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Building social networks ethics beyond "privacy": a sociological perspective

Abstract:

This article aims to widen the question of online social networks sites (SNS) ethics going beyond the questions of privacy and self-management of data, yet dominant in the public debates. The main theoretical framework developed in this paper, based both on recent contributions and classical sociology, is that SNS have to deal with the social dynamics of distinction and social classes like in any other spaces. From this perspective, focusing only on online privacy is too subjective and individualistic to provide a satisfying answer. Thus, we suggest that transparency should be considered as a social and collective fact rather than an individual characteristic. Boundaries between online and offline world are becoming increasingly porous and we argue, although acknowledging certain particular characteristics of SNS, that SNS ethics should be less about the specificities of online behaviors than on their articulation with the social world.

Agenda

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Social network sites (SNS) and the way they affect society have rapidly become a main subject of discussion for social scientists and, more generally, for public actors. They are seen as playing an increasing role in the construction of individual and collective identities, in the creation of social links and in the way individuals involve themselves in the social and political life. In this context, most attention has been focused on issues such as trust, reputation and privacy. The latter is probably the biggest common and consensual concern.

In response to these legitimate concerns and beside the implementation of privacy and data protection laws, many advocates claimed that the users of these tools should be supervised and trained, in order to be able to face potential dangers and to keep control on their data. Usually, the problem is reduced to the idea of an inability of the users to understand that they put their privacy and reputation at stake, or in other terms, that they are not aware enough of the consequences of disclosing personal data. How to build trust and how to protect reputation and privacy has then become dominant in the public and political discourses, as the main key concepts for building ethics.

The aim of this paper is to establish the basis of a sociological analysis of online behaviours, with the purpose to diversify the dominant ethical discourses, expanding them beyond the question of the protection of privacy. Our approach is built upon the result of much recent research on SNS stating that social relations happening within social networks are not ontologically different from the ones which have existed before these platforms but that they rather increase the speed of exchanges, relationships, visibility and transparency. We suggest that SNS emphasize social effects which classical sociology knows already very well, rather than creating entirely new ones. Elaborating a framework of analysis built on classical sociology and applying it to the contemporary object of online social networks, we hope to enrich the debate differently and to offer fresh perspectives to think ethical issues in a new way.

What is privacy?

The notion of "privacy" dominates the debate around ethics strongly (Bennett 2008), although it is a vague concept (Solove 2008; Stalder 2002). Still, it is dominant in policies and public discourses meant to protect people integrity. The main problem of the notion of privacy is its very individualistic nature. When speaking about privacy, it is usually about an individual facing government or private companies, and trying to find a balance between the advantage of enjoying services and partially renouncing to his/her privacy. But, privacy is also a very subjective notion. When asked, people give very distinct and personal definitions which most often do not fit the privacy advocates'. When observed as an everyday life experience, it becomes even more complicated to be conceptualized (Coll 2010).

Moreover, privacy should be seen not only as an individual good, but rather as a collective good (Westin 2003; Regan 2011). The main argument is that there is no equality in regard to privacy: "Privacy is frequently determined by the individual's power and social status. The rich can withdraw from society when they wish; the lower classes cannot. The affluent do not need to obtain subsidizing support from the government by revealing sensitive information to authorities, while those in economic or social need must disclose or go without" (Westin 2003, 432). Thus, although privacy is still somehow helpful from an individualistic perspective (Bennett 2011; Stalder 2011), we think that such approach cannot alone build a satisfying ethics for informational systems, including the case of social networks.

Privacy in social network studies

Since the growing development of computers and Internet, early research focused on online disclosing of personal information (Turkle 1984). The specific ways users express themselves and adopt these new spaces of expression were also rapidly studied (Walther 1992; Turkle 1995). These studies, by exploring the anonymity of users and their multiple identities, dealt with the question of the building of transparencies/opacities (Wallace 1999).

However, these studies had to be updated since new platforms of exchange of information begun to appear (Allard 2007), even more with the raising of the Web 2.0 (Boyd and Ellison 2007). The fast adoption of such platforms which offer plenty of new forms of interactivity led to new studies focusing on the 'construction of the digital self' (Voirol 2010). The Web 2.0 and its technical devices oriented to information sharing can be seen as an opportunity to produce new and multiple forms of visibilities (Cardon 2008). At this stage, two levels have been addressed: first, the self-disclosure induced and controlled by technical devices (Lewis, Kaufman, and Christakis 2008; Fuchs 2011a); second, the strategies of presentation of the self produced by the social relationship between users (Fogel and Nehmad 2009). The first level is related to the ever-changing privacy settings of the platforms and raised for example research on how companies take advantage of disclosed data to do targeted advertisement (Wilkinson and Thelwall 2010). The second level has been empirically studied in the specific context of the culture of teenagers and their use of social networks (Boyd 2008).

Recent research also specialized themselves on particular types of tracks: profiles' pictures (Siibak 2009), body representations (Dobson 2008), claims for ethnical membership (Grasmuch, Martin, and Zhao 2009), display of gender (Geidner, Flook, and Bell 2007), or the appearance of persons which have been accepted as "friends" (Walther et al. 2008). These show how tracks circulate within social networks, as social but also symbolic markers. They shed light not only on why information is disclosed by users, but also why they are sometimes hidden on purpose.

The act of disclosing information is not only related to the presentation of the self, but also to the representation of the expectations of the audience (Evans, Gosling, and Caroll 2008; Ploderer et al. 2008). As a consequence, the analysis of a so-called "transparency" is not only about how information is disclosed, but also about how the same information is potentially used by others. Studies actually show that an important part of online activities consists in exploring tracks left by "friends" (Rau, Gao, and Ding 2008). They explore the criteria by which information is sorted in order to build an opinion and then a social judgment (Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfeld 2007). This consciousness of being watched and evaluated could led to an internalization of social control (Back et al. 2010; Proulx and Kwok Choon 2011), inciting creation of strategies of reputation management (Madden and Smith 2010). This way, the so-called "transparency" can be seen as a co-product of both visible and invisible online interactions (Andrejevic 2005) or, in other terms, as an assemblage of contrasted attitudes toward the exposition of intimacy online, each one being balanced between modesty and exhibitionism (Aguiton et al. 2009).

In terms of ethics, the practices of self-disclosure on social network are most often reduced to the question of the protection of privacy. Yet, many sociological studies show that the boundaries between public and private are becoming ever more blurred (Boyd and Hargittai 2010; Cardon 2010; Christofides and Desmarais 2009).

Transparency and social networks

Is transparency a new social norm?

As seen above, in most studies on SNS, the notion of "transparency" has become increasingly recurrent. To the extent that it is sometimes considered by economical actors as a new social norm, replacing privacy[1], or even a moral standard[2]. Indeed, when asked, many users claim that they have "nothing to hide" (Solove 2007).

This phenomenon is analyzed by some scholars as a "voluntary servitude" which informational capitalism is taking advantage of (Proulx and Kwok Choon 2011). Undoubtedly, one of the main salient characteristic of

[1] See Mark Zuckerberg's quotation: "Privacy no longer a social norm" (*The Guardian*, 11 January 2010).

[2] See Eric Smith's CNBC interview: "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place" (3 December 2009).

SNS is the fact that users disclose data about themselves on a voluntary basis. It is also true that deep data-mining is made by companies to create efficient targeted marketing (Fuchs 2011b). However, as seductive the idea of a "voluntary servitude" can be, it is sociologically weak. The unclear notion of "transparency" needs to be theoretically deconstructed. We think that it suffers at the first place from the same problem as privacy does: to be seen from a very individualistic point of view.

Transparency as a social fact

Some of classical sociology theories are able to shed light on the complex modalities of this so-called "voluntary transparency". From a macrosociological angle, SNS have to deal with the dynamics of social distinction and social classes like any other public space. From this perspective, classical sociology is important to reflect on visibility as an asset to build one's social identity and to claim one's membership to a certain social rank.

First, there is no absolute and generalized transparency. Not every individual makes oneself visible in the same way or at the same degree (Goffman 1959). Thus, the relationship between visibility and invisibility, disclosure or not disclosure, open transparency or limited transparency, is producing power (Simmel 1906). Visibility is as much an act of power when the purpose is to claim one's membership to a certain social rank, that a risk taken because it allows other to take control on one's self.

Second, this ambivalence led to a distinction: between transparency at the individual level, as perceived, experienced and practiced by users; and transparency as a social fact; that is as a key element – which was existing before the SNS – of social regulations in the large sense, involving judgements, positive or negative sanctions (Ogien 1990; Radcliffe-Brown 1965[1952]; Durkheim 1982[1895]), and social distinctions which maintain social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1987[1979]). This macrosociological approach allows going beyond the idea of a personal economy and control of personal data.

Our point is to emphasize the fact that the modalities of disclosure are more related to well-known sociological process rather than a personal economy of data. It is about fulfilling the social need to feel as a part of the society, to show one's social status, in other terms, to operate social distinction (Goblot 1967[1925]; Simmel 1957[1895]; Veblen 2008[1899]).

Conclusion

By considering the transparency as a social fact rather than as an individual economy of data disclosure, too close to the individualistic concept of "privacy", we have pointed out the continuousness between the last research about social network and more classical sociological works.

The main conclusion we draw from these theoretical reviews of social visibilities, SNS related or not, is that the boundary between online and offline world is highly porous. Distinction and social judgments operate in these platforms as in the whole society and SNS cannot be considered any longer as separated microcosms where only geeks or teenagers were supposedly experiencing alternative social dynamics. SNS are a whole part of the information society, being combined with many other device or technology such as mobile phone, email, blogs, speeches, etc. and contributing to a continuum of intricate communication experiences which tend to form a seamless web (Hughes 1986) of social interactions.

This standpoint diminishes the requirement to develop an ontologically specific ethical framework for online activities and rather advocates for a broader perspective. In such perspective, online and offline activities should be symmetrically analysed, and the focus point of these investigations should be less about the specificities of online behaviours than on their articulations with the social world. We think that taking into account those convergences would set the foundation for a stronger hermeneutic approach in ethics. Such method would retain as its main object how social norms are translated from one world to the other and how those norms co-evolve notably through well known social processes.

The proposed reframing should however not be confused with a relativist stance negating the specificities of online social dynamics. Rather, in the context outlined in our paper, we think that these SNS related activities are less in the need of some epistemological differentiation than requiring an actual recognition as full-fledged social dynamics. By questioning some of the artificial theoretical fences built during the early steps of online social networks analysis, our ultimate goal is to let SNS studies contribute more directly and profoundly to the ethical debates around transparency for the whole society.

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