Daniel Skog:

Ethical Aspects of Managing a Social Network Site: a Disclosive Analysis

Abstract:

Managing an online social network site is not an easy task. First, the software environment must be designed with tools that promote social interaction. Second, the social environment most be nurtured and protected with thoughtful and balanced rules that allow for freedom within limits. This paper reports from an ethnographic study of a Swedish social network site, and focuses on how the site managers try to deal with undesirable use patterns and behaviors among members, at the same time struggling with the unexpected social outcome of a software redesign. Adopting a disclosive ethics approach, the paper highlights some of the ethical challenges embedded in the process of managing the site, and discusses their implications.

Agenda:

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Introduction

An online social network site (SNS) is defined as a web-based service that allows individuals to construct a public profile, and list connections with other users at the site (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). These sites flourish online, with Facebook as the most noticeable example hosting hundreds of millions of users. The enormous growth and popularity of these spaces is also illustrated in a recent report from the Pew Research Center (Madden and Zickuhr, 2011), stating that 50 % of all American adults use SNS.

Even though ethically charged questions regarding identity, friending, privacy and surveillance has surfaced in SNS research (see, for instance, Boyd, 2008; Frick and Oberprantacher, 2011; Hull, Lipford and Latulipe, 2011; Vallor 2011), Light and McGrath (2010) argues that ethical issues associated with these environments are somewhat neglected. Since SNS have become so popular, playing a vital role in many people's everyday life, their ethical implications deserve more attention. In this endeavor, Light and McGrath (2010) adopts a disclosive ethics approach (Brey, 2000a), with the aim of revealing ethically relevant features in the context of using an SNS.

Using a similar approach, this paper highlights ethically relevant mechanisms and situations within a Swedish SNS. When reviewing the events that followed a minor software redesign, using an ethical lens, critical issues emerge concerning SNS development and management.

The case of LunarStorm

The empirical foundation of this paper originates from a recently finished long-term ethnographic study of LunarStorm (LS), a popular online social network site among young people in Sweden.

LS was one of the earliest SNS online, predating sites like Friendster, MySpace and Facebook (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Many of the features now common at most SNS (i.e. user profiles, friends lists, guest books, etc.), thus appeared much earlier on LS. The site was launched at the millennium shift, January 1, 2000. However, it was actually a remake of StajlPlejs, a community site that had existed since the mid-nineties. For almost a decade, LS was the premier SNS in Scandinavia with more than 1 million active members. Even though a majority of the members were teenagers, the average age among members during this time period was about 18 years old. Losing ground to other SNS and facing a diminishing user base, LS recently remodeled again in August 2010, when it was transformed and reborn as L8.

This present study was initiated 2003. During five years empirical material was collected by the use of participant observations and semi-structured interviews with members and site administrators. In addition, a large number of text-based conversations with LS members concerning their social interactions, use of technology and experiences as SNS members, were carried out during fieldwork, generating a substantial amount of data. In total, the empirical material comprises field notes, screen images, transcripts from 37 interviews, about 1200 guest book entries, 750 e-mails, and 700 pages of forum discussions.

The ethnographic analysis can be described as iterative-inductive (O'Reilly, 2005), blending fieldwork, analysis, and theory elaboration in a joint process. For the purpose of this paper, the empirical material has been analyzed focusing on site members' interactions and experiences connected to a specific feature within the software environment. In the following sections quotes are sometimes used to illustrate a common attitude or viewpoint, and these quotes originate from different communication contexts at LS. The reader should observe that quotes from informants were documented in Swedish and have been translated by the author.

The Lajv feature

LS can be described as a multifaceted environment, which offered its members a variety of communication modes. As a LS member you had access to a personal profile page including a guest book, a blog, a contact

list, a photo album and a file repository. In addition, the site comprised various discussion forums and several other communication tools.

One frequently used communication feature in LS was Lajv (corresponds to the English word Live), which allowed members to broadcast a text message to those online at the same time. The text messages that were put out appeared in a specific message box where new messages continuously showed and were visible for around 30 seconds. A typical Lajv message was sent out to draw attention to the member's home page and often included a request for guest book contributions or comments on the photo album. Lajv messages were also frequently oriented towards dating:

Inf 1: You are cute if you could comment on my photo album (kiss)

Inf 2: Is there a sweet single girl who wants to add a lonely single guy on msn…

Inf 3: anyone up for CYBERSEX!?

The Lajv feature was launched in 2002. It became very popular, and if you wanted to get attention there was no other feature as effective. People sent messages to get attention, to provoke, to ask questions, and to get in contact with other members.

Redesigning Lajv - implementing an age division

It might not come as a surprise that a large social network such as LS also caught the interest of Internet predators. By using Lajv messages, unwelcome and typically adult male members could make contact with their targets, followed by communication via guest books and e-mails. When the LS administrators became aware of this they decided to intervene. With the primary aim of creating a safer environment, they modified the Lajv feature by implementing an age division (Eriksson, 2006). Lajv messages broadcasted by members older than 20 were not to be shown to members below 18, and vice versa. This modification would perhaps not stop Internet predators from making new contacts, but at least their primary tool for contacting minors was to some extent rendered harmless.

The Lajv feature continued to be a heavily used communication tool, and initially the age division seemed to work as intended by LS administrators. However, not all members were content with how the Lajv feature had been redesigned. Among the members of LS were many parents whose primary reason for being there was to monitor the environment where their children spent several hours per day. By applying an age partition on Lajv (and on some other features) the parents no longer could share their kids' online environment. Initially the age division was unknown to most members, but when discovering it, caring parents reacted with frustration:

Inf 4: I think we are many who didn't know [about the age division]. For my part I feel totally deceived. So here you have one who will be sitting next to the children for some time now when they are logged in.

Inf 5: I didn't know that [the age division exists]. So there are two sides of Lunar in other words. How then should a parent be able to keep track? By checking on the kids' pages or what?

Inf 6: But this was the primary reason why I made a home page at Lunar, I wanted to know what the kids were doing. … Is it that impossible in our society for all ages to spend time with each other in a shared forum without being separated by age, with or against your will?

The maneuvering of Lajv probably made it somewhat more difficult for Internet predators trying to make new contacts, in that way contributing to the safekeeping of minors. However, considering how some parents tried to safeguard their kids by sharing their online environment, the age partition perhaps had the opposite effect on child safety. Parents being hindered from monitoring communication patterns involving their kids preferred having no age segments, instead being able to watch the full flow of messages. In their view the age partition of Lajv failed its purpose.

The frustration and anger among parents amplified by the news that another Swedish youth community online offered help with creating fake social security numbers (SSN). When you registered as a new member at LS you had to state your SSN, and since Swedish SSN are assigned according to a person's date of birth, the age of the person became known. But it was discovered that the fake SSN generator available online could be used to register a bogus membership at LS pretending to be a teenager. In that way people who did not want to adhere to the age segments could circumvent the partitions, being able to interact with teenagers without restrictions.

Since not that many sincere parents were attracted to the idea of creating fake personalities of their own, the age division maneuvered by LS administrators fell short in two ways. Not only did it prohibit caring parents from monitoring dubious Lajv messages, it also in some way offered protection to unscrupulous individuals who now could socialize using a fake identity as a disguise.

Reasons why the technological intervention backfired

Reviewing the happenings connected to the modification of the Lajv feature, it can be argued that there were at least two major reasons to why the technological intervention to some extent backfired. First, the LS administrators failed to recognize how the Lajv feature was perceived and used for different purposes by different members. When it was created the intention was to offer a tool for members trying to catch the attention of the community. It was never meant to be a means for parents monitoring their kids, and this usage became evident only when it could no longer continue. Lajv was certainly not intended as a tool for Internet predators either. This apparent usage of Lajv messages was detected and the discovery was in part the reason for implementing age segments. However, dealing with this misuse both unveiled and hampered the unexpected usage of caring parents, without being powerful enough to put an end to the actual misuse being targeted.

Second, it was not anticipated by administrators that members would want to outmaneuver the imposed age segments. The modification of Lajv placed an obstacle in the way of Internet predators who were eager to find a way to outsmart it. Knowing first hand the flaws of the customary SSN control, LS administrators perhaps should have seen the loophole offered to these offenders, realizing that it could and would be exploited. But even if they did see it they perhaps still did not want to strengthen the control of SSN since doing so most certainly also would have had other undesired consequences for the community.

The story of the redesign of Lajv illustrates the intertwined relationship between technological factors and social interactions in online social networks. In addition, it also highlights some ethical issues in managing online social networks.

Disclosing ethical issues in a complex software environment

As described by Brey (2000a), disclosive computer ethics is concerned with the moral deciphering of computer technology. The underlying assumption is that many computer-related practices are morally nontransparent:

> *"Many design and uses of computer systems, I want to claim, have important moral properties, that remain hidden because the technology and its relation to the context of use are too complex or are insufficiently well-known." (Brey, 2000b: 126)*

This argument resonates well with the case study presented in this paper. At first, the redesign of Lajv (implementing an age division) might seem rational and straightforward. The result of the redesign might even be considered successful. But reviewing the social context of this specific feature, reveals a complex relationship between the software environment and the interactions among different user groups. With this complex relationship on display, ethical issues concerning SNS management also emerge.

If we once again review the events accompanying the Lajv feature, using an ethical lens, we should start from the very beginning, since not even the initial decision to launch Lajv can be seen as ethically neutral. Unlike many other SNS, the social interactions taking place at LS were not limited by members' friends lists. Anyone could see your profile page and write in your guest book. This fact created an environment that was dynamic and lively. The possibility of meeting new people seemed to be one of the main ideas with LS, having old friends blend with new acquaintances and strangers. The development of Lajv accentuated this idea, offering enhanced possibilities of contacting, and being contacted by, new people.

This strategy of creating an environment without clear boundaries, were everyone could make contact with you via Lajv or by using tools at your profile page, certainly communicates ethically flavored values and ideals. While many members seemed to cherish those ideals, enjoying their stay in a lively environment without thresholds and with almost unlimited possibilities of interacting with new interesting people, some of them also experienced the downside, having a hard time to be left alone, struggling with bullies or stalkers. As described by Skog (2005), some LS members consequently chose not to reveal much of themselves on their profile pages. They simply were not willing to take the risk of being teased, or having strangers contacting them offline.

Even before the advent of Lajv there had been a scribble board at LS where members could write messages for everyone to read. But with Lajv, the developers wanted to create a more effective scribble board, something that was in real-time and provided members with an even more powerful tool when trying to get attention (Eriksson, 2006). Using Lajv, someone could communicate a message with thousands of unknown members, currently being online. It is not hard to imagine that this possibility sometimes was exploited for the wrong reasons, and the site managers must have seen this coming and decided that it was an acceptable drawback to offering such a powerful communication tool. However, at some point in time, LS developers apparently decided that they had to modify Lajv in order to prohibit misuse of a certain kind. Targeting this specific misuse, by using age divisions, should also be considered as an ethically charged choice, communicating what the developers regarded to be good and bad behavior.

The modification of Lajv was perhaps not secret, but still not communicated to the site members. As if the LS developers preferred altering the software environment unnoticed, without having to discuss their incentives with the users. Perhaps not surprisingly, the developers also did not act on the complaints from caring parents who felt that the redesign of Lajv had failed its purpose. This reminds us that SNS are typically proprietary spaces. The site owners/developers not only build the site, and thereby design the social environment (Pargman, 2000). They also make decisions about membership guidelines and rules of conduct (Humphreys, 2008). However, when a site is being populated, the members develop social and behavioral norms of their own, within the broader set of regulations decided by the site administrators. Furthermore, the users start to explore and exploit the software in unexpected ways for different purposes. On the one hand, this is a natural process, vital for the growth and sustainability of the social network. On the other hand, site administrators might feel a need to control the process, or at least desire to influence it.

As Lessig (2006) points out, the code that builds the online social environments reflects choices and values of the coders. Likewise, many algorithms, e.g. the age division of Lajv, comprise value judgments (Kraemer, van Overveld and Peterson, 2011). One could argue that the developers should be morally responsible for the outcome of their designs. However, as the empirical case shows, it is almost impossible to predict the outcome of a software design. Even if LS developers would have made a thorough ethical analysis of Lajv, imagining different use patterns and possible scenarios, they could probably not have foreseen neither the range of initial use patterns emerging or the effects caused by the age division. Furthermore, recognizing that the meaning of technology ultimately is socially constructed by the users, the responsibility for its ethical implications must be shared by developers and users alike.

Concluding remarks

This paper contributes to the endeavor of disclosing ethical aspects of SNS. By examining a single software feature in a Swedish SNS, this study highlights some ethically charged decisions embedded in the process of managing and developing a social online environment. However, it is important to emphasize that those

decisions cannot be removed. Developers cannot avoid them or be passive pretending they are not there. A SNS is like a garden that has to be nurtured, and managing it demands ongoing work trying to match technology with emerging social practices (Wenger, White and Smith, 2009). Still, developers can make an effort to show their value judgments and to make their ethical standpoints more transparent. Even more, users could be given more freedom of making their own choices, deciding for themselves how different software features should be set up.

Today, LS has been replaced by other more popular SNS. But ethical challenges similar to those highlighted in this paper still remains. There is clearly a need for continuous examination of online social spaces, aiming for a higher awareness of ethical issues among both users and developers.

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