

Chapter 97

Digital Paranoia: Unfriendly Social Media Climate Affecting Social Networking Activities

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ABSTRACT

Participation in social networks, forums, and other discussion groups is a growing trend in the United States. Aside from the benefits of online social media, there is a growing concern about privacy and safety from the devolvement of personal information online. As a result of this unfriendly social media climate, Americans are taking measures to protect personal identity and to avoid surveillance by others. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze factors predicting which groups are most concerned about Internet privacy. In addition, this chapter explores how concerns regarding Information privacy are impacting usage of social network sites. We explore these questions using multivariate regression analysis and individual level data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Our findings suggest that those with the greatest fears regarding online privacy are not staying offline but are taking necessary precautions to address concerns.

INTRODUCTION

The social networking climate in the U.S. has become unfriendly for some users, and possibly affecting their emotional health. This is a concern particularly with social media interaction becoming a popular activity with 67% reporting using some form of social networking site and most appealing to those under age 50 years, women, and urban residents (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2013a, p. 2). With social media use popular among Americans both on and off the job, some employers now require employees to disclose user names and passwords in effort to comply with financial obligations to government, to protect proprietary information, and to minimize company liabilities. As of October

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2013, 36 states have introduced legislation to prohibit employers from requesting social media personal account information from users (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014, p. 2). Currently, 32 states have passed data disposal laws requiring businesses and government to make personal identifying information that is collected and stored by these institutions destroyed and/or altered so that it is no longer comprehensible (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015). As a result of this unfriendly social media climate, growing numbers of Americans are concerned about their personal identity and cybercrime, and are taking measures to avoid surveillance by others. A 2013 Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, found as many as 55% reported avoiding observation by other entities such as employers, government, organizations, people and groups; while 86% of adult Internet users have taken measures to promote anonymity, privacy, and security online. Cybercrime continues to grow with 11% reporting stolen bank account or credit card information, and/or Social Security Number. In an attempt to avoid surveillance, online user behaviors are diverse and range from masking personal information, clearing search histories, to using public computer instead of personal home computer (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2013b, pp. 1-2, 5, 9).

This change in the social media climate in the U.S. raises a number of questions regarding its impact on individual trust of both government and other organizations. In this chapter we will explore this phenomenon “digital paranoia” by empirically analyzing 1) what demographic groups are most concerned about Internet privacy and 2) how are these concerns impacting usage of social network sites (SNS). This chapter will report research analysis from 2013 using multivariate regression analysis and Pew Internet & American Life Project social media user opinion data.

BACKGROUND

Socialization online is becoming a popular activity in the United States. Accessibility to social media interaction is easy, with new generation technological devices such as tablet computers and the multifunctional cell phones (for example Smartphones), becoming more available. The benefits to social networking and online forums range from sharing personal opinion(s) to discussion of political events and political activism. Social media is also becoming a common meeting place for the online health community for sharing caregiver experiences and provide emotional support. However, the devolvement of personal information during socialization has led to a heightened awareness of privacy and security matters, not only for adults, but for children. The issue of Internet privacy has moved beyond concerns of individual consumer to the government agenda. In 2007, the Federal Trade Commission (2007) identified social networking and mobile Internet as children’s online privacy issues. As a response, individuals, organizations, and government are taking measures to protect information that may jeopardize personal and professional integrity.

Social media users are growing in number and are a broad demographic group. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2013c) since May 2013, 72% of U.S. adults have visited social networking sites (SNS), an increase of 5% from 2012. Adults age 65 and over are also visiting these sites growing from 13% in early 2009 to 43% mid 2012 (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2013c, pp. 2, 4). Although youth are more likely to take part in social network activities, this activity continues to grow with six out of ten Internet users visiting social sites for age group 50 to 64 (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2013d, p. 2). In 2012, social networking was most common for women, individuals under age 50, urban residents, with those in age group 18 to 29 years leading other groups in socialization

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