

facebook

and the privacy paradox

How social networking is changing our notion of privacy.

By Tim Cigelske

There was a time when many people didn't feel comfortable talking about politics or revealing their age and religion except to close friends and family. But today, many Facebook users voluntarily post that and other personal information online for an increasing number of people to see.

"Fundamentally, what we think of as private has changed," says Dr. Sarah Feldner, assistant professor of communication studies.

be posted on Facebook," says D'Urso, an assistant professor of communication studies. "It's an interesting pattern that emerges."

An estimated 85 percent of college students have a Facebook profile, making it a significant phenomenon shaping student experiences today. It is the most popular website in the country, and Feldner and D'Urso think that the sheer number of people engaged with this social network — approximately 500 million as of 2010 — point to the critical nature of research focusing on Facebook.

D'Urso and Feldner surveyed 642 undergraduate students who revealed that they have a strong concern about the privacy of their personal information and activities online, but at the same time they were willing to share more information to be a more connected member of the online world.

Despite changes in personal privacy controls on Facebook, students allow personal information to be seen by "friends," D'Urso and Feldner found. But the average student has more than 400 friends on Facebook — many of whom they don't know very well outside of the online arena.

"The term 'friend' has really changed in the past five years," D'Urso says. "A friend when I was in high school or college means really different things today, especially in an online context. Students

make a clear distinction between a real friend and a Facebook friend, but the online platform does not."

So what is motivating this increased social sharing with a widening audience? One possible explanation may be the way that Facebook changes the dynamics of a relationship. The site can often be used to learn more about people they meet offline, rather than to start new friendships online.

This information exchange can be a kind of currency, Feldner and D'Urso say. They relate this phenomenon to the concept of relationship reciprocity, and in this case people are giving information to start the relationship process. Users appear to be willing to exchange their own privacy to interact with or learn about others.

"If you want to have friendships on Facebook, you need to part with some of your information to make it worthwhile for someone to friend you," D'Urso says. "The more information you share in some ways, the more interesting you might appear to other users."

As social networking continues to grow, the professors see an increased need to continue studying the changing nature of informational disclosure and privacy. They say they have only scratched the surface of this issue. ■



Dr. Sarah Feldner and Dr. Scott D'Urso

Research by Feldner and Marquette colleague Dr. Scott D'Urso found that even among young users who say they are highly concerned with privacy, greater information sharing has become a social norm. They call this "the privacy paradox." "They may say I'm highly concerned with privacy," and yet their birth date, residence hall and hometown may all

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I would expect that next year, people will share twice as much information as they share this year, and next year, they will be sharing twice as much as they did the year before.”

— Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg

