Reclaiming Privacy: Reconnecting Victims of Cyberbullying and Cyberpredation

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Abstract

Current research on youths and self-disclosure falls into two seemingly unrelated areas: *disclosure management* by social networking teens and *disclosure violation* by cyberbullies and cyberpredators [29, 15, 28]. One area that has not been explored is privacy management in the *aftermath* of victimization. Parents frequently respond by restricting victims' Internet access, which may compound youths' victimization by isolating them from positive online relationships. This calls for a new response by authorities, parents, and victims that reflects the permeable nature of privacy and its management, which will better prepare victims for reconnecting with members of their social network after trust has been violated.

Keywords

Cyberbullying, cyberpredation, disclosure violation, disclosure management, social networking

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation: Miscellaneous. H3.4. Social Networking

General Terms

Human Factors, Design

Introduction
Despite warnings from parents and law enforcement, youths continue to disclose personal information in the process of exploring and exhibiting their evolving identities with friends and strangers in their online social networks [3]. Unfortunately, such personal disclosures can change from socially constructive to destructive, from innocent chats to cyberbullying and cyberpredation [13, 28, 16]. Arguably, current research on youths and self-disclosure falls into two seemingly unrelated areas: *disclosure management* by social networking teens and *disclosure violation* by cyberbullies and cyberpredators.

Disclosure management: Youths today are "digital natives" [22] who live parallel lives on the Internet and in the "real" world [29, 14]. Chiou (2006) found that youths were quite willing to self-disclose sexual information, regardless of the intimacy of the offline relationship they shared. Other studies have shown that age, gender, and relationship status are also related to the disclosure of highly personal information [20, 27]. Youths find their online connections beneficial, improving their relationships with friends and affording them increased social capital while reducing feelings of loneliness [12, 7, 2, 17]. Some youths consider their online relationships to be as real as face-to-face relationships and frequently befriend strangers [14]. Despite their desire to establish and maintain social connections, however, youths are relatively adept at managing their online privacy, from the various strategies they employ with friends and strangers on Facebook [8, 24] to guarding their personal information when shopping online [29].

Disclosure violation: Unfortunately, the personal disclosures that enable youths to develop and maintain social networks may also be used against them by cyberbullies and cyberpredators [11, 15]. According to recent online victimization research, approximately 1 in 7 youth experience a sexual approach or solicitation online [19]. Chats between sexual predators and victims show that, in addition to prolific grooming language and requests for face-to-face meetings, sexual offenders seek and exchange personal information with their victims in their efforts to assess vulnerabilities and boundaries [9, 13, 6]. This information includes victims' hobbies, relationships with parents, their names, ages, phone numbers and addresses.

The CDC and other researchers [5, 28] define cyberbullying in terms of the power differential between bullies and victims and the intensity of the attacks:

- Flaming – heated argument between victim and bully during a brief period of time
- Harassment – repeatedly sending offensive messages to the victim over an extended period of time
- Outing – posting intimate, personal information about the victim
- Impersonation – bully accesses victim's account and posts offensive material as the "victim"

Cyberbullying statistics provide an interesting mix, with one study showing both a decrease in victimization from 2009-2010 (from 28.7% to 20.8%) and also an increase in offending (from 11.5% to 19%) [10]. Ironically, this reported decrease in victimization appears to contradict the current uptick in anti-bullying legislation.

Cyberbullies and cyberpredators take advantage of the continual "erosion" of privacy by information technology [24], with social networking sites demanding the forfeiture of youths' privacy as the price of admission. From this perspective, then, the value of privacy is perversely diminished with youths lulled into a false sense of security in the name of connecting to others. To bullies and predators - especially when they are former friends of the victim - there is no "minimal" disclosure that won't lead to violation; therefore, even

the most discerning online youth may be at risk. Privacy management, then, cannot be absolute in social networking sites; in fact, it may be impossible. And one lapse or failure may be more than a youth can bear.

Reconnecting Victims
One area of interactional privacy and electronic aggression that has not been explored is youths' experiences in the aftermath of electronic violence. The standard response by authorities is to recommend that parents restrict or suspend victims' social networking usage [25]. Unfortunately, this may compound victimization by isolating youths from positive online relationships. Research suggests that these victims typically have low self esteem and frequently have problematic parental relationships [26, 1, 18], making Internet restrictions an additional punishment for youths. Ultimately, banning victims from the Internet may make victims vulnerable to future victimization [23].

This potential cyber-isolation calls for a new response by authorities, parents, and victims that reflects the permeable nature of privacy and its management, which will better prepare victims for reconnecting with members of their social network after their trust has been violated.

Acknowledgements

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