Ethics in Social Networking: A Framework for Evaluating Online Information Disclosure

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Abstract
Participation and membership in social networking sites has exploded in the past several years. Services such as Myspace, Facebook, and LinkedIn have evolved from niche communities to active societies. In addition to an increase in usage rates among certain demographic groups, there has also been an increase in the amount and type of information participants freely reveal. In this paper, we integrate decision making research from marketing, theology and privacy literature to explain information disclosure in online communities. In particular, we use Potter’s Box to propose a framework for evaluating the ethical implications of online information disclosure. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: social networks, ethics, online community

1. Introduction
Participation and membership in social networking sites has exploded in the past several years. Services such as Myspace, Facebook, and LinkedIn have evolved from niche communities to active societies. Facebook surpassed the 400 million worldwide users milestones this past April [1]. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg commented on the significance of the 400 million user mark by explaining that if you are building a website most of your users are probably Facebook users too and if they are not they will be soon [1]. Zuckerberg went onto highlight how each new Facebook service gets faster adoption rates amongst users. Facebook Mobile hit the 100 million user mark after three years and the most recently launched Facebook Connect which hit the 100 million user milestone in a mere fifteen months [1].

This rapid increase in participation has been accompanied by a progressive diversification and sophistication of purposes and usage patterns across these sites. Most social networking websites have a core set of features in common: an individual creates a profile (a representation of their selves and often times of their own social networks) for publication on the website. This profile offers viewers an opportunity to peruse user profiles, with the intention of contacting or being contacted by others. These connections afford users the opportunity to network with business professionals, reconnect with old friends, find a new job, etc.

In addition to the staggeringly high usage rates among certain demographic groups, so, also are the amount and type of information participants freely reveal. Category based representations of an individual’s broad interests are a uniform feature across most networking sites [2]. These categories include a person’s hobbies, literary background, political views, sexual preferences to name but a few. In addition, personally identifiable information (such as contact information) is often times provided and intimate pictures of a person’s private life and social circle are often displayed as well [3].

Such apparent openness to reveal personal information to vast networks of loosely defined “friends” calls for a closer look at the ethical implications of the decision at hand. IS researchers have explored social networking in diverse contexts [4-8]. Specifically, [9] investigates issues of trust and intimacy in online social networks, [10, 11] focus on participants strategic representation of themselves to others; and [2] discusses harvesting online social network profiles to obtain recommendations. In this study, we focus on the ethical decisions involved in participating in a social networking site. The implications on an individual’s privacy are undeniable when discussing the posting of personal information anywhere on the Internet let alone in an environment as loose as a social networking site, but to date the ethics of the decision to actively participate have not been examined. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was recently quoted as saying that “privacy was an outdated social norm”. In the virtual online communities that are formed within these social networking sites this appears to be true. Previous research has demonstrated that online relationships develop in social networking sites despite perceived...
trust and privacy safeguards being weak [12]. The implications of which become magnified and are of particular interest to both the private sector (marketers, clients, investors) and the public (legislation of privacy issues).

In this paper, we develop an ethical framework used to evaluate the ethical decisions involved in participating in a social networking site. We integrate research from three diverse yet relevant fields - marketing, ethics and privacy literature - to explain individual user information disclosure on social networking sites. In particular, we use Potter’s Box to propose a framework for evaluating the ethical implications of online information disclosure.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. We first elaborate on social networks in section 2. In section 3 we introduce and discuss an ethical framework of social networking. Then we discuss the implications of this framework on the individual user in Section 4. Section 5 discusses the implications of Potter’s Box on research and practice. Finally, we summarize our findings and conclude in section 6.

2. Theoretical development
While social networking sites share the basic purpose of online interaction and communication, specific goals and patterns of usage vary significantly across social network sites. The most common model is based on the presentation of the participant’s profile and the visualization of his or her network of relations to others – such is the case with Facebook. For the purposes of this study, we define [13] a social networking site as a web based service that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and share their social networks. This can result in connections between individuals that would not otherwise be made, but that is often not the goal, and these meetings are frequently between "latent ties" [14] who share some offline connection. On many of the large social networking sites (SNSs), participants are not necessarily "networking" or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network. Online social networking sites can therefore morph into a variety of things including online classifieds at one end of the spectrum and blogging at the other.

First, a user’s anonymity varies from site to site. In popular sites such as Facebook the use of real names to represent account profiles to the rest of the online community may be encouraged. Or the use of real names and contact information could be openly discouraged as in the dating website Match.com, that attempts to shield the personal identity of its users by making the linkage to their online persona more difficult [3]. Regardless of the approach to identifiability, most sites encourage the publication of personal photos.

In addition, the type of information revealed or elicited often centers around hobbies and interests; however, it is extremely common for users to post information that is intended to be semi-public information such as past and current schools and employment; private information such as drinking, drugs, and sexual preferences and orientation; and open-ended entries [3].

Also, visibility of information is highly variable. On certain types of sites (i.e. dating sites) any member may view any other member’s profile. On sites such as Facebook (no pseudonyms required) access to personal information is limited to “friends” that are part of the direct or indirect network of friends belonging to the profile owner [3].

Given all of this, anecdotal evidence suggests that participants are willing and happy to disclose as much information as possible to as many people as possible. This study presents a framework that can be used to evaluate information disclosure in online communities.

2.1 Online community
Online communities are conceived as continuous communication relationships that are computer mediated [15]. To date, IS researchers have studied communities of practice (CoPs) extensively in an effort to better facilitate the creation and dissemination of knowledge within organizations [16-18]. Online communities have similar characteristics as CoPs. Like CoPs, they are “collaborative” which help to “develop shared understandings” and facilitate “relevant knowledge building” [17]. However, unlike CoPs, online communities are not affiliated with a firm and have the potential to be accessible to a larger user base [19]. Online communities are also less amenable to organizational control because members of the community are not affiliated with a single organization, often times being comprised of members with absolutely no affiliation or knowledge of each other outside of the community. Wellman and Gullia [20] described the online community as a relational community, concerned with social interaction among its members. These are interest-organized communities, such as hobby clubs or spiritual groups,
facilitating virtual collaboration among community members with the potential of transforming the activities of off-line into an online context [21, 22].

Prior CoP literature has identified these communities as having two key functions: (1) the creation and dissemination of knowledge and (2) the socialization and development of social identity of members [17, 23-25]. Prior research has shown that the social interaction supported by technology is crucial to the success of online communities [26-28]. Additionally, human-computer interaction (HCI) research has shown that website attributes (e.g. usefulness and ease of use) influence member participation in online communities [29, 30]. Regardless of the perspective taken, researchers agree that online communities can be made feasible by the presence of groups of people who interact with specific purposes, under the governance of certain policies, and with the facilitation of computer mediated communication [31].

2.2 Social network theory and ethics
The relation between personal ethics and person’s social network is multi-faceted. In certain scenarios we want information about ourselves to be known only by a small circle of friends. In other scenarios, we are more comfortable sharing information about ourselves to unknown strangers, but not to our family and friends.

Social network theorists have discussed the relevance of relations of different depth and strength in a person’s social network [4, 5] and the importance of weak ties in the flow of information across different nodes in a network. Network theory has also been used to explore how distant nodes can get interconnected through relatively few random ties [6-8].

While privacy is likely at risk in social networks, information is willingly provided by users. As a result, whether or not to post information comes down to an ethical decision made by the individual user whether or not the material is to be published on the site.

3. Ethical framework for decision-making
One aspect about moral reasoning is that it is often times a topic for discussion, but seldom one that is ever the basis of action. The authors suspect that individual social network users accept that privacy may be at risk and are fearful that any ethical issue could potentially cause embarrassment. However, users provide information willingly. There are several factors that drive individuals’ decisions on social networking sites: such as signaling [11] because the perceived benefit of selectively revealing data to strangers may appear larger than the perceived costs of possible privacy invasions; peer pressure and herding behavior; relaxed attitudes towards (or lack of interest in) personal privacy; incomplete information about the risks of privacy loss and the implications of such; faith in the networking service or trust in its members. In the following paragraphs we present an ethical framework for decision making scenarios on social networking sites and the implications of such.

What then is required to construct a defensible ethical decision? Moral justification is possible when a pattern of moral deliberation is outlined and where considerations are outlined and given appropriate weight. In essence, it is a systematic way of looking at ethical analysis that provides a guideline for action.

Dr. Ralph Potter of the Harvard Divinity School has developed a model of moral reasoning that sizes up the circumstances, asks what values instigated the decision, what ethical principle is feasible, and what social groups are the recipients of one’s loyalty. This is of particular interest in a social networking context because our social boundaries are blurred between close intimate “friends” and “friends” that are “friends” of your “friends” and then “friends” of their “friends”. The Potter Box [32] is an ethical decision making framework utilizing four categories which Potter identifies as universal to all ethical dilemmas.

![Figure 1. Potter’s Box](image)

In implementing this model, the decision maker is asked to discern the values that instigated the decision, the feasible ethical principles, and the social group that is the recipient of one’s loyalty. The process allows an individual to systematically analyze the potential outcomes of a particular decision by giving careful consideration to the issues of loyalty and long-term relationships. As the model shows, the first quadrant forces the participant to define the circumstance; the second examines the values surrounding the
circumstance. The third quadrant appeals to an ethical principle, and the fourth examines the clarity of one’s loyalties [33].

Potter’s Box serves as a decision making tool in social ethics combining the need for an appeal for an explicit moral principle with the need for addressing the sociological values of the culture and the assignment of loyalties to a specific individual or group. It combines these elements to generate a conclusion that is morally justified. This is done by using the box as a cycle and asking relevant questions in each quadrant. The cycle is initiated when one first focuses on the ethical principles and is culminated by examining the question of loyalties. Each stage of the cycle defines and clarifies the process and the elemental relationship of each quadrant to the others. The process requires several interactions for a morally justified conclusion [33].

This process was extended [34] by refining Potter’s original model to highlight the main elements involved in making an ethical decision. Strassen’s model not only expands on the underlying reasons to which ethical decisions are subject but depicts the possible interaction between the four quadrants [34]. For the purposes of this study the model has been refined to highlight the ethical decision making process in social network participation. This model not only expands on the underlying reasons to which ethical decisions are subject but depicts the possible interaction between the various quadrants. According to this model, ethical decisions are affected by four dimensions:

1) The empirical definition of the situation, which includes various situation specific variables (such as perceived risk and legitimacy of various alternative courses of action) that might affect the individual’s perception of the situation at hand (i.e. posting an incriminating picture of oneself).

2) The moral reasoning dimension, which includes the three major normative theories of ethics: rule-deontological, act-deontological, and teleological. It also adds the theory of divine command, “where principles are justified because they are god given” [35].

3) The theological dimension, for which one explanation is that an ethical thought requires some answer to the existential question, “Why ought I be moral?”

4) The loyalties dimension, which focuses on the groups that might influence the individual’s ethical perceptions.

The extended model adapted for the purposes of this study (see Figure 2), like Potters Box, provides a means to further illustrate the constructs underlying the ethical decision making process. The adapted model used in this study provides a framework for justifying an ethical decision regarding an individual’s information revelation in a social networking context. This model also addresses the salient elements in reasoning though social network moral decisions, so that the discussion can move beyond situation specific ethics to why an individual makes a particular decision given the outcomes being sought [33].

The models also demonstrate how two individuals may arrive at opposite or conflicting conclusions yet have ethically defensible decisions. By illustrating these different yet “defensible” positions, the models allow the participants to recognize the factors that made their particular decision the correct one.

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**Figure 2. Elements Involved in Justifying an Ethical Social Networking Decision ---Adapted from Potter [32] and Strassen [34]**
4. Ethical framework and the social network user
The following subsections highlight the complexity of the ethical decision at hand. Below each quadrant of the social network ethical framework is explained in more thorough detail.

4.1 Empirical definition of the situation
The ethical decision at hand in most social networking revelation situation is influenced from a variety of sources. The first element that must be considered by the individual social network user is what threats they may be exposing themselves to by posting the personal information in question. Secondly, a consideration has to be made towards the issue of perceived risk and alternative courses of action. The authority in a specific scenario is often times multi-faceted in that certain information revelation actions are intended for different “friends” within the individual user’s social network. For example, offline social networks are made up of personal ties that can only be loosely categorized as weak or strong, but in reality are extremely diverse in terms of how close and intimate a subject perceives a relation to be. On the contrary, online social networks often overly simplify these intricate connections into a simplistic binary relationship: “friend or not”. This limits an individual user’s ability to change or mask their value system online because everything that is posted is available for all “friends” to see, regardless of how strong or weak the tie.

4.2 Mode of moral reasoning
In theology, Divine Command approaches to ethics tend also to be deontological in approach. Something is moral because God commands it and something is immoral because God forbids it [36].

Deontological forms of moral reasoning focus on whether a particular moral action is intrinsically “right” or “wrong” and usually right and wrong are deontological categories. This is multi-faceted issue in the sense that “right” and “wrong” will vary dependent upon the “friend”. The most famous Western philosophical version of this is German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Kant argued that actions were either right or wrong regardless of consequences. He argued that one could deduce unbreakable moral rules from a universal categorical imperative [36]. First, to be moral, an action must be universalizable, i.e., one must be willing that everyone should do it. Second, an action is moral if it never treats persons merely as means to an end, but always treats persons as ends in themselves [36].

By contrast, teleogical approaches to ethics place more emphasis on goals or outcomes. Presently, the most predominant version of teleological ethics is utilitarianism. An action is Good (“good” and “bad” are theological terms as “right” and “wrong” are deontological terms) if it leads to the most happiness for the most people with the least unhappiness for the least people. Utilitarianism is associated with the British lawyer Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and his disciple, the civil libertarian John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) [36].

4.3 Center of values or loyalties
“Friend” takes on a variety of definitions, some users are willing to accept anyone as a friend while other users stick to a more conservative definition [10]. However, in most instances users tend to list anyone as friend that they do not actively dislike [10]. Ultimately, this means that people are indicated as friends even though the user does not particularly know or trust the person [10]. From the group standpoint, Donath and Boyd [11] explain that while the number of strong ties that a person may maintain on a social networking site may not be significantly increased by these online communities; however, the number of weak ties one can form and maintain may be able to increase substantially because the technology is well suited to facilitate this type of communication with these weak ties. An online social network ultimately can list “hundreds” of direct friends and literally hundreds of thousands of additional within three degrees of separation [11, 37]. Ultimately, this implies online social networks are both larger, vaster, and have much weaker ties as compared to offline social networks. In other words, thousands of users may be classified as friends of friends of an individual and become able to access their personal information, while, at the same time, the threshold to qualify as friend on somebody’s network is low [3]. Therefore, decision at hand is more complex in nature from the standpoint that the revelation of information on an online social network is exposed for all to see.

4.4 Ground of meaning or theology
Why should I be moral? This is the underlying factor which many social network users face in their decision to post private information. On a higher level, what is moral and what is not? It comes down to a variety of factors that will be individual specific. It is human nature to act in one’s best interest; however, one’s best interest is variable on a case by case basis. It is the process of justifying one’s actions that enables them to formalize their decision to reveal personal information about themselves.
5. Discussion
This study integrates research from three diverse fields to explain information disclosure in online communities. According to Potter’s Box there are four dimensions that affect ethical decision making. We posit that these dimensions are applicable to social networking and the implications of which should be of keen interest to both the private and public sectors. The box serves as a guideline moving from one box to the next. The modified Potter’s Box adapted for a social networking context serves as an exercise in social ethics. It combines the need for an appeal for an explicit moral principle with the need for addressing the sociological values of the culture and the assignment of our loyalties to a specific individual or group in order to generate a conclusion that is morally defensible (justified). This is done by using the box as a cycle. First, by asking the relevant questions in each quadrant; then expanding it as a circle whereby you focus on the ethical principle, and finally examine the question of loyalties. Each cycle redefines and clarifies the process and the elemental relationship of each quadrant to the others. It is a process that requires several iterations for a morally justified conclusion.

The moral justification ultimately relies on the explicit moral principle selected. Although, often articulated, the need for alternatives available for moral justification (principles) in ethical decision-making on information disclosure is often a befuddlement for the social network user. Most often times only considering the ethical decision and privacy implications that result only for a second or not at all. The proposed framework represents an initial attempt to present a comprehensive view of ethical information disclosure in social networking. It can serve as a foundation for future studies on online information sharing in this digital age.

6. Future research
The proposed framework presents numerous fruitful avenues for future research. Future studies should conduct a qualitative assessment to explore the intricacies of ethical decision making in this context. Following the qualitative assessment, quantitative studies should be used to develop and assess a replicable research model. The model could be tested in various online contexts such as online dating and professional networking. Given the impact of demographics on social network website utilization, future research should explore the impact factors such as age, gender, scope of network, and ethnicity on ethical information disclosures within online communities.

7. Conclusion
Online social networks form virtual communities (online communities) for which users register and identify with connecting them to not only their direct “friends”, but also their indirect “friends”. Information revelation onto the site and thus into the community allows provides both friends and extended friends the opportunity to view private, potentially sensitive information. This framework serves as a foundation for future research into the ethical decision making process of social network users.

7. References
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