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Understanding privacy

A study of LinkedIn and Facebook use among Brazilian young-adults

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Abstract

The following pages show how Brazilian young adults, users of LinkedIn and Facebook perceive privacy in these social media websites as well as the effects of perception on their behaviour online. I conducted an analysis of their media ideologies and idioms of practice in each of these social mediums in consonance with their self-presentation and information disclosure as well as their concepts of “public” and “private”. The analysis showed that both their idioms of practice and media ideologies affected their online behaviour as well as their individual definition of “public” and “private”. The results revealed the presence of aspects of conviviality and of the emerging concept of the “good neighbourhood” policy within their understanding of privacy and their forms of interaction in online environments. This paper is a result of research conducted as a final thesis for the master’s in Communication and Information Sciences, specialisation in Business Communication and Digital Media.

Keywords: social media; privacy; media ideologies; conviviality; the “good neighbourhood” policy.

Introduction

Since the creation of social media websites, there is a tradition in which researchers attempt to understand how its users behave and perceive online settings, the different forms of interpreting “public” and “private” concepts as well as the fashion of their online information management (van Dijck, 2013). Further, it is believed that some variables of online interactions act as a steer towards a more “loose” engagement between users which “lacks in meaning”, deriving the concept known as conviviality (Varis & Blommaert, 2014).

There have been discussions that each social media user has an online identity, regulated both by different orders of normativity and by the individual characteristics of each online environment itself. For instance, prior to creating content for each website, users consider the type of audience and the specific context existing in each medium (Van Dijck, 2013). Such connection, alongside users’ understanding of “public” and “private” concepts provide a specific shape to the type of information disclosed online as well as the online identity they create and disclose in each setting. The result is an online discourse presented in forms of online identity and behaviour (van Dijck, 2013; Weber & Mitchell, 2008), outlined from one’s understanding of the online environment itself and the idioms of practice formed by the users of social media websites.

Gershon (2010) defines media ideologies as the way in which one uses and understands media, regarding its characteristics and purposes. As the norms and rules of interaction of each online environment may shape users’ idioms of practice, their individual identities and media ideologies may also differ while disclosing oneself and interacting with other users in each medium. For instance, if we consider individual identity as a “relational and socio-cultural

phenomenon that emerges and circulates in local discourse context of interaction” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p.585-586), the influences of both identity, media ideologies and idioms of practices potentially impact on one’s individual online behaviour and self-presentation. Altogether, these factors lead to the construction of one’s online repertoire (Varis, Wang & Du, 2011) which in a specific ethnic group or online community may become single idioms of practice and affect their choices regarding information disclosure, as well as their conceptualisation of “public” and “private” - these may also differ according to each audience and context.

Gathering the information above, it is perhaps safe to say that the use one makes of social media is directly connected to one’s media ideologies and the idioms of practice believed to be proper of the chosen medium. Moreover, one might take the audience into account prior to disclosing any content as well as to disclosing oneself. Varis and Blommaert (2014) describe this process as a type of “filter” which relates to the concept of conviviality. Defined as an agreement existent among individuals in a shared environment, conviviality emerges from the abstract need to avoid topics of personal nature or taboos in shared places in order to keep it as an environment “for everyone”. Moreover, different norms of social interactions may affect individuals in the form of a reflexive action which includes evaluation, judgment and policing of one’s behaviour: by watching how others behave, one reflects upon his or her own behaviour (Leppanen et al., 2015). Therefore, it leads us to believe that this normativity is a crucial piece to understand social interactions both online and offline, but in this case, in social media environments.

In order to evaluate such variables, I chose both Facebook and LinkedIn to compose the social medium element of analysis given the social-friendly manner in which Facebook connects its users (Skeels & Grundin, 2009) and the support given by LinkedIn on the development of an online professional identity containing one’s working life in a timeline (van Dijck, 2013).

In the light of the concepts abovementioned, I aimed for gaining insight of how Brazilian young adults understand privacy and of whether this conceptualization interferes in their online behaviour. Solove (2004) poses that there is a large amount of personal information available online which reaches both private and public sectors, and that are freely disclosed by social media users. He also describes that this “free flow of information” is only available given the ease in which people are willing to share them.

Therefore, I questioned several aspects of users’ approach towards both mediums, ranging from the ways in which they disclose their personal information as well as which norms do they abide to do so. For instance, I posed questions such as “*What kinds of distinctions do people using Facebook and LinkedIn make in terms of information-disclosure and self-representation on these social media?*”, “*What influences the decisions people make regarding what they post on Facebook and LinkedIn, and the possible differences in their use of these media?*”, and another which will be addressed along the way. The discussion that follows accounts for individuals’ media ideologies, the idioms of practice formed by the community, the type of information chosen to be disclosed in these websites, and the norms pertinent to LinkedIn and Facebook under their categorisation of personal/private and public environments. I sampled the participants through my own social media accounts, resulting in a group of twelve adults, age between 25 and 37 years old, eight males and four females. The data was collected through interviews which were recorded, transcribed, translated and incorporated to this study.

Self-disclosure, idioms of practice and distinctive use of social media

Our discussion begins with a remark given by Goffman (1959) stating that the identity of oneself is divided according to each social role an individual fulfils in society. For instance, the

subjects of this research stated to believe in both that “many people ‘pose’ to an image created only for Facebook” (G.F., 36 years old) and that “not even in real life you can be yourself (...) there are social rules and you must behave within these rules, so you cannot show yourself fully, neither in real life nor virtually” (M.J., 28 years old). Further, some participants stated that a process of self-categorisation takes place while producing content which works as a sort of “filter”, as described in aspects of conviviality. It is believed that this selection is also responsible for shaping one’s online behaviour in order to create a sense of togetherness, matching identities with certain social interactions (McKenna & Green, 2002; Postmes, Spears & Lea, 2000). For instance, F.L., 27 years old declared that if he wishes to produce and share any content online which is of a more personal nature, he prefers to do so within an online group where he knows that the participants will accept his comments and ideas instead of judging his actions. This preference illustrates how people with similar beliefs self-categorise into belonging to determined groups.

When it comes to talk about the self-categorisation process, it is important to highlight that social interactions influence and configures one’s individual discourse. After going through a “shaping process”, the final discourse presented by oneself is, therefore, a product of one’s identity plus a reflection of the norms of the niche and its interactions. For instance, the data collected revealed that five out of the total amount of participants believe that aside from morally offensive topics (i.e.: explicit sexuality and violence), there is a number of contents which are understood to be “forbidden” or strongly rejected in social media websites. Hence, participants also affirmed that the choice for a type of content to be published should indeed take the audience into account alongside the norms of interaction belonging to the medium.

Although almost half of the participants agreed with the fact that a filter must take place while generating online content, the remaining participants brought about some very interesting concepts. For instance, G.F. affirmed that instead of taking the audience into account, users are allowed to produce any type of content they desire, being up to the reader to select what they wish to see or interact with. Complementary, A.J., 26 years old, declared that “everything has a ‘limit’, but in the end, everyone posts what they want. If the person posts something (online), she knows that her/his own Facebook community will judge or criticise somehow, but I don’t think there is a specific subject that should not be posted”. Furthermore, S.A., 31 years old, defended that “there is a social media for every type of content and anything that runs “out of the line” of the purpose of the social media, is not appropriate”.

Approaching this latest statement of “a social media for every content”, the assessment of participant’s idioms of practice and media ideologies on Facebook and LinkedIn revealed that Facebook is generally seen as a more dynamic environment, suitable for self-expression and informal chatting with friends. Adversely, LinkedIn is considered to be used strictly for professional purposes. Moreover, their self-presentation as well as their behaviour (interactions) were unanimously different and adapted to each social media website. Features such as profile picture and personal statement were clear to be specifically selected to adapt each medium. For instance, A.J. revealed that her choice for a profile picture on LinkedIn wasn’t her own, but her employer’s: she was asked to wear formal clothing and the picture was made in black and white, in order to keep a more structured company identity on the company’s LinkedIn account. Finally, P.R., a 35-year-old journalist described this difference between mediums as “it is basically the same thing as going on a business lunch and going to have lunch with friends”, referring to the content divergency existent in between Facebook and LinkedIn.

There are many ways in which one displays oneself within the content of a profile, however, G.F. declared that the contrast she makes of each medium goes beyond photo exposure. She affirmed that “since we have more than one family name in Brazil, I use one family name on LinkedIn and the other on Facebook. It makes more difficult for everyone to find me in those websites and, at the same time, that’s how people know me in each environment” (G.F.). As stated by Kalinowski and Matei (2001) this illustrates the idea that one’s online presentation is directly connected to its observing audience and that their discourse matches each one of them.

The interviewees declared that not only a matter of self-disclosure, one’s presentation on a social media website is also a matter of ‘self-protection’. About 45% of the participants debated that the fear of having their personal information used for “bad purposes” is a real concern. As a compatriot of the participants of this study, I can clarify that the “bad purposes” stated by the subjects is directly related to the possibility of having information such as one’s current location or possession of valuable items disclosed to third parties, which can facilitate robbery, acts of violence, threats or similar actions. For this reason, all subjects declared to make use of privacy settings on Facebook which ranges from medium to extensive. They stated to categorise their friend’s list into groups and to carefully select what each of them is able to see, as explained by G.F. “mainly to avoid nose people”, but also as a matter of personal care.

The liker vs. lurker online behaviour is also another interesting topic worth mentioning. Nonnecke, Preece and Andrews (2004) define ‘lurkers’ as users who are usually introvert, remaining “behind the scenes” and preserving their privacy. For instance, the majority of the participants revealed to act more as ‘lurkers’ on social media websites, keeping them as places to gather information about news, job offers and network, which illustrates that there is much of an audience yet unknown by the majority of the online community.

The “good neighbourhood” policy

Nonnecke et al. (2004) mention that the attempt to avoid debates or arguments about social taboos is made given a need felt by oneself to preserve one’s privacy or safety. Unanimously, the participants declared that in order to maintain a good relationship in their online networks, they need to avoid posting about certain topics. “I have strong opinions about things and I like to express myself. I just learned that I can’t do it, otherwise, I will have problems with my friends”, declared G.H., 25 years old. In Brazil, this relates to a phenomenon which has always been mentioned among Brazilians as the “good neighbourhood” policy.

Literally translated from Brazilian Portuguese, the “good neighbourhood” policy is social agreement which shapes social interactions among Brazilians. Commonly known, this policy covers three specific topics which are entirely forbidden for questioning or arguing about during conversations in any scenario: football, religion and politics. It is believed among Brazilians that once these topics are avoided, it is possible to maintain a “good relationship” with others during a social gathering or while interacting online.

During the interview process of this study, all participants reasoned their “do or don’ts” of their social media networks on this policy, at some point. For instance, statements such as “politics, for example, when someone is criticising too much, I already block the person from seeing it. It is the good neighbourhood policy” (Z.M., 29 years old) are used as a justification for such action, which relates to aspects of conviviality in online environments, as well as maintaining a good relationship with others.

A couple of previous studies of conviviality define the features of good neighbours as an “open person who gets along with everybody” and who belongs in a subjective place called “ethos of mixing”, where interactions are pursued to simply liking one another, without engaging

with individual values or beliefs (Wessendorf, 2013; Varis & Blommaert, 2014). Although their data was collected from groups ethnically different, these researches connect with the “good neighbourhood” policy existent in Brazil, within Brazilians sharing the same online environment and perceiving one another socially. As evidenced by this study, users’ idioms of practice are shaped by the “good neighbourhood” policy on what concerns not only the type of content chosen to share, but also their online interactions, selection and categorisation of Facebook friends and LinkedIn connections. Blommaert (2013) discusses that by categorising friends one produces “a relaxed identity work, focused on ‘the pursuit of sameness, that nice feeling of being a community’” (p. 620). Although this addresses conviviality to an ethnically different group, we can apply such definition to individuals of shared nationality, though of different beliefs and values, interacting in social media networks and taking the rules and diversity of the community present in the environment.

Professional vs. personal: awareness and consequences

One of the primarily research questions of this study was *“Is people’s Facebook use influenced by awareness of potential consequences of their Facebook use for their professional life, and if so, how?”* as an attempt to explore the extent to which users consider Facebook as a private or public social media website. So far, we have discussed questions about self-presentation and information-disclosure, but let’s dive some more into privacy concepts regarding this medium.

One of the questions I asked my sample was *“Do you see Facebook as a private and personal social media and why?”*, which I believed to receive a direct and clear answer. Instead, I noticed hesitation and doubt from the participants. The answers I collected ranged from “not

private at all (...) when you post something on Facebook, the private becomes public” (M.J.), to “it is not private (...), but I consider it as personal still” (G.H.), and “as long as you use privacy settings, it is a private medium” (E.A.). The latter, however, gives the user the power and the responsibility to define whether the medium is public or private and that is what we will discuss further.

By categorising information into ‘public’ or ‘private’, one’s perception of information disclosure touches base with one’s media ideologies and idioms of practice. For instance, A.J. believes that Facebook is a private medium, but she states that the real answer to this question lies within one’s judgement and construction of his or her social media profile. Further, F.L. declared that it is crucial to know what is public and what is private for oneself prior to defining what subjects apply to social media websites. “I take a lot of care of what I post there, exactly because of it. It’s up to you. You control the content and it’s up to you to make it public or private.” (F.L.). Solove (2004) debates that, sometimes, people disclose important personal information without properly defining or differentiating ‘public’ and ‘private’ to themselves within the environment they wish to be a part of. I gathered a valuable illustration from G.F. which I find important to highlight. She explains that

“Facebook is divided in two aspects. Your profile is your house and the group pages are the street. In my house, I control, I put on my own rules. I welcome who I want, I treat people as I treat the ones I welcome in my actual house and you have the control to be and welcome whoever you want, and people must respect that as well. (...) Don’t go to anyone’s house to attack. Not even on the street. I believe that social media has become a reflection of the real world. The online and the offline environment are everyday closer,

and you should behave in the same way in both environments. So, for me, your profile is your house and Facebook is both, public and private” (G.F.).

Understanding user’s perception of ‘public’ and ‘private’ in social media was an important variable to interpret their online behaviour. Although the features of the “good neighbourhood policy”, as above discussed, have already provided us with a sense of their management of online privacy, a few aspects of information disclosure seemed to conflict on their professional use of Facebook. For instance, when asked if they would hide information from their profiles if they knew that a corporate recruiter could be observing it, two participants stated that they would consider the scenario and remove some information from their profiles, while the remaining unanimously declared that would not disengage from posting anything or modify the content. As I gathered from the participants’ opinion, it is up to the recruiter to be thoughtful and cautious while seeking information about job applicants in social media networks. G.H. affirmed that “the recruiter must understand that the LinkedIn profile is a professional medium and Facebook is personal, even having content which I would not post on LinkedIn”. Similarly, S.A. believes that this (Facebook) is not the best tool to gain insight of potential future employees’ personalities, given a prejudice and judgement believed to exist in interpreting Facebook content.

“People like to post about happy moments and sometimes, there’s a sort of prejudice. Maybe someone took a picture with a glass of beer in his or her hand and didn’t even drink it. Maybe it was just for the moment itself, and by doing so, this person may be badly judged by the company” (S.A.).

This concern about a “bad behaviour” is discussed by Bohnert and Ross (2010) as a real and recurrent fact. They state that “if applicants post unprofessional (e.g., alcohol-oriented) information to their own websites, it seems plausible that recruiters will think of these applicants as not being conscientious (Bohnert & Ross, 2010, p.341-342). Therefore, being aware of professional complications derived from personal ideas or facts posted online can also affect their information disclosure and use of privacy settings on Facebook.

Out of the total number of participants in this research, six stated to have witnessed real life issues between the use of social media made by an acquaintances and their employers’ or even in their own work environment, which resulted in jeopardy of the employee’s life within the company.

Looking back at the beginning of this discussion, we can strongly highlight how do individual discourses change in terms of clear self-presentation when it comes to certain online settings. For instance, we saw that the tools used to outline the degree of self-exposure and truthfully express themselves was directly related to the audience present in it. Moreover, the discernment one makes between Facebook and LinkedIn seems to also result in the way one reveals oneself, which links both to safety issues and to the understandings of the media ideologies of each medium.

Throughout this paper, we have seen many features of conviviality applied to online interactions, but mainly to social media websites. If we understand this connection, it is possible to see that individuals shape their behaviour according to each online environment in order to keep a “polite” interaction. Further, the differences presented in the behaviour displayed on Facebook and on LinkedIn match the nature of each medium and connect with their perceptions of public and private, as well as with personal and professional views on each medium.

Therefore, through privacy settings and content management, users create a convivial online relationship with their network, shaping the idioms of practice and the media ideologies of each individual belonging in superdiverse online communities.

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