

Social Media Privacy: User Behaviors and Expectations

Raymond Papp
The University of Tampa

Melissa Walters
The University of Tampa

Erika Matulich
The University of Tampa

Abstract

Social media refers to various classes of Internet-based applications by which parties interactively connect, interrelate, and, perhaps most significantly, create and share user-generated content (cf. Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, Kietzmann et al. 2011). Social media use has expanded dramatically over the past decade in terms of user base, user demographics, and outlets utilized (Pew Research 2018, Raine 2018, Smith & Anderson 2018). Users of social media are largely focused on connectivity, convenience, and sharing, with the majority of users routinely participating on multiple social media outlets on a daily basis (see Duggin & Smith 2013, Ngambeket 2012, Pew Research 2018, Smith 2012, Srinivasan 2012, Smith & Anderson 2018). Most users have few reservations about posting personal information on social media sites and will readily share such content with those parties designated as “friends” (Fox 2012, Srinivasan 2012). The open platform of social media outlets and the habitual sharing of personal information makes users attractive targets for exploitation and exposes them to a myriad of online privacy abuses and risks (Ngambeket 2012).

Recent incidents such as the Facebook Cambridge Analytica scandal have focused a great deal of interest on social media privacy concerns, policy, and law (e.g., see Ratnam 2018). Social media and privacy are arguably at odds, with some asserting that users implicitly waive their rights to privacy when voluntarily sharing via social media outlets, and others intimating that stronger policies and laws are needed to protect user privacy (see Claypoole 2014, Privacy Laws and Social Media, 2018, Sableman 2016). But is the central issue just a problem of social media policy and/or privacy law, or is it also a matter of user choice (i.e., where they go, who they “friend”, what they share) and the corollary privacy implications of such social media sharing behavior (cf. Sableman 2016)? This paper presents the results of a survey study designed to explore social media use, sharing behavior, and privacy concerns. Survey results were assessed relative to the concept of “reasonable expectations of privacy” to reveal some thought-provoking insights into the conflict between social media use and privacy expectations/rights. The paper closes with a reflection on the nature of social media privacy, emerging trends and generational differences, and directions for future research.

Keywords: social media, “friends”, sharing, privacy

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