Unclear Social Etiquette Online: How Users Experiment (And Struggle) With Interacting Across Many Channels And Devices In An Ever-Evolving And Fast-Changing Landscape Of Communication Tools

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People care and worry about how online and online/offline interactions should practically happen. They experiment with different tools and different visions of themselves in different situations, be they online or offline or across both. However, they feel there is no established etiquette about how purely online relationships should be conducted, but also how to transform relationships that began 'online only' into their social environments that reach beyond the Web. In this paper, I illustrate how user expectations of the desired practical experience conflict with the predominant model, "concentric circles of social distance," that underlies most tools/services. Through six strategies of user workarounds I show glimpses of models that users do employ as they struggle to find stable ground for moral and ethical behavior as they experiment with interactions online.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will talk about how users of the Internet experiment with interacting across the many and diverse online channels, tools, and devices in an ever-evolving and fast-changing landscape of communication tools, and how users are trying to integrate these with each other and their offline personae. While this paper is based on research originally conducted for other purposes, questions about online social behavior surfaced so repeatedly that we took a second look. What became clear is that users of the Web very often ask themselves some fundamental questions. How should one behave and interact online? What kind of behavior can one expect from one's partners in the online communication/interaction/transaction spaces from Social Networking to Online auctions and from Email and instant messaging to blogs and reviews? People raised these issues, since they feel there is neither an established etiquette on how purely online relationships *should* be conducted, nor on how to transform relationships that began 'online only' into their social environments that reach beyond the Web. Therefore, I looked for practical clues from the research data in my analysis. How do people calibrate their experiences with new forms and tools of communication on the Internet? How do they make sense and keep control of the digital relationships they're engaging in? I focused on the current experience of users on the web. Internet users struggle with two basic issues. One the one hand, there is the issue of establishing 'simply' the right behavior through and with online tools. How should one interact online, and what kind of behavior can one expect from one's partners in the online communication /interaction /transaction spaces from Facebook to eBay and from Email and instant messaging to blogs and reviews. What are acceptable and/or appropriate modes of behavior online? What difference does it make, if any, via which channel the relationship was originally made or built?

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Are Facebook postings different to a blog, do you behave different on Email than on Instant messaging systems, and what implications does it have if you shift communication channels? Is it ok to say something in one channel but not in another?

By telling representative stories from people I interviewed over the last two years in Germany, Switzerland, the UK and the USA, I will present six strategies on how users currently deal with ethically, morally and practically unclear situation for interacting with others online. Based on these insights from the research, I will then illustrate how the current models of personal relationships (most notably the model of concentric realms extending outward from ego) are proving insufficient, contradictory and unworkable for many users to be meaningfully applied in their online activities.

THE SETTING

So let me start with a story. In London, a research participant told us how he found himself crisscrossing the line of appropriate behavior on the web. It concerned the line between nosiness and stalking without intending to:

> So I get the link from Dave, 'my mate at the pub' and some pictures. So I look at the pictures. Then I see a friend of his, an acquaintance of mine. Who's with this cute bird? So I look up her profile. And before I know it, I find myself clicking away through her pictures, and then those from her last holiday. And then I realize, hey, what am I doing? What am I doing, since it's also 3 am, and I shouldn't be doing this. -- Oh well, just one more picture...

The story illustrates the two issues laid out in the introduction: what is an appropriate relationship online, and how does the set of those online relationships relate to those outside the online realm. Such qualms and uneasiness about how to incorporate the social affordances of new technology into the fabric of everyday life is not a new occurrence, but is analogue to what has been reported from other disruptive (at the time) media like the telephone and television (Gitelman 2006, Peters 1999, Marvin 1988). Etiquette is also different among age groups, as recent work has shown (e.g. Boyd 2007). On the other hand, there is the issue of how online relationships relate to offline relationships. How does one transform relationships that began online into their social environments that reach beyond the Web (e.g. Boellstorff 2008, Turkle 1995)? How should one achieve that? Where should be the appropriate checks and balances, and to what measures? When should one not make such a transformation, and what risks are associated with such transformations? Finally, what are the social interpretations and signals that are associated with such transformations? At the same time, there is a lot of interest in certain situations to bridge that gap; people are becoming aware that the offline and online parts of their personas or identities are more often meaningfully and purposely aligned (be it for 'selling your stuff on a crafts site' like on Etsy, 'networking for a better job' on Facebook or LinkedIn, or 'earning social capital from your online blogging identity', to name but a few examples we heard all in research sessions). But think also about people's profiles for online dating or blogging (Jones & Ortlieb 2006), social or professional networking (Gershon 2008), and online games (Taylor 2006,

Turkle 2010). Concurrently, users are unsure about the implications and unnoticed implications that their attempts of managing the processes of the flow between these nodes of identity creation and management. People have multiple experiences of relationships being conducted in offline realms only, in online environments only and even moving from offline to online environs, but they often feel especially unsure about relationships moving from the online to the offline. They don't know how these situations should be conceptualized, as Sue told us in the USA:

> So people who just began merely listened to your updates, have turned into people who're not just paying attention. Strangers have turned into acquaintance have turned into friends, just by communication online.

THE TOOLS ARE INADEQUATE

Only when they stop and think, do users question whether and/or how the behavioral and communicative affordances of the tools they are using are appropriate and/or acceptable for their online interactions. When they do reflect, however, users find that they are unsure or unclear about the impact and/or the consequences of the underlying models of relationships embedded in the tools they are using. Moreover, the tools, programs and applications they use for online interaction and communication continue to evolve at a fast pace, often incorporating significant implicit or explicit changes to the underlying assumptions and models. In their everyday lives, users find that the tools they're using don't allow them to have the kind of control over their social interactions the way they would like to. Hence, they experience leakage of information about them they would have liked to keep private, or intrusions into what they regard their private lives (see also Acquisti & Gross 2006, Strickland & Hunt 2005).

I'd like to tell you two stories here. A participant in Germany told us how he wanted to order something online, but when he gave the company the recipient information (for this single transaction, as he assumed); he couldn't use his full name because it was "too long." Finally, he chose his nickname instead. He received his goods, but a couple of weeks later, he started receiving junk mail from other vendors in the post, addressed to his nickname at his address. *"They sold my data, it's obvious. I was really disappointed,"* he told me. The other story is from a lady in the UK. She told us how she was befriended by a stranger on Facebook. Being concerned she followed up. Eventually, in this way, she and her family discovered that their father had had an affair. The mistress had befriended all members with the same surname (probably to learn more about her lover). Our participant described this as a clear intrusion into her privacy by being stalked or being followed with an undisclosed second agenda.

In both cases, the tools people were using (ordering process and communication networks with friends and family) were abused by outsiders to use/gain/collect personal information about them. Not all of that is totally unexpected. To the contrary, their experiences have led them suspect or fear such occurrences, or they have heard of them via acquaintances or urban myths. The shock, however, when they experience a leakage or intrusion is still something they feel strongly. Most of the people we talked to are aware that the diversifying online behaviors they increasingly engage in change our ways

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of interacting, even though the majority also stated that they'd regard themselves as more conservative (i.e. less daring than their friends or wider social circles). What all participants shared was the feeling that they have little control over what the social standards are or where they could be reliably learned about.

THE CONCENTRIC MODEL OF SOCIAL DISTANCE

Part of this has to do with the underlying model of social relationship for many of the communication tools and services. In most cases this is what I call 'the concentric model of social distance.' This concentric model of relationships is based on the idea that proximity – and consequently also intensity and importance – in social life is structured in concentric layers. Its detailed layers run along the following extending lines: "me, my spouse, my family, friends, acquaintances, and finally, strangers." This basic model (with variations) lies at the heart of almost all communication and interaction tools on the Web often representing the line of degrading trust or the intensity and/or frequency of social interaction, but always a model of social distance (See also Dunbar 1998, Zhou, Sornette & Dunbar 2005, Spencer & Pahl 2006, Curry 2010). Just think of IM, one of the older tools in this space. It came with presets for "family, friends and buddies," three concentric layers of social distance. Abstracted, and perhaps more publicly known, were the concentric layers "private, friends, public." The problem with this model is that it does not well represent people's real-life experiences (See Adams 2010). People find work-arounds, or try to ignore certain layers. In other words, they know that their social world is not structured concentrically. But they run into a fallacy. Since everyday users are often unable to formulate the experience of that finely meshed, complex and ever-changing social web of interactions, they fall back in explanations onto the over-simplified version of 'me, family, friends, strangers.' In this way they perpetuate the model. However, if you take the time in research to let users build out and create their social circles (See representatively Adams 2010), people come up with very different models.

USER STRATEGIES

In this paper I am not going to present detailed alternative models from user research. Based on research, which I conducted, I will outline in the following six strategies that people employ to gain a clearer view of and to maintain better control over their own and their counterparts' online interactions and behavior. These stories shine light onto emerging parts of these other models, and hope to be a call to the design anthropology community to take them further and to create tools that incorporate these requirements.

1.   **Lock-down, Restriction, Withdrawal**

Users choose to allow as little as possible with their data and restrict access to anything that could be linked between them and their data or their devices. Emily in California told me how she has set her Facebook profiles to the most restrictive possible, just in case, *"something changes again."* Regular checking isn't totally resolved, but it reduces the exposure and leakage by minimizing the data available. Others have done the same, and rely on special friends to tell them if they should change a setting. This approach of strong manual reduction of public data was something we heard a lot: Claire in the UK told me how she deleted several online profiles to maintain better control over the remaining ones. Another participant felt the cross-over between online and offline was too great:

> I don't want people knocking on my door all day long [either], in fact I don't want them to be knocking. So I got fed up [and deactivated my Facebook account].

Paula in Germany told me how she does use the Internet, but only cautiously and only at approved sites, but if she were not sure about something she'd rather not use the service. She sees herself as cautious but not at the extreme end of is, since she has friend who has chosen not to use the Internet at all, out of fear for uncontrollable and unclear social interactions online. And finally, participants like Simon in Germany or Marzooq in the UK told us time and again, that *"if you really want to keep your computer safe, you should just never go online."*

2. Splitting Your ID

Many users consciously split their online identities a participant in Zurich told me:

> I have an email for my purchases on Ebay etc., one for newsletters and other subscriptions like market research, one for my family and close friends, and one that I still have since college, and that still many people know, so I'm keeping it.

Others think that putting all your data with one provider is also potentially risky. In the US, a participant told me that he wouldn't use Gmail, since uses other Google services and he'd rather purposely segments his data.

Another example is to split your ID into several profiles or personas, especially if there are too many interests conflicting with it. A guy in Denver told us how he created this fan page for his job: he runs a sports bar. But then his bosses wanted a say in and some control over the profile, and he didn't want them to own part of his *own* representation online. Eventually, he created a profile for his dog, and associated his dog's profile deal with work. Only his real friends know his dog and can hence identify him, for everybody else this remains anonymous. More importantly, however, he retains full control over his real, *personal* profile on Facebook.

3. Separating Domains

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Another user strategy to keep some control over the online data is to separate their online from their offline personas as far as possible. This means to restrict as far as possible any connections of their online selves to their physical offline world. First and foremost the fear is here about security. People are aware how several pieces of information about yourself online things enable others – especially companies – to draw conclusions about you. In one of our focus groups, the members all agreed when one of the participants said,

> *I can guarantee you: there are 30 other people with my name in the state of Colorado. But if you put my date of birth, it drops it down to 10, and if you put my address it drops it down to 1. And if you put your picture too... [even worse].*

Potential financial damage obviously also concerns people a lot. In order to solve the issue, users complete purchases made on eBay, for example, in parking lots, or through pseudonyms. For some online transactions are distrusted. "*I have three computers, I use one of them solely for online banking so that other information couldn't spill,*" told us a man in Munich. Comments like *"I would never give my credit card out. And I don't buy anything online"* or *"I don't use online banking"* were a constant recurrence in every location. But many do use online banking and do transact, albeit with hesitation. Some of these people separated their offline world from their online data about them by creating P.O. boxes so they could have things shipped to an address that was not connected to them, or they create separate PayPal accounts to put a further link between them and their transactions.

4. Manual Individual Control

Many research participants felt that they did not have dependable tools or settings for managing their interactions and the kinds of information they are willing to share in or for a particular relationship conducted via online means. In order to control the information flow in a way appropriate for the interaction, users often resort to a lot of manual checking and event-based control, despite the often considerable overhead this creates. Above I told the story about the guy who has three computers to avoid dissemination of his banking data. Ulrike in Germany told us:

> Before I sign up on a new site, I always copy and paste the T&Cs into a Word document. I search for terms like Euro or the symbol of it, to make sure I am not unwillingly signing up to a hidden contract.

Often the manual control related to pictures. Many users went back to their online photos and reassessed them, sometime they removed photos or they restricted access to manually created groups. Others manually delete their browser history every time they close their browser, both to protect them from online snooping and/or other computer users.

Nonetheless, we heard a number of stories when mistakes were made: wrong groups of friends had been selected for a communication or status update and subsequently came back to haunt them.

Arnold in the UK hinted at how his relationship faltered when he hadn't taken care of his browsing history. And despite all her awareness and care about what she posts and when and to whom, Christy, a teacher on the East Coast told me when her students came back to her:

> And all of the sudden one of my students says to me along the line of you know, out of the blue, totally out of the blue, oh your brother goes to burning man. I was like how do you know? I just kind of laughed it off. I didn't want to make a big deal and said 'oh you must have Googled me'. She said, 'oh no, no I didn't'.

> I said 'yes you must have Googled me because that's the only way you would have known that', but she said she had just run across a website with me. I, and everybody else in the class, was not convinced.

5. Hope

When users want to use the advantages the web also offers without withdrawal, many users resort to a greater or lesser degree in hoping for the best. This can be seen in their approach to managing passwords. Participants complained how they always forget e.g. the verified-by-visa passwords and have to re-set it every time, how they use the same, similar or a couple of different passwords on all the sites they use, even though they know that's not very safe. Some people have files on their computers at home or lists on their phones, but they are aware that this makes the devices so much more vulnerable. When the pros and cons of these strategies were discussed in some of the focus groups we ran, some participants who used simple files clearly looking worried about whether they've been exposing themselves. In another group, the participants took notes – literally – from each other. All participants in one group in London marveled at one guy who just remembers all his passwords without writing them down. Most felt they are not able to do that and they need other aides to keep on top of passwords. Yet at the same time, they would not trust a single ID solution across the web, however much they'd like the idea for its simplicity. They seemed worried about having a single key that could then open up all their details to someone who gains access. In all cases users cited trust (and the lack of it) as a reason. *"It would need to be super backed up with all kinds of security."* It did not matter which of the bigger companies would offer such a solution. Lacking any of the options, they continue to rely on hope that their re-use of passwords or their methods for remembering them will not come back to haunt them.

6. Different Measures for the World than for Me

Finally, people are not always scientific or rational in their expectations for themselves as they are of others. They may expect special treatment as a customer when purchasing on online auctions, but are unwilling to ever give it as a seller. During our research we heard many stories when participants or their friends seemed to step over boundaries that they had just declared as inappropriate. In a focus group in the US, one participant was researching, *"sometimes for months,"* old friends/connections/

acquaintances with last contact sometimes dating back 30 years, in relation to her ill friend. She saw it as legitimate use, even though she understood the concerns: She reported to us how she found out potentially a lot more about *"personal stuff"* from people that *"could harm them. I mean I don't want them anything bad, but perhaps you could."*

Many other participants told us similar stories. For example, *"my friend had access to her ex's email and Facebook account for over a year after they broke up. He just never bothered to change his password."* According to our participant her friend *"hadn't done anything bad* "to her ex, she just watched what was going on. Many knew of 'techy friends' who were able to access information about other people they couldn't, so they assumed that this is possible by others, and these online partners might be trying to find out more details about them to gain an advantage in their relationship.

CONCLUSION

As you could see in the examples above, people are trying to execute on certain aspects of their models for social distance in ways they deem important. They utilize a number of strategies. Not always they are effective or the strategies may have gaps in their protective cover. Often users cannot assess whether the self-taught strategies they adapted are effective. As they try to calibrate their risk-taking, some of the strategies may not be appropriate. One participant told us how his strategies about online suddenly made him feel exposed by the offline steps he was taking*:*

> I have a guy that goes from house to house, cleaning up cookies ad spy-wear. He helped me with my security. But he did all these things on **my** computer, and I can't really tell what he is doing on **my** computer. He takes a long time, so it makes me suspicious. So now I hesitate to call him again, I need to ask him to do stuff I don't know how to do myself; but I feel funny about it because how do I know I can trust him?

But it goes to show that users are concerned and thinking about how these relationships should be structured. They express this by desiring reliable and replicable guidelines and etiquette for online interaction and for the crossover between online and offline situations. Linda in the UK told us how she had been looking at her cousins' new baby photos on Facebook through a link she had received via mail.

> Then I saw there was another album from her new extension to the house. So I looked at them, too, though I felt a bit strange. It was as if I was in their house without permission. Even worse, when she rang me a couple of days later to tell me about her new extension they had just finished, I didn't know what to say. I **had already been there**, so to say. She kept telling about details from the work, and I was like, I already know. I've seen it.

Underlying all these qualms – the same as Dave's mate when he was looking at holiday pictures above – are questions about understandings how social relationships are structured, how much input and management can be expected, and the extension of older models from other areas to make

them more or less fit their new and strange experiences. Users are not through with these explorations and experimentations, and they often challenge the industry's assumptions in the conversations we've had. They are skeptical of statements that tell them that everybody is their buddy or friend and it's ok for them to know a lot about you what they consider personal and private. Just as one example, I'd like to quote Mark Zuckerberg from January 2010:

> People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people. That social norm is just something that has evolved over time. (See Johnson 2010).

Our research participants may not refer to this quote, but I would dare to state that these are, in fact, two different conversations. Their point is not about sharing, it's about the lack of tools guidelines and standards for practically conducting their online activities and connecting them (safely and comfortably) to their offline selves. In this paper I tried to show people care and worry about how online and online/offline interactions should practically happen. They experiment with different tools and different visions of themselves in different situations, be they online or offline or across both. However, the expectations of their desired practical experience lead to conflicts with the predominant model, "concentric circles of social distance," that underlies most tools/services. I gave six examples of strategies that users use to work around the limitations of that model. Additional stories showed how users sometimes find themselves on the very slippery slope of unclear behavior and they are morally and ethically not always fully 'clean.' Through this narrative scope I gave glimpses of the models that users do employ albeit often incomplete or partial models. Finally I made the point that this is the struggle in which that users find themselves.

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