

The need for privacy versus the urge to reveal the self



Social interaction and communication are key elements of our society. Individuals reveal personal information about themselves to others — for instance with a view to deepening a relationship. Since nowadays, social relationships are oftentimes maintained via social networking sites, instant messengers, or other social media platforms, personal disclosures can reach larger audiences than originally intended and put people in a difficult situation with regard to their privacy. Still, many people use social media platforms to satisfy their urge to disclose the self in order to build and maintain relationships and gather social support.

Social media platforms are suitable for this need satisfaction because they provide features allowing for intense self-presentation and impression-managing activities. This, however, entails manifold privacy challenges. For instance, people might lose control over the spread of personal information and identifying data. This, in turn, might lead to psychological consequences, which can be threatening to users' perception of autonomy.

Psychological variables in the calculation of privacy

The [privacy calculus approach](#), which is used to explain the motives for users' self-disclosing activities despite potential harms, claims that users calculate risks and benefits of disclosing the self and base their decision to reveal or withdraw personal information on the outcome of that calculation. A potential problem, here, is that social media users usually believe that they are aware of their online privacy risks, and that they know how to manage their disclosures, which can be based on false perceptions and might lead to biased calculations, resulting in unexpected privacy harms.

We addressed this topic in our recent [article](#), with the aim of summarising the research on online privacy in social media and the psychological processes behind users' online behaviour. Our goal was to shed light on different psychological variables of social media users and explanatory approaches for why users' sometimes accept privacy risks in order to benefit from positive outcomes of self-disclosure, and sometimes not. In order to do so, we discussed the extent to which self-disclosure is a fundamental human motive – with a view to building and maintaining relationships. On the other hand, we reflect on the question whether privacy can also be regarded as a – in this case opposing – need. Recent research revealed that although people have an intrinsic urge to self-disclose, they try to weigh disclosure gratifications and privacy risks – if corresponding capacities and knowledge are present and retrievable. The motivation to consider privacy risks seems to be rooted in a fundamental, but secondary, human need for privacy. Since users might be overwhelmed by the contradicting needs of social interaction and individual privacy, we posit that users need to be supported in order to not be pushed by social media affordances to reveal more than they would do when deciding on a rational basis under consideration of both, positive and negative outcomes.

Understanding and guiding users' online behaviour

It is important to acknowledge that online privacy research first and foremost tries to understand how and why people behave in certain ways when actively using social media. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that especially when deriving potential interventions, a normative stance is taken in the sense that the general idea is to prevent people from disclosing "too much". Given that social media provide numerous opportunities to enable social interaction and thereby enhance people's well-being and life satisfaction, the solution cannot be seen in keeping people from using the platforms.

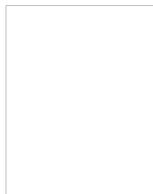
In our review, we introduce two currently discussed possibilities of helping users to regulate their personal self-disclosures on online social networking sites and to satisfy both needs – the need to disclose, and the need to beware an adequate level of privacy: (1) providing technical privacy support aiming at supporting real time privacy-decisions or (2) fostering privacy literacy and media competence.

Technical privacy support might be especially promising because it can help people in specific privacy decision situations and trigger their protection motivation through risk-communication, without challenging users' cognitive capacity too much. We reflect on future possibilities for finding ways to design technical privacy support (e.g. prompts or warnings on SNSs) in a way that they do not lead to reactance: There is a thin line between supporting users to regulate their privacy and patronising them.

Overall, the realm of personal self-disclosures, online privacy, and technical privacy protection is very sensitive and needs comprehensive investigation as well as ethical consideration of opportunities and risks.



- This blog post is based on the authors' paper [Mastering the challenge of balancing self-disclosure and privacy in social media](#), in *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Volume 31, February 2020.
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