Public Disclosure on Social Networking Sites

Natalya Bazarova  
Dept. of Communication  
Cornell University  
318 Kennedy Hall  
Ithaca, NY 14850  
nnb8@cornell.edu

Rachel Blady  
Dept. of Communication  
Cornell University  
201 Kennedy Hall  
Ithaca, NY 14850

Margaret Drislane  
Dept. of Communication  
Cornell University  
201 Kennedy Hall  
Ithaca, NY 14850

Jennifer Herlihy  
Dept. of Communication  
Cornell University  
201 Kennedy Hall  
Ithaca, NY 14850

Jill Mendelsohn  
Dept. of Communication  
Cornell University  
201 Kennedy Hall  
Ithaca, NY 14850

David Rollins  
Dept. of Biological Sciences  
Cornell University  
216 Stimson Hall  
Ithaca, NY 14850

Jessie Taft  
Dept. of Information Science  
Cornell University  
301 College Avenue  
Ithaca, NY 14850

Abstract
This position paper focuses on social practices of self-disclosure and privacy on Social Networking Sites (SNSs). It describes how disclosures on SNSs, in particular Facebook, challenge traditional understanding of self-disclosure because they are shared publicly with a network of SNS friends instead of privately in dyadic interactions. Its further focus is on how a public context in which disclosure is enacted may affect receivers’ perceptions of disclosure. The results of an experimental study demonstrate that a public context of disclosure influences perceptions of disclosure intimacy and appropriateness.

Keywords
Self-disclosure, Privacy, Social Networking Sites, Facebook

Introduction
Self-disclosure or revealing of private thoughts, experiences, and emotions is widespread on the Internet. Whereas the primary focus of self-disclosure research, both in face-to-face and online settings, has been on dyadic interpersonal exchanges, sharing private interpersonal information publicly has become a common practice on social networking sites, such as Facebook [1]. We refer to such voluntary sharing of intimate and personal information in online (semi)public spaces as public disclosure. Even if Facebook privacy

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1 The order of the six junior authors was alphabetically determined.
settings restrict information sharing to only people with the status of a Facebook friend, the “eclectic” nature of friends and their average high numbers [2] suggest that a public disclosure is broadcasted to a relatively large and diverse audience. Furthermore, because people use Facebook to primarily maintain relationships with their offline acquaintances [3], Facebook public disclosures are exchanged among identifiable and often familiar parties.

In addition to privacy concerns associated with disclosure on SNSs [4], public disclosure deserves theoretical and empirical examination because its public nature challenges traditional understanding of self-disclosure. For example, according to Social Penetration theory, people disclose gradually and incrementally, from peripheral to more intimate information, as they progress in the knowledge of their partner and relationship development [5]. Relatedly, people are selective about which information to share with whom depending on the established interpersonal trust and affection, as well as relationship type (e.g., coworkers, family members, close friends, acquaintances, etc.) and its duration [5]. Finally, consistent with the dyadic boundary concept, people disclose private information within a dyadic boundary trusting that the disclosed information will not be “leaked” to mutual acquaintances [6].

Self-disclosure behaviors on SNSs, however, challenge the conventional understanding of self-disclosure because people can share large amounts of private information all at once rather than incrementally and gradually [7]. Next, because of public nature of self-disclosures, private profile details and personal communication (i.e., status updates and wall posts) are made accessible to a whole network of acquaintances rather than being kept within a dyadic boundary. Finally, instead of self-selective information sharing determined by relationship type and its duration, personal information is revealed to Facebook relations varying from unknown and distant to closest friends and family members.

The aforementioned challenges of public disclosure to the traditional understanding of self-disclosure raise a host of questions about how public disclosure may differ from private (dyadic) disclosure. This research, in particular, focuses on disclosure perceptions, such as its intimacy and appropriateness. Given the impact of disclosure perceptions on interaction and relationship development [8], it is important to understand the role of a public context in disclosure perceptions.

As a theoretical framework for understanding differences in perceptions of public versus private self-disclosures, we draw on self-disclosure as a situated interactional practice perspective [9]. According to this perspective, self-disclosure should be viewed not as a “single piece of verbal behavior, but a social action which must be brought off in the circumstances of a given interaction” (p. 196). In other words, a disclosure context creates an interpretative frame through which a receiver views disclosure intimacy and appropriateness.

Drawing on Schoeman’s conceptualization of subjective meaning of intimacy [10], which emphasizes the role of a private context as reflecting on disclosure’s special value and intimate meaning for the sender, we argue that disclosure shared privately is perceived as more intimate than disclosure shared publicly. At the same time, the intimate content of disclosure may be
perceived as less appropriate in a public context than in a private context, as demonstrated by previous research on face-to-face disclosures in public spaces [11].

**EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION**

Two hundred and ninety-five college students were randomly assigned to view six fictitious Facebook profiles containing high or low intimacy disclosure messages that were previously pretested for their intimacy level. Whereas the contents of the disclosures remained constant across conditions, the private/public context was manipulated by presenting the disclosures as a) a private Facebook message, b) a Facebook status update, and c) a Facebook wallpost. Intimacy perception was measured on a 7-point scale consisting of four bipolar items: non-intimate/intimate, impersonal/personal, public/private, and superficial/in-depth (alpha=.81). Disclosure appropriateness was measured with a single bipolar item measured on a 7-point scale: appropriate-inappropriate. The manipulation check was employed to test participants’ recognition of a public versus private context, which was passed successfully in 96% of cases.

Consistent with the prediction, the analyses produced the main effect of disclosure context on the perception of disclosure intimacy, such that disclosures shared privately were perceived as more intimate than disclosures shared publicly (i.e., as a status update or wallpost), $F(2, 1420)=84.7, p<.001$. This effect held true for both high intimate disclosure (for private messages, $M=5.38$, $SE=.07$; for status updates, $M=4.57$, $SE=.07$; for wallposts, $M=4.68$, $SE=.07$) and low intimate disclosures (for private messages, $M=3.70$, $SE=.07$; for status updates, $M=2.91$, $SE=.07$; for wallposts, $M=2.99$, $SE=.07$). For perceptions of appropriateness, there was a significant interaction of disclosure intimacy condition and its context, $F(2, 1410)=5.06, p=.006$. Whereas low intimacy disclosures were considered to be equally appropriate in public and private contexts (for private messages, $M=2.43$, $SE=.09$; for status updates, $M=2.70$, $SE=2.09$; for wallpost, $M=2.56$, $SE=.09$), high intimacy disclosure was perceived more inappropriate in public than private contexts (for private messages, $M=3.50$, $SE=.09$; for status update, $M=4.18$, $SE=.09$; for wallpost, $M=4.16$, $SE=.09$, with higher means indicating greater perceived inappropriateness).

**Conclusions**

Understanding social behaviors related to privacy can potentially address design challenges for disclosure and privacy in socio-technical environments. This position paper proposes a concept of public disclosure to capture a public nature of self-disclosure on SNSs, and discusses ways in which public disclosure defies conventional notions of disclosure. The results of the empirical study demonstrate that people derive the subjective value of disclosure intimacy and appropriateness based on the public versus private context. Disclosures in private contexts were seen as more intimate than identical disclosures in public contexts suggesting that people discount disclosure intimacy because of a public context in which it appears. Furthermore, high intimacy disclosures were viewed as less appropriate in public than private contexts. These findings extend our understanding of disclosure in new media and raise questions about the effects of public disclosure perceptions on impression formation and relationship development on Facebook.
REFERENCES


