Regulating privacy in interpersonal online communication: The role of self-disclosure

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ABSTRACT

Establishing privacy is a key demand in interpersonal online communication. Do people regulate their privacy through self-disclosure regarding specific interlocutors and privacy contexts? One hundred and fifty-seven participants answered an inquiry in a 2 (communication situation: public vs. private) × 2 (interlocutor's self-disclosure: high vs. low) × 2 (inquiry length: short vs. long) between-participants design. Results showed that participants were aware of the degree of privacy in the context and sensitive to the interlocutor's self-disclosure. However, they did not adapt their communication behavior to this awareness. We conclude that awareness of privacy is necessary, but insufficient for regulating privacy.

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1. Introduction

Self-disclosure is an important interpersonal mechanism in establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Derlega, Winstead, & Greene, 2008). However, when communicating with strangers, people need to evaluate whom to trust and when to self-disclose. In online interactions, these questions refer primarily to the effort undertaken to "keep private information confidential" (Green, 2007, p. 44), that is, to keep one's privacy. Privacy can be described as a need to control access to the self from others (Altman, Vinsel, & Brown, 1981; Petronio, 2002; Westin, 1967). Access refers to the physical person as well as to information on the self.

1.1. On the interplay between privacy and self-disclosure

Revealing and concealing of private information are dialectical, i.e. opposing processes. There are multiple models in different disciplines attempting to explain how people can deal with this dialectic. Most models propose a calculation of the benefits and risks of self-disclosure (e.g., Afifi & Steuber, 2009; Omarzu, 2000). Benefits include self-expression, self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). However, revealing information poses a risk as it creates vulnerability towards the recipient of the information. The sharing of information demonstrates a willingness to be vulnerable and is therefore interpreted as an offer of trust.

Including the idea of a benefit-risk-calculation, Sandra Petronio (2002) has posed a widely recognized theory for the regulation of privacy: The *Communication Privacy Management* (CPM) theory provides a comprehensive framework on how to coordinate and manage privacy in close relationships. The premise is that people have the feeling of owning information about themselves setting a boundary around private information. Based on rules derived from cultural background, gender, motivation, context and the risk-benefit ratio, people decide on whether or not to share information extending the boundary ownership to others. Boundary permeability determines the degree of access, utilizing the metaphor of thin vs. thick walls to separate public from private information. Hence, the extent of the shared information is influenced by the discloser, the recipient, and the specific context of the conversation (see Ignatius & Kokkonen, 2007, for a review). In the following, we will summarize empirical results that illustrate (1) *who* discloses (2) *what* (3) *to whom* and (4) *under what circumstances*. We will start with a short review of each research area including specifications for online communication settings (for a review comparing online and offline self-disclosure see Nguyen, Bin, & Campbell, 2012).

1.2. On the occurrence of self-disclosure

1.2.1. Who engages in self-disclosure?

People differ in their propensity to self-disclose (cf. Wheeless & Grotz, 1976). Certain personality traits (e.g., introversion/

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extraversion, Peter, Valkenberg, & Shouten, 2005), characteristics (e.g., social anxiety, Liu, Ang, & Lwin, 2013; gender, Dindia & Allen, 1992), as well as a general tendency to trust others (Steel, 1991) have been shown to impact the degree of self-disclosure. Empirical studies suggest further that emotional state influences desire and scope of self-disclosure. On the one hand, good mood, as a promoter of cooperative behavior, can lead to higher self-disclosure (Forgas, 2011; Wakefield, 2013). On the other hand, psychological distress facilitates people's tendency to talk more about themselves (e.g., Stiles, Shuster, & Harrigan, 1992).

In online environments negative experiences and risk beliefs have shown to raise concerns about one's privacy further impacting the intention to self-disclose online (Bansal, Zahedi, & Gefen, 2010). Nonetheless, people disclose private information, even when they are concerned about their privacy. This has been described as the privacy paradox (Barnes, 2006; Norberg, Horne, & Horne, 2007). This discrepancy could be due to the higher and more immediate benefits of self-disclosure in comparison to the perceived risk (e.g., Acquisti, 2004). In other words, social interactions require some kind of self-disclosure, but the amount and quality can be regulated.

1.2.2. What do people self-disclose?

Self-disclosure can vary on three dimensions: Duration, breadth, and depth (cf. Cozby, 1973). In text-based communication, *duration* refers to the length of the self-disclosure and is measured by the amount of utterances starting with a personal pronoun in first person (e.g., "*I* have a problem"). *Breadth* describes the range of different contents addressed (cf. Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007), that is, personal information or facts (e.g., demographic data), a thought or an opinion (e.g., political beliefs), and feelings (e.g., to be happy). In all three content areas the self-disclosure can vary in its *depth*, that is, the intimacy of disclosed content. Although these dimensions help to categorize the personal information, they do not help in determining what counts as private information. While some researchers focus on self-disclosure of very intimate information (e.g., when sharing a secret, Kelly & McKlillop, 1996), others consider any kind of information on the self to be private (e.g., telling one's age, Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007). We conceptualize self-disclosure as the latter, because any personal information can be misused and thus is possibly risky. Self-disclosure can further lead to rejection and is risky even under anonymity. Note that self-disclosure can also include information about others.

1.2.3. To whom do people self-disclose?

The recipient of the self-disclosure plays an important role. If people like a person (Collins & Miller, 1994) or perceive somebody as a trustworthy recipient (Wheeless & Grotz, 1977), they are more likely to disclose information. The relation between self-disclosure and closeness to a recipient is u-shaped: People tend to disclose more information about themselves either when they do not know the interlocutor or when they are talking to an intimate friend (cf. Dindia, 2002). Following the principle of reciprocity (cf. Jourard, 1971) people's own self-disclosure can vary depending on previous self-disclosure by the interlocutor: If one person self-discloses, the other one is more likely to say something about herself in return (e.g., Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007; McAllister & Bregman, 1985). However, this does not simply represent a tit-for-tat strategy (cf. Dindia, 2002). It can be interpreted as a form of acceptance of what is appropriate in a given situation (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974) and can lead to a positive perception of the interlocutor (cf. Sprecher, Treger, Wondra, Hilaire, & Wallpe, 2013).

In online communication information about the interlocutor is transmitted on fewer dimensions as face-to-face (cf. Clark & Brennan, 1991). The question of "who is the recipient?" is more difficult to answer and thus the regulation of privacy exacerbated. Different online media thereby provide different channels of information (e.g., visual vs. auditory vs. text). When it comes to text-based communication, the message itself provides the most important information about the communication partner (Jucks & Bromme, 2011).

1.2.4. Under what circumstances do people self-disclose?

An important factor which influences the level of privacy in online communication is the degree of anonymity or in the words of a famous cartoon: "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog" (Steiner, 1993). Under circumstances of anonymity people tend to self-disclose more (e.g., Joinson, 2004), because anonymity reduces the perceived risk of self-disclosure (cf. Bargh & McKenna, 2004). In terms of the CPM theory (cf. Petronio, 2002) anonymity functions as an artificial boundary (i.e., subjectively perceived but not necessarily objectively provided) between discloser and recipient (for a review on anonymity in online interactions see Christopherson, 2007).

The main context factor influencing privacy is the question of how many people have access to the conversation. In some online situations the question of possible overhearers is more prevalent compared to others. Interlocutors in e-mail communication, for example, can determine actively who is participating in the conversation. In comparison to other online communication media, people thereby feel rather private (Frye & Dornisch, 2010). In contrast, online forums often have multiple actors and audiences. Although different online platforms vary greatly in the extent of privacy features provided, most forums are public and privacy is therefore low. The one-to-one interactions between interlocutors in online forums are only pseudo-private: The boundary between private and public communication is blurred, that is, it is often unclear who can gain access to the conversation. Similarly to the function of anonymity, the blurring between public and private communication can reduce the perceived risk of self-disclosure. Furthermore, online information often remains retrievable for a long time and is therefore more likely to be accessible to more people than initially intended (cf. the digital baggage, Solove, 2007). In terms of the CPM theory (cf. Petronio, 2002) the question of overhearers refers to boundary permeability. All people that have access to the conversation gain control over the information shared. The risk of self-disclosure is thereby clearly higher when disclosing in public for two reasons: First, groups are more difficult to control than individuals; and, second, trusting a group means having to trust more people and there is always the possibility that the group contains at least one untrustworthy recipient (cf. Moll, Pieschl, & Bromme, 2013).

1.3. Rationale of the study

Self-disclosure and privacy hold a dialectic relationship that needs to be regulated. In interpersonal online communication settings where people exchange information and experiences with strangers, the boundaries between privacy and publicity cannot be explicitly negotiated (e.g., "I have HIV, but please do not tell anybody else."). Hence, privacy must be regulated implicitly through self-disclosure. Do users regulate the extent of self-related information in different online contexts and with regard to different interlocutors? To answer this question we manipulated two factors: (a) the characteristics of the interlocutor (i.e., low vs. high self-disclosure) and (b) the circumstances of the online communication setting (i.e., private vs. public communication).

For a successful regulation of privacy people need to sensitively assess privacy from the given information (research question 1) and adapt their own self-disclosure behavior to it (research question 2). Following previous research, adapting means that people reciprocate self-disclosure from the interlocutor, but disclose less