

My Concept Report

Media & Communication theorists' response to Privacy Issues

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Introduction | Context

My thesis research is based on a scenario in which an internet-of-things (IoT) device transmits inaudible near ultra-high frequency sound that is picked up by a mobile phone. The phone is running an application with a background process designed to respond to this signal by initiating an internet connection and sending personally identifiable information (PII) to a webserver. An IoT device has been classified as being a small electronic device with sensory capabilities that is connected to the internet. The device is then combined with another object for the purpose of adding new functions to it. So, for instance, a kettle becomes a water boiling device that is connected to the internet so that it can generate and send data about itself and its environment to either the owner's mobile device or to the manufacturer's web service.

It is within this seemingly innocuous context that privacy has become an area of concern to the public and academics alike. The implications of expanding internet-based technologies for privacy and its impact on traditional legal, political and cultural assumptions is the central problem of my thesis. My research will examine issues around the use of internet based

technologies (mobile phones, social media, IoT etc.), what impact they may have on society and what vocabulary might be required in seeking to make sense of these questions. The work done by media and communication theorists in these areas are providing me with an analytical framework which will serve as a basis of my own research.

While the internet and the role of privacy are not new concepts, privacy has become more prevalent with the expansion of social media and could be considered one of the defining problems of our age. What was once understood to be the user's private life and thoughts, is now published on various privately owned corporate internet platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc). Due to this increase in awareness of potential privacy concerns within the area of social media, a great deal of academic research, journalistic investigation and commentary has been dedicated to this problem. The wide ranging research conducted in this area has proved to be fertile ground for developing a theoretical basis for my own research.

Identifying | Analysis

The first step in my research was to consult a wide range of sources and consider a wide range of disciplinary approaches, many of which were beyond the immediate scope of my project. Several of the more technical, allied fields such as computer science, data, algorithms and robotics tended to remain confined to technical perspectives and responses. This single mindedness limited these approaches, often precluding a more expansive analysis that might deal with the implications of the technological developments they described. By way of contrasting a

characteristicly insular perspective, an examination of academic papers by members of the legal profession was conducted. A brief examination proved to be a very useful introduction to an analytical framework through which to articulate concerns with privacy-invading technologies.

Along with jurisprudence, media and communication theorists have considered ideas in a manner that is conducive to further investigation and thought. These analyses tend to contextualise the problem domain in relation to its historical precedents. This research takes place within a broad field consisting of multiple sub-theories that make it a rich body of research but also somewhat difficult to maintain focus. Such responses to privacy concerns are not new nor are they simply a collection of obscure ideas favoured only by academics, as any glance at news or current affairs media can attest. The notion that privacy is a site of contestation is not limited to the contemporary context, in which private companies mediate social interactions via the internet; it necessarily underpins all forms of communication. These approaches also include investigations into responses that have arisen when any new technology or technique is adopted at a large scale, from the first email exchange to the latest tweet.

As a starting point for internet research, some scholars have proposed Social Presence Theory. However, "deeper origins can be found, ... when one realizes that technology need not mean computing nor be digital" (Baym 720). A method of scraping social theories from pre-internet era media is useful only as a reminder that, regardless of technological changes and "the notion that everything is new" (720), there are some fundamentals at play when people interact

with technologically mediated communications. Within discussions there has seen the theoretical expansion and evolution of "issues about the quality of interaction, the nature of community, the status of relationships, the authenticity of identity, the safety of children, and the limits of trust and privacy" (720).

Theorists have explored not only what effects are produced but also what changes are made to the way we communicate when technology is the intermediary. These are issues that arise when "people simultaneously integrate multiple media into their daily communicative experience" which serves to "cut across once-familiar boundaries separating mass from interpersonal" (721). The intersection described here results in the dissolution of traditional boundaries between private and public, singular and mass and ultimately gives rise to new problems around the question of privacy.

The problem of privacy can also arise when technologically mediated socialising takes place "within proprietary systems", and where these systems rely upon "users' unpaid labor to generate their content" (722). Concerns around the use and purpose of these systems also raise questions about behavioural responses: what happens when we acknowledge that we don't have complete control over the aspects of our lives we imagine to be private. There is also debate among theorists around whether our ability to socialise is curtailed or hampered by our knowledge of these systems, technologies and how they operate.

Our understanding about the role of technology in communication is wholly dependant on our level of engagement with complex systems and interactions. Complex "technology is a form of societal structuring that is historically much older than mechanical or electronic devices and is not intrinsically dependent on them" (Franklin 244). Societal structuring is thought to occur when the space in which "all human, social and political activities are mediated by a system of highly interconnected and interdependent technologies" (246). This mediation between people can also give rise to conflicts around privacy when one person's communication has to pass through the corporate entity providing the medium. Social media has expanded these problems and demands that we rethink the role that technologically mediated communication plays within society.

Noelle-Nuemann's influential study that pre-dated the internet sought to "substantiate empirically the process of public opinion forming" by documenting "the results of surveys conducted" (43) and provides a useful basis for an understanding of how social media can influence behaviour. The resultant theory called The Spiral of Silence describes "the tendency of the one to speak up and the other to be silent [that] starts off a spiralling process which increasingly establishes one opinion as the prevailing one" (44). A process is initiated where a person assesses "the distribution of opinions for and against his ideas" so that there is a "picture of the distribution of opinions which the individual gains from his social environment" (44). The response of the individual to this picture and how they view their own position within it forms the basis for this theory that says "public opinion can be described as the dominating opinion which compels compliance of attitude and behaviour in that it threatens the dissenting individual

with isolation" (44). This analysis of the ways in which people respond to their social environment is instructive when investigating social responses to the digital environment.

An assumption of the late twentieth century was a distinction between the physical and digital worlds. However, recent thinking and analysis suggests that the idea of a person existing online as a separate and anonymous version of the real-world analog "is outdated and has largely been abandoned" (Elwell 233). In the early days of the internet it was thought that an online identity was something "that was easily put on and taken off while the Internet guaranteed anonymity" (234). Today we imagine these two identities to be interchangeable and the anonymity once provided can no longer be guaranteed.

The merging of digital and analog identities, while "not functionally equivalent", do combine in such a way that they "cocreate the experience of identity" (235). The influence of one over the other is apparent when we consider that these two sides of identity are so closely entwined. The isolation of the individual, revealed the Spiral of Silence theory, is particularly relevant today as real world and digital identities have become indistinguishable. When we transform "our private subjectivity into public content" (237) we are in some ways presenting our private analog self as the digital public self, a relationship that can operate in both directions. This can be understood as a "feedback loop, a dialectic" between our public and private selves in which "one domain informs the other" (237).

The ideas of public opinion formation via internet based mass media and the integration of our digital and analog selves can be used to describe the current information technology environment. We can augment this description if we consider that this environment also "alters our sense of time and space, and we adapt to these changes" (Stivers 203) even if they provide us with "ersatz experiences upon which opinion rests" (206). Despite this desultory appraisal there is a strong undercurrent of a "technological utopianism" (207) that drives society to adopt and utilise the varied internet connected media devices in the belief that it "insures our collective survival and success" via the "the consumption of goods and services" (208). In this formulation communication is a commodity that serves as "white noise to distract us" (209). This phenomenon that produces an "overload of information" generated by digital media "transforms us into consumers of information" (209). The expansion of media from its traditional analog format into a platform of digital technology has facilitated a commensurate increase in volume of information. The increase causes us to "lose the ability to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information" (209). Once it was considered that the "context of discourse reduces the ambiguity" of meaning. Today, however, meanings are increasingly "divorced from what they refer to in reality" (209).

The digitising of the self and the accompanying reduction of identity to internet rendered data, has meant that "people become visible, knowable, and shareable in a new way" (Zuboff 77). The theory known as "surveillance capitalism" demonstrates that it is now possible to "predict and modify" (77) as well as "observe behaviour that was previously unobservable and write contracts on it" (81). This is enacted at the corporate level through "incursion[s] into

undefended private territory until resistance is encountered" (78). This process has been described as "infrastructure imperialism" (78). The companies at the vanguard of this development describe what they do as an "extractive process" that occurs in the "absence of dialogue or consent" (79). Its application reveals that information is extracted "without consumers' knowledge, consent, or rights of privacy" (78). It also reveals one of the most pernicious aspects of a technological infringement of privacy that takes place when we aren't aware of its occurrence.

In a technological society consisting of a "ubiquitous networked institutional regime that records, modifies, and commodifies everyday experience" control resides with a "sovereign power" (81) that can "reconfigure the structure of power, conformity, and resistance" (82) via its control over the digital realm. In response to concerns around privacy rights and violations, corporations argue that "people agree to the invasion of privacy" required for these companies to exist "if they get something they want in return" (82). Given the popularity of social media, and other internet services based upon the divulgence of personal information, it would appear that this is the case. An alternative way of framing this concept might be to understand that the intention "is not to erode privacy rights but rather redistribute them" (83). A redistribution can occur between the individual and the corporation when the latter "have extensive privacy rights and therefore many opportunities for secrets" while the former are deprived of "choice in the matter of what about their lives remains secret" (83).

The corporate control over the medium of communication operates via mechanisms such as intellectual property laws, corporate laws, proprietary software and patented technologies. When corporations deploy new communication technologies or techniques they demonstrate that "rapid abilities to surveil for profit outrun public understanding" (83). The communication surveillance taking place now is merely a precursor to a future in which a corporation envisions it will "know what you want and tell you before you ask the question" (83). To do so, at the data and algorithmic level, it "has to know a lot about you and your environment to provide these services" (83). The provision of this information is achieved by data generated by a technology "that is also regarded by most people as essential for basic social participation" (83). Somewhere in this lies the concept of privacy, the right to privacy and normative behaviour that seems to offer tacit approval for privacy violations.

Incorporate | Conclusion

In this essay I have analysed the ideas that are central to my thesis through a limited sample of texts from media and communication theorists about the ways in which technologies are shaping modes of communication and social interaction. They have demonstrated that the fundamental ideas of how people communicate remain unchanged and relevant today even as technology is mediating this exchange in new ways. Some theorists have relied on historical perspectives and concepts to develop a framework through which they can understand current issues or concerns. Others have examined allied fields of research for theories that may be suitable for scrutinising and expanding comprehension. Regardless of the approach taken,

placing a specific problem within a broad context is a necessary and useful first step. From the initial broad overview, it is the task of the researcher to describe a route back to the original problem, collecting definitions and responses suitable for analysis.

The broader context described by media and communication theory relates not only to how we interact but also to the medium itself, which has an ability to influence this interaction. This influence takes place in an asymmetrical manner: we know who we are communicating with and yet there is an opaque third party in between that surveils and responds to who we are and what we are saying. The technical capabilities aside, what is more relevant here is that a corporately owned medium has its own interests that transcend the communicated message and are driven by the desire to profit from a datafication of social relationships. The conclusion some theorists have drawn from this is that this process represents an intrusion into the privacy of our social relations. My research therefore requires a definition of provacy. From these readings I have understood that privacy in response to surveillance is not just the domain of government or corporate agencies but also ourselves. We require information about the people we meet in order to form an opinion and a relationship that then determines how we socialise with them. What and with whom we choose to communicate is our private concern and it is, as evidenced in the discussion above, our right to determine this.

As a necessary starting point I have contextualised my research into privacy in a broader framework that goes beyond a purely technical analysis. Concerns around privacy are as old as

communication itself and form a continuum that arrives at social media and the internet of things today. Responses formulated by media and communication academics have uncovered common ideas, counter proposals and differing perspectives that all assist in developing my own research. In becoming aware of these differences I can broaden my initial impressions into a comprehensive understanding that is formed by academic analysis from varied perspectives.

Becoming familiar with some of the methodologies behind the research I have analysed above has enabled my own research to progress in a manner that is open to a broader range of ideas. Some methods have described a way of looking for similarities among seemingly disparate elements and recognising the commonalities. Other methods have not attempted to find similarities in the instantiation of elements but, instead, recognise that resultant effects can provide useful analogies for further consideration. The combination of the explicit and implicit has expanded theoretical priorities for researchers while also allowing a *périphérique* to give form to the context. To do so has required an examination into aspects of social media and the internet that are either wholly concerned with privacy or that touch upon a correlating issue.

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