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## SHARING IS THE NEW PRIVATE: CONCEPTUALIZING SHARING AND PRIVACY THROUGH READER COMMENTS TO ONLINE NEWS

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### Abstract

Sharing, as a counterposition to privacy as a normative state, is under-theorized and under-conceptualized. Reader comments to online news accounts offer a space for public deliberation, and provide insight into how the users think and relate to the topic of a story. Leveraging this participatory space, we use semantic network analysis as a starting point to map the conceptualization of sharing as it relates to information online. In doing so, we attempt to further conversations about sharing as it relates to privacy, and demonstrate how these concepts might relate to one another, if at all.

Publicness and privacy are frequently positioned in opposition, especially with respect to personal information that is created and made available through digital technologies and platforms. Conceptualized as a boundary management process, the accomplishment of privacy is envisioned within a continuum (Ford, 2011) or a dialectic (Altman, 1975; Jurgenson & Rey, 2012; Petronio, 2002). Such binary approaches to privacy have not advanced the understanding of how it is accomplished in the everyday however, and especially in the use of Web 2.0 communication technologies such as social network sites, microblogging and photomessaging.

van Dijck (2013) offers sharing as an alternative counterposition to privacy, and argues it is the normative practices of sharing in online spaces that have evolved and continue to evolve, and not privacy norms. These sharing practices have techno-cultural and socio-economic dimensions that shape the strategies and behaviors used to accomplish privacy. We know that sharing often occurs in relation to privacy, with consideration to audience and kind of information (Bellotti & Sellen, 1993; Lederer, Dey & Mankoff, 2003; Olson, Grudin & Horvitz, 2004), but how do we understand the notion of sharing by itself?

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Shifting the focus from privacy as a goal state or value to sharing as a normative state is a subtle move that acknowledges agency of the individual in determining privacy outcomes. Instead of a dialectical tension between public and private, or a continuum of closedness and openness, a focus on sharing acknowledges that these practices may offer indirect benefits to social media users that are only peripherally related to a specific relationship or context. These may include economic benefit such as preferential pricing on products and services or social benefit such as increased social capital resources and reduced loneliness. While explications of privacy and its dimensions are numerous (e.g., Allen, 1988; Altman, 1975; Westin, 1967; Nissenbaum, 2010), the idea of sharing as a normative model of interaction and information sharing is under-theorized and under-conceptualized. This limits the ability to examine how sharing maps to privacy, especially in online spaces.

Reader comments to online newspaper accounts offer a space for public deliberation and share characteristics of the social and analytical processes associated with public discourse (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009). Borrowing from blog platforms, newspapers began allowing comments on their stories in 2004. For ten years, newspapers have embraced this participatory technology with the hope that it would energize the public sphere (Hughey and Daniels, 2013). They have been quite successful relative to other participatory online spaces. Importantly, a recent Pew study found that 25% of internet-using adults have commented on an online news story or blog item about news they read (Purcell, Rainie, Mitchell, Rosenstiel & Olmstead, 2010), marking this activity as more widespread than the use of Twitter or Reddit, particularly among adults in older age groups.

While users appreciate being involved in the news process via commenting, this involvement is admittedly limited. Journalists prefer readers to be relegated to the comments section, where they are unlikely to influence the news process (Singer, 2006). Though only a small percentage of readers leave comments and read comments on newspaper articles online, Reich (2011) identifies that readers who chose to comment prefer to do so in a topical and item-oriented manner. In other words, when readers comment, they feel their perspective contributes to the topic at hand. So while not directly influencing the news making process, comments provide insight into how the users think and relate to the topic of the story.

This study attempts to utilize the value of newspaper commenting activity on articles and blog posts by journalists related to the sharing of information online as a starting point for the conceptualization of sharing as a normative value. We use semantic network analysis as the vehicle to map how individuals have commented on such articles. Semantic network analysis is a technique to examine textual content by determining the occurrence and proximity between pairs of words within a message or group of messages. The frequency, co-occurrence, and distances among words enable the mapping of a network, with concepts as the network nodes and the relationships between concepts as edges. Effectively, this network becomes a cognitive or mental map of the attributes of a phenomenon, a representation scheme for how the phenomenon is discussed. Mapping the comments in this way effectively permits the exploration of meaning that is embedded within the texts--the important dimensions to how a phenomenon is conceptualized and how these relate to one another. In short,

comments on news stories related to sharing and personal information gives a picture of how these commenting readers think about the topic, its important attributes and related concepts.

We examine reader comments on 128 news stories and blog posts related to sharing and personal information posted online that were published in the New York Times between January 1, 2012 and December 31, 2013, for a total of approximately 13,200 reader comments. The New York Times moderates its comments for “personal attacks, obscenity, vulgarity, profanity (including expletives and letters followed by dashes), commercial promotion, impersonations, incoherence and SHOUTING” (New York Times, 2013), and either approve or reject comments as they are posted by readers. Despite this moderation, this commenting activity speaks to notions of Habermas’ public sphere. Readers who comment on these stories may exhibit agency in resisting public agendas as set by mainstream media (Papacharissi, 2009) and may direct us toward an initial understanding of how readers conceptualize sharing, its norms, and its other unique dimensions.

Through this semantic network analysis of New York Times comments, we intend to begin a discussion on sharing and how this idea is situated to understandings of privacy. These concepts do not map neatly as a binary as they incorporate different goals, risks, and tradeoffs. Our goal is to demonstrate some of the ways in which sharing is considered, talked about, and deliberated in public forums to further conversations about sharing as it relates to privacy, and demonstrate how these concepts might relate to one another, if they do at all.

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