"Why Won't You Be My Facebook Friend?": Strategies for Managing Context Collapse in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

This poster presents a preliminary analysis of data collected from staff personnel at a large U.S. university regarding their use of the social network site (SNS) Facebook in their personal and professional lives. Sixty-five percent of online American adults now have a profile on a SNS, and Facebook is increasingly utilized in organizational settings such as universities as a tool for information dissemination, recruiting, and promotion of the organization and its programs. Analysis of interview data (N = 26) found that while social media outlets like Facebook offer a number of advantages for reaching diverse populations, navigating work/life boundaries on Facebook was a concern for many participants. Through the lens of context collapse—the flattening of multiple distinct audiences into a singular group—we explicate these concerns, focusing on participants' strategies for maintaining boundaries between their personal and professional lives.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H5.3. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Group and Organizational Interfaces.

General Terms

Human Factors

Keywords

Facebook, social network sites, work, context collapse, impression management

1. INTRODUCTION

Social network sites (SNSs) are increasingly part of the daily experience of millions of Americans: half of all U.S. adults (65% of Internet users) now maintain a profile on a SNS [1]. Facebook is the largest of these sites, with more than 800 million users, and 92% of adult SNS users in the U.S. have a profile on the site [2]. The primary reason for joining Facebook—finding and interacting with pre-existing connections—offers benefits such as simplified relationship maintenance and increased access to information. However, as users' networks on these sites grow, they are likely to become increasingly diverse because users are now connecting with people from different aspects of their lives, including family, friends, classmates, coworkers, and neighbors.

The concept of context collapse [3] describes the process by which

connections from various aspects of individuals' lives become grouped together under generic terms like "Facebook Friends." Context collapse is important when considering individuals' self-presentational goals on SNSs. According to Goffman [4], individuals engage in differentiated self-presentations based on their audience. These differences may be especially prominent when comparing an individual's performance in a professional setting versus a more social one, such as Facebook. Users are therefore faced with a number of decisions regarding the merging of these different contexts on SNSs, including whether or not to connect with coworkers on sites that are typically used for social activities; how to maintain boundaries between their personal and professional lives; and the extent to which they should share personal or family-related information on more professionally oriented sites. These tensions may be exacerbated when users' professional duties include managing a SNS profile for an individual or organization.

The present study presents a preliminary analysis of qualitative data from 26 interviews of university staff. Analysis focuses on the strategies they employ to manage context collapse across their personal and professional lives.

2. METHOD

This study is part of a larger research project examining how adult Facebook users engage with the site for a variety of information-based goals. Between fall 2010 and spring 2011, we invited 3000 non-faculty staff members from a large Midwestern university to participate in an online survey. A subset of respondents (N = 106) was recruited to participate in a follow-up study, including an interview. For the analysis below, we focus on 26 participants who volunteered information about their use of Facebook as part of their job and how they maintained boundaries—if at all—between their jobs and the rest of their lives. These interviews were transcribed, imported into Dedoose (an online data analysis tool), and coded for emergent themes. Through textual microanalysis [5], four inter-related themes emerged: social uses of Facebook at work, task-based uses of Facebook at work, context collapse concerns, and strategies for managing context collapse. Excerpts were extracted from interviews, assigned at least one of these codes, and weighted for their importance on a scale of 1-10.

Among those included in this analysis, participants were likely to be women (73%), White (84.6%), 39 years old (SD = 8.4), and have at least a bachelor's degree (88.5%). Participants spent an average of 64 minutes on the site per day (SD = 64.6) and had an average of 315 Facebook Friends (median = 265, SD = 275), of which 30 were fellow university employees (SD = 27.8).

3. RESULTS

In describing their use of Facebook at work, respondents discussed the benefits of using the site as a professional tool and the strategies they employed to manage their site use in a way that was consistent with their desired self-presentation.

3.1 Facebook as a professional tool

Participants' comments represented a range of attitudes regarding the instrumental benefits of Facebook in terms of professional tasks, ranging from enthusiastic embracing of the technology to deeming it inappropriate for work-related tasks. Those in communication or media-related positions were most likely to report using Facebook as part of their job, especially as a method for facilitating outreach to a variety of audiences. For example, a male participant who worked as part of a health-related outreach program on campus commented that Facebook was useful for sharing information and communicating with students: "It's a way to interact with students and give them information…to have contact with them." He said the program's Facebook presence has strengthened the program and increased interest significantly.

A more indirect use of Facebook for professional goals was discussed by some participants, who pointed to the benefits of sharing social information with their colleagues through the site. A male who worked as a television producer said connecting and socializing with colleagues through Facebook made him feel more comfortable approaching them in the future for information or other favors: "If I meet someone at a meeting and I connect with them on Facebook, I can remember what they do so I can go back to them if I need them for information or for my work."

3.2 Strategies for managing context collapse

While not true for all participants, several referenced a conscious desire to maintain contextual boundaries on Facebook and detailed the strategies they employed to keep the personal and professional aspects of their lives separate.

The simplest strategy used by participants to manage work-based context collapse was to keep those contacts out of their Facebook networks entirely or restrict access to just a few trusted coworkers. For example, one participant said, "This is my personal network. This is where I don't have to be politically correct, this is where we can be ourselves." However, at least one participant commented that this strategy backfired after her supervisor confronted her at work about why she did not accept the supervisor's Friend request. Participants also referenced more professional-focused SNSs such as LinkedIn and said they were more willing to connect with coworkers through those services.

A second strategy for managing context collapse referenced by several participants was creating multiple Facebook accounts, effectively partitioning off professional contacts from the rest of their network. A female office assistant described why she segmented her Facebook Friends in this way: "I wouldn't want a professor…to see updates about my daughter's potty training. So I just keep it separate because I can't keep up with the [site's privacy] changes." Her comment reflects Goffman's [3] distinction between front stage and backstage performances: she has a clear sense of how her "professional self" should act (i.e., her "front stage" performance), and she attempts to perform in professional settings in ways that reflect this understanding. If Facebook is her backstage (i.e., space away from the professional self), then keeping her professional audience separate makes sense. Another woman, who worked in alumni relations, echoed this rationale: "There are certain things I'll talk about with my family and friends on my personal Facebook page…I didn't really need alumni to see pictures of me in high school."

Finally, some participants resolved context collapse issues by adopting what Hogan [6] describes as a "lowest common denominator" approach. These users consciously avoided publicly sharing any content that might negatively impact their job or their relationship with coworkers. One participant, who worked as an assistant manager, said, "…there are people here [at the university] who use it to vent, who use it to talk about other friends, co-workers, and I don't think that's appropriate, so that's why I just stay away from [doing that]." This strategy suggests that while users may find benefits from connecting with coworkers, they may become more careful in making decisions about the content they choose to share with this more diverse network. More than any other strategy, this approach points to one of the negative outcomes that could be associated with context collapse; if users are only willing to share "sterilized" content, they may not be able to engage in meaningful interactions with their network and receive some of the benefits (e.g., social capital) that have been empirically related to SNS use [7, 8].

4. DISCUSSION

Facebook use is becoming increasingly commonplace in the workplace—offering users the opportunity to connect with coworkers through the site and potentially disrupting traditional professional communication practices. While participants recognized the benefits of social media to share information, interact, and reach out to diverse groups, many also worried about context collapse: the blurring of boundaries between users' personal and professional lives. To ameliorate these concerns, users pursued a range of strategies, including keeping Facebook "Friends Only," creating multiple accounts, and constraining content to only material appropriate for all Friends. As these sites continue to grow, a number of outcomes are possible: users may adopt these strategies for managing self-presentation to a greater degree, norms around professional communication may shift, or new practices may evolve. Future scholarship should examine these practices in order to better understand the challenges posed by social media and the ways users attempt to maximize the benefits while minimizing the risks of their use.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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