). The Pew Internet and American Life Project interviewed 2251 US adults and noted that from 2005 through 2008 the number of online individuals 35–44 years old with a blog or social network site (SNS) quadrupled from 8% to 30% (Lenhart, 2009). Social network sites are often used more for linking and networking with others rather than blogging and disclosing (Beer, 2008; boyd & Ellison, 2008). However, the future suggests that diverse social media platforms will continue to expand their functionality, resulting in integrated social media that can be used in a variety of ways (blogging, networking, and posting YouTube videos/website links). For example, Facebook, which is currently the most popular SNS site, made adaptations in 2006 allowing status updates, commenting, and open-ended wall discussions (Thompson, 2008). These expanded interaction options permit more of the disclosure-based interactions occurring on social media platforms identified primarily as blogs (i.e., LiveJournal, Xanga, and Blogger) to also occur on Facebook. Facebook also allows individuals to link their new blog post notices as status updates. Given that blogging occurs on a variety of different social media platforms, this study examines individuals who self-identify as primarily personal diary-based bloggers in order to focus on blogging practices collectively. Recent research results reveal that several individuals who use social media (52% in a recent national study) maintain profiles and interact with others on more than one site (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Therefore, greater holistic examinations of blogging practices overall are needed, irrespective of where users may choose to host their blogs.

tal reasons people blog is to disclose information such as things that make them unhappy, problems they are having a difficulty with, and telling others positive things that have happened to them (Child et al., 2009). In all, people feel comfortable revealing information that is highly personal and private to them online (Child & Agyeman-Budu, 2010; Lenhart, 2005; Lenhart & Madden, 2005). People make choices (either intentionally or unintentionally) to reveal or conceal information about themselves and others (Petronio, 2002, 2010). Bloggers making an online disclosure are no different than those making face-to-face revelations in that the blogger believes that they own their disclosed information and continue to have the right to control the flow of that information to third-parties (Child & Petronio, 2011).

Typically when people disclose in face-to-face situations, they have a set of criteria that helps them judge what they are willing to tell, when they tell, who they tell, and if they tell the information to others (Petronio, 2002). While we know that this privacy management system functions in face-to-face settings, it remains unclear how people regulate the disclosure of information or what expectations they have for the way others might respond in online situations (Child & Petronio, 2011). Nevertheless, research shows that there are times when privacy rules must adapt and change to meet evolving privacy needs (Petronio, 2002).

Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory describes the state of *privacy turbulence* as incidents where privacy breakdowns occur because the management of private information becomes unstable or confused, leading to disruptions that require revising, changing, or repairing privacy rules guiding privacy protection and access. When turbulence serves as a catalyst for change in the privacy management system, people alter or revamp their privacy rules to decide whether to reveal or conceal information (Petronio, 2010). Given turbulence occurs in privacy management and it can lead to breakdowns, there is a certain degree of unpredictability that leads to unanticipated situations. From existing research on blogging, it seems reasonable that these kinds of breakdowns exist for bloggers’ and impact their privacy regulation (Child & Petronio, 2011). As a result, bloggers may say things that upon reflection they regret disclosing online to others. Consequently, bloggers encounter unanticipated situations that expose deficiencies in their existing privacy management practices, calling for changes to those practices that often mean adjusting their privacy rules (Child & Petronio, 2011; Child et al., 2009; Petronio, 2002). The current study examines deletion practices and motivations in order to better grasp blogging privacy rule adaption and the events that trigger privacy turbulence.

### 2.2. The management of private information on blogs

CPM theory (Petronio, 2002) provides a useful framework for conceptualizing variations in CMC disclosure practices on social media (e.g., Child & Agyeman-Budu, 2010; Child et al., 2009). Much of the research applying CPM theory explores privacy within face-to-face interactions (e.g., Petronio, 2010). However, with increasing frequency, research applications of CPM are spanning more diverse contexts that include CMC interactions (Child & Agyeman-Budu, 2010; Child & Petronio, 2011; Child et al., 2009; Metzger, 2007; Petronio & Caughlin, 2005). This marriage of CMC and CPM fits the call Walther (2009) makes as he contends that more research in CMC should test assumptions tied to potentially complimentary theoretical approaches and fully examine the way they interface. Child et al. (2009) illustrate the effectiveness of applying and testing the propositions of CPM to CMC interactions occurring on diary-oriented blogs by developing a theory-based blogging privacy management measure.

CPM is a dialectical theory asserting that privacy management depends on realizing people have both protection (for autonomy)

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