SHARING OUR LIVES ONLINE

RISKS & EXPOSURE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

DAVID R. BRAKE

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David R. Brake
University of Bedfordshire, UK

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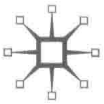

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1
Introduction

The contradictions and complexities involved in the increasing sharing of personal information on social media are neatly encapsulated in this *New York Times* piece on a teenage personal weblogger:

> He wanted his posts to be read, and feared that people would read them, and hoped that people would read them, and didn't care if people read them. He wanted to be included while priding himself on his outsider status. And while he sometimes wrote messages that were explicitly public – announcing a band practice, for instance – he also had his own stringent notions of etiquette. His crush had an online journal, but J. had never read it; that would be too intrusive, he explained.
>
> (Nussbaum, 2004)

Profiles and entries on Facebook, Twitter and many other such services can contain diaristic or confessional material that looks as if it is only for the author to read or perhaps for trusted friends and family – but although social media services often include tools to keep such writings private, many are visible to a large number of people or even published openly on the web with a potential audience of millions. In this first, stand-alone chapter I will summarise the evidence and arguments I will further develop in the rest of this book. In Chapter 2, I outline the risks of disclosing personal information online on social media and who is at risk. In Chapter 3, I provide a detailed exploration of the academic theories which have informed my research. Chapters 4–6 draw on my own social media experience and research and on studies and statistics from researchers around the world to analyse some of the reasons why we reveal what we do on social media. The concluding chapter looks

ahead at how the social media landscape may change and suggests some ways educators, policymakers and the social media industry itself can and should influence this approaching future.

Digital media have been used as social media from their beginnings, of course, and risky self-disclosure went alongside the development of digital media itself. For example, Usenet newsgroups, the first discussion forums to be provided on the internet, featured a group about homosexuality (net.motss) as early as 1982, even though those who participated would be likely to be easily identifiable through their email addresses – anonymous email was not common at the time (Pfaffenberger, 1996). What makes this phenomenon particularly noteworthy now is an explosion in the scale of such activities. Early Usenet users probably posted messages in the belief that their only likely readers would be a few thousand people who were students or scientists like themselves.[1] Now not only has internet usage spread dramatically across the developed and developing world, but the technologies to enable sharing of a variety of personal information have become much more available and a variety of easy-to-use tools have sprung up and attracted large followings.

Some are designed around sharing one kind of data – for example, Delicious enables sharing of internet bookmarks and Foursquare enables location sharing. Many others started focused on a single task but developed additional functionality over time. Blogging tools like Blogger, Wordpress and Tumblr for example (and 'microblogging services' like Twitter) started as means to share text and later added the ability to embed a variety of multimedia forms. Flickr, Photobucket and Picasa were designed primarily around photo sharing but also enable discussion and video sharing. Social network services (SNSes) like Facebook and Google+ are umbrella services that enable (and encourage) the sharing of many different media forms.

At the time of writing, Facebook is the biggest and best-known social networking site. It claims that 727 million people use the site daily – 80 per cent of them from outside North America (Facebook, 2013a), but across the world one source found five other SNSes that are leaders in certain countries – Qzone, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Cloob and Drauglem (Cosenza, 2012) – and many other smaller and specialist sites. While outside developed countries the overall proportion of internet users is lower, the proportion of those connected who use SNSes can be very high. In China, for example there were 401 million bloggers – two in three internet users – 288 million users of SNSes and 330 million users of 'microblogs' (CNNIC, 2013, p. 27).

Not only are SNSes growing in size and variety across the world – viewing and participating on them is becoming a dominant element of internet use for many. For example, of the approximately 40 hours per month the average UK internet user spends online from a laptop or mobile device (Ofcom, 2013, p. 276), the average Facebook user spends eight hours using that site – longer than on any other site or set of related sites; Google's sites together amounted to 7.6 hours (Ofcom, 2013, p. 289). Social media are no longer solely or even primarily a youth phenomenon either. In the US in 2013, 71 per cent of all online adults had used Facebook, including 60 per cent of online 50–64 year olds and 45 per cent of those 65 and over (Duggan & Smith, 2013, p. 5). In the UK, the distinction between age groups is more marked but while 94 per cent of online 14–17 year olds use social networking sites, the proportion of 45–54 year olds, while lower, is still just over half (Dutton & Blank, 2013, p. 39).

A series of high-profile cases has highlighted the dangers of the kinds of online self-disclosure that can take place on sites like these. Much of the concern that has been raised to date about revealing information about oneself online – in the US and UK at least – has been related to the risks to children and teens of exposing themselves to older sexual predators. US media have reported that there are 50,000 sexual predators online at any given time (Hansen, 2005). A study which found that one in five young internet users in the US between 10 and 17 had been sexually approached on the internet is widely cited (Finkelhor, Mitchell & Wolak, 2000), and an advisor to a national children's charity in the UK asserted that at least 300 children had been sexually abused between 2002 and 2007 after being 'groomed' online (Brown, 2007). As I will argue in Chapter 2, however, academic research conducted to date suggests that while the abuse of children and teens using the internet is clearly shocking and should be minimised, it has been exaggerated in the public mind, while harms to reputation, interpersonal relationships and employability due to revelations made in the wrong context have received insufficient attention.

Imagine the plight of Stephany Xu, who in mid-2008 wrote an ill-advised would-be humorous posting to the Facebook group for the Princeton class of 2012. It was publicly mocked on a weblog about Ivy League colleges (Yu, 2008), and this in turn was picked up by Gawker (Tate, 2008), a gossip website which claims to have 5.3 million readers per month (Gawker, 2012). As a result (and in part thanks to her unusual name), more than five years later a search for her name on Google still

offers the articles as the first two links (which quote extensively from the original semi-public posting) and photographs of her.

Abby Margolis wrote a pseudonymous weblog, 'Girl with a One Track Mind', about her sexual activities, which she turned into a book, but her identity was revealed by a newspaper (Mikhailova, 2006) and she had to abandon her career as an assistant film director. Brooke Magnanti, who wrote a pseudonymous weblog, 'Belle de Jour', about being a part-time sex worker while finishing her PhD – subsequently published as a book and made into a television series – was similarly exposed (Ungoed-Thomas, 2009). Dr Magnanti says that having been pushed into revealing her 'double life... it feels so much better on this side. Not to have to tell lies, hide things from the people I care about' (Magnanti, 2009). Ms Margolis, who has had longer to contemplate the consequences of her blogging, was not as sanguine:

> Having to keep up a facade with everyone in your life is exhausting. I wonder, though, if she's ready for the inevitable media blitz and prepared for every part of her life to be held up to public scrutiny. Things will die down in the press once the story is no longer fresh news, but with one quick click on Google, Magnanti's legacy as the formerly anonymous prostitute Belle de Jour will continue to live on; sadly that may impact her life in ways she could not possibly predict.
>
> (Margolis, 2009)

These two were blogging pseudonymously, but even on SNSes where people generally use their real names they sometimes reveal very damaging information about themselves. A wanted fraudster had a former US justice department official on his friends list and led the police to himself after boasting of his exploits through his Facebook updates (BBC News Online, 2009), and one study of the public profiles of adolescent MySpace users found that 8 per cent revealed alcohol use, 3 per cent showed or talked about smoking tobacco and 2 per cent revealed marijuana use, although these would be illegal activities for most of these young people (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010).

Of course writing online about your sex life or criminal activity is at the extreme end of the spectrum of self-disclosure. People have lost their jobs or had their lives turned upside down because of much less obviously highly charged material. Sometimes social media users' carelessness is manifest – one news site simply collected and displayed public social media postings tagged '#ihatemyjob' (Kotenko, 2013).

Companies often lack coherent and well-publicised policies about what their employees can write, however – as a result, bloggers can find themselves fired simply for maintaining a blog in which they mention work or in which they share comments about customers or conditions that would be innocuous if shared around the water cooler. This phenomenon is sufficiently widespread that a new word has been coined to describe it – being 'dooced' – after the pseudonym of one of the best known early bloggers to be fired under these circumstances (Armstrong, 2002). Ellen Simonetti, an airline attendant with Delta Airlines in the US, appears to have been fired because she posted (non-sexual) pictures of herself in uniform on her blog (BBC News Online, 2004b), and Michael Hanscom was fired from a contract at Microsoft after posting a picture on his blog of some Apple Macintosh computers that the company had ordered (Hanscom, 2003).

A survey of the public and of human resources (HR) professionals across the US and Europe (cross-tab, 2010) reveals a potentially serious gap in perceptions of what companies should be able to look at online when they are considering people for employment. In the US, 79 per cent of HR recruiters searched for candidates online before hiring, and in Europe numbers ranged from 59 to 23 per cent. Yet although 43 per cent of Americans surveyed (and 56 per cent of 18–24 year olds) thought that recruiters judging their social networking sites was somewhat or very inappropriate, 63 per cent of recruiters *did* look at candidates' profiles, and the numbers are similar for examining video- and photo-sharing sites. What causes candidates to be rejected can be worryingly broad – the survey also found that in the US, 43 per cent of recruiters found 'inappropriate comments or text written by friends and relatives' could encourage them not to hire someone, and in France a similar proportion might reject a candidate because they showed 'poor communication skills'.

As the survey suggests, it isn't just self-disclosure that presents potential problems – social media users can also get others into trouble whether deliberately or inadvertently. Because our social actions are often bound up with and implicate others, greater self-exposure leads to greater exposure of others – whether intentional or incidental. For example, the well-known Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps found himself exposed in a tabloid newspaper after pictures of him using a cannabis pipe at a private party were circulated online (Dickinson, 2009), and the newly appointed head of UK overseas intelligence found the location of his home and other family details were accidentally revealed to anyone in London because his wife's Facebook settings had made

her profile visible (Evans, 2009). One survey found that between 60 and 80 per cent of bloggers never ask permission before writing about co-workers, employers, family or friends (Buchwalter, 2005). The situation of children in this respect is under-studied. Many are now growing up in a world where parents are increasingly documenting their lives in ways over which they have no control and which could result in future embarrassment. According to one UK study, two-thirds of newborns were pictured online, on average within an hour of their birth, and only 6 per cent of parents say they have never uploaded their children's pictures to social network sites (Press Association, 2013a).

Exposure in the media or being shamed in front of friends or employers may not be the only harms people face after ill-advised online comments or actions. Some find the traces they leave of their lives online collected and used against them by online vigilantes. In China and across Asia, where this appears particularly prevalent, the process of collective data gathering for public shaming is known as the 'human flesh search engine'. When Gao Qianhui posted a video online mocking the victims of an earthquake in the Sichuan region of China, her comments were distributed widely across online forums along with her personal contact details and information about her parents, culminating in her arrest by local Chinese police (Fletcher, 2008); and when a woman in South Korea subsequently dubbed 'Dog Poo Girl' left excrement from her dog on the subway, her action was exposed by a third party whose photos were put on a blog and subsequently picked up first by the local and then international press (Volkenberg, 2005).

Away from the headlines there is reason to believe that more and more people are likely to encounter other problems because of self-disclosure – for example, harm to their reputations and damage to their interpersonal relationships. Unfortunately research to measure these impacts is limited. One online survey of bloggers in 2004 found 36 per cent of respondents said they had encountered trouble because of things they had written on their blogs, and a similar number knew other bloggers who had encountered such problems (Viegas, 2005); another survey found just under 10 per cent had been 'in trouble' over something published on their blog (Buchwalter, 2005). US survey data (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006) hint at the scale of the problem – 13.7 per cent of US bloggers surveyed had had 'bad experiences because embarrassing or inaccurate information was posted about them online', compared with 2.8 per cent of non-blogging internet users. Moreover, focusing on the harms of which respondents are aware in studies that have been conducted to date may understate the problem, as friends

or employers may disapprove of what they read on someone's blog or profile without telling the authors. This also does not take into consideration harms that may result from the persistence of personal information visible online years into the future when individuals' life circumstances or public attitudes have changed, an issue that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Why focus on the online?

Problems with inappropriate self-presentation and miscommunication are hardly unique to the online world. Why, then, focus on the online? Because, this book will argue that these services allow new forms of risky behaviour and the nature of the technologies used often conceals the potential consequences of such behaviours. Moreover, as I will explore in Chapter 6, there is a market imperative that encourages those who provide such services to underplay these risks both to maximise usage generally and because the advertisers who fund these services can more effectively target users who have revealed more (or too much) about themselves.

Throughout human history, society has accommodated itself to a succession of new technologies, adopting them selectively and building new norms of behaviour around them (Bakardjieva & Smith, 2001; Lally, 2002; Lie & Sørensen, 1996; Silverstone & Mansell, 1996). Undoubtedly this will happen again, but there are two issues that must be addressed. Firstly, while social media have been adopted very broadly very quickly, the norms that will enable societies to adapt to them emerge more slowly, and while there is uncertainty about how we should adapt there is an increased likelihood of conflict and disruption. Secondly, precisely because these norms emerge more slowly, we might be at a pivotal moment where we may be able to influence their development. It does not appear likely that at this point we can (or should) stop the adoption of social media, but there are several potential ways in which we can adjust to their existence. Some suggest that they are inevitably making the idea of personal privacy obsolete and that this is broadly to be welcomed (Jarvis, 2011). However, if societies were to reach a new equilibrium of comfort with greatly increased and promiscuously recirculated online self-expression, we should seriously consider the potential consequences of this accommodation. If this future does not appeal, we must consider what alternative ways of coping with social media we should be advocating – a subject I will return to in the concluding chapter.

Why do we reveal what we do online?

Why then, given the risks which appear inherent in online self-expression that could reach a broad audience, do people continue to expose themselves to such risks in large numbers? Some have suggested that a new generation of young people – the heaviest users of these new tools – have a new, more relaxed culture of sharing their lives that this software helps them to express (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). However, as I will show in Chapter 2, this new kind of self-disclosure does not seem to be limited to 'digital natives', and indeed social media use is rapidly spreading through most of the population who are online. No single factor can explain this change in behaviour, but I have identified several different levels of influence that I will describe below and that will be explored in greater detail in the remainder of this book – macro-level influences are those that appear to apply across whole societies or across a broad range of technology users, while micro-level influences are those that affect people based on their individual outlooks, motivations and the particular interactions they have when using technologies and services.

Macro-level influences

First and fundamentally, the technology services that enable these practices are increasingly *easy to use* and *popular*. Thanks to what have been termed network effects, they have become sharply more attractive as more people go online and start using them (M. L. Katz & Shapiro, 1985). Indeed, once these tools have become sufficiently commonplace, it becomes increasingly socially awkward to opt not to use them (Baumer et al., 2013; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). Moreover, as the companies that run SNSes become larger and wealthier, they benefit from a variety of forms of media exposure. This typically begins with coverage of these services as novelties, and then rapidly journalistic coverage tends to reinforce the notion that 'everyone' is using them. This may be exacerbated because journalists are natural 'early adopters' of social networking technologies since they are middle-class, urban, networked knowledge workers. And, of course, the largest of these companies like Facebook and Google have the financial power to promote and advertise the benefits of the use of their products widely.

The technological tools used to access and contribute to these services are also increasingly *inexpensive* and *ubiquitous* – at least in the developed world, where a large majority of people under 65 access the internet regularly. Across much of Asia, mobile phones have for some time been

a leading means of accessing the internet – 78 per cent of Chinese internet users do so via mobile devices compared with 69.5 per cent who use desktops (CNNIC, 2013, p. 18). Using social media from one's mobile phone is also rapidly moving from a novelty to a commonplace activity elsewhere – 48 per cent of Facebook's users in 2013 were accessing it only via their mobiles (Lunden, 2013). This means that maintaining and updating one's online presence can be done anywhere. And thanks to GPSes built into mobile phones and other means of location tracking, the sharing of certain personal details like one's whereabouts can be done *automatically* without the user needing to lift a finger (and therefore without giving them the opportunity to consider the consequences). In Chapter 6, I will set out some of the ways in which business imperatives and technological developments appear set to further encourage the growth of online self-disclosure, while the harvesting (and potential misuse) of such information by governments and corporations seems also likely to increase.

The enabling technology and the companies that provide and support these services are not the only overarching factors that may be encouraging online self-disclosure. There is a long-standing but increasing *media interest in self-disclosure*. This has been noted since the mid-1990s, with the growth of the talk show on television, increasingly personal newspaper and magazine columns and the cult of celebrity across all media fuelled by personal revelations (whether real or PR-inspired) (Calvert, 2000; Niedzviecki, 2009; Rosen, 2005). As noted earlier, the media have publicised the increasing amount of personal revelation online and the services used to enable this and have also profited from it, as a steadily increasing proportion of published revelations about the daily lives of ordinary people and of celebrities has come to light online.

There are also factors working together that can make it difficult for people to use the tools available to protect their privacy when they post online. For users to employ privacy tools effectively they need to be aware of them and their capabilities, the tools must be sufficiently easy to employ, the users need to have used them correctly and, once they have been set in a certain way, the settings need to be effective and to remain so over time. There is ample evidence that a significant minority of users of social media services have difficulties with one or more of these stages. The fact that the technical capabilities, user bases and policies of these services often change rapidly does not help matters. Facebook, for example, started in 2004 as a service used by adult members of a small group of Ivy League universities in the US, whose profiles were visible only to other members. Now it is used by hundreds of