SURVEILLANCE, PRIVACY, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

The Millennial generation seems to be habituated to having immediate access to information, including essentially private information on people of interest to them. Social media has accustomed them to watching and being watched. Albrechtslund (2013) describes this type of surveillance as "participatory surveillance", where people willingly keep watch on each other through social media. An anonymous focus group and online survey of 80 Australians aged between 18 and 34 investigated their use of participatory surveillance, that is, of their surveillance techniques on others and their awareness of the level of surveillance they themselves are under. The results reveal that while these young people were concerned about the privacy and security of their own personal information, they had come to rely on being able to access the personal information of others.

Keywords

mutual surveillance; Facebook; social media; Millennials; privacy

Introduction

The Millenial generation (Howe and Strauss, 2009) seems to use Facebook for four primary reasons: socializing, entertainment, information, and status seeking (Park, Kee and Valenzuela, 2009), functions that are dependent on users' self-disclosure of personal information. Facebook facilitates the sharing of ideas and experiences, enabling a visibility of personal details that goes beyond that which would typically be available to acquaintances in the off-line environment (Trottier, 2012). Facebook suggests the sharing of "status updates", "life events" and "photos/videos" encouraging a flow of personal information. Responses to posts can be a "like", a "comment", or a "share", responses that limit the possibility of a conversation and favour a one way

discourse. In using Facebook as a vehicle for staying in touch with personal networks, relationships become more like surveillance, where users are monitoring each other rather than engaging in a conversation with one another.

The mutual surveillance on social media is different from the panopticon-style surveillance for control, and for this group the experience of social surveillance has largely been positive. Individuals' online visibility and concurrent watching of others functions "to foster deeper social connections" (Markwick, 2012: 391), rather than to overtly influence their behavior.

This study of Australian students aged between 18 and 35 asked them about their use of Facebook to uncover the extent to which that use constituted a normalization of the public disclosure of personal information. The study identified that these students are generally concerned about privacy and security for their personal information, particularly from individuals and from the government, but they are also reliant on Facebook for information on individuals they have an interest in; friends, acquaintances, and strangers.

Method

The project employed a mixed method approach, relying on both qualitative and quantitative data collection, and analysis and inference techniques (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). An online survey used a Likert scale to collect data on the likelihood of participants engaging in a range of surveillance practices on Facebook, and on their attitudes to personal surveillance in both online and offline spaces. An asynchronous online discussion forum was used to conduct an unstructured focus group where participants were able to raise their own opinions and experiences of surveillance and respond to the ideas of others.

Results and Discussion

Most of the respondents controlled the access to their information on Facebook, with 51.9% having their privacy settings on "Friends" and a further 31.2% using "Customised" settings, indicating that at least at this level there was a deliberate decision made to limit the sharing of their personal information. While 32.1% often used Facebook to communicate with friends and family, a majority used the site to establish new contacts, and to maintain contact with past friends, acquaintances and friends of friends. Their use seemed to be directed towards establishing and maintaining weak ties. More than half of the participants (53.2%) said that they would share information or images that could be considered personal, with a significant number often (28.6%) or very often (5.2%) doing so. Facebook normalizes this sharing of personal details, with strategies such as the "Ask" button beside missing personal data, which emphasizes its absence.

Most seemed to be accepting of commercial entities and platforms collecting their data, with frequent comments in the focus group like:

> *People act like it is a massive abuse that the service providers are selling our info - info that we freely give. Google/Facebook aren't altruistic companies, and they need to make the money somehow. Of course they are going to try and get as much information as possible.*

There was a general concern around Government collection and use of data; however this was combined with an acceptance of its inevitability:

> *Have we reached an unspoken understanding? We aren't all going to just give up the internet, and do we really have any chance of stopping government surveillance?*

The discussion in the focus group suggested that privacy from individuals (latent axe murderers and vengeful exes) was a greater motivation in limiting and restricting disclosure, than fears of commercial and government monitoring of data:

> *I start to freak out a bit when apps and services want my location because I'm one of those paranoid people that think when someone sees my location they will stalk and kill me. I know that the likelihood of this happening is very slim but it still completely freaks me out.*

> *I do feel that more people are using Facebook and social media to "stalk" or monitor their partners.*

However despite their concerns regarding their own personal information and fears of how it might be used by others, the majority of respondents admitted to using Facebook to collect data on others, or to publish others' information. Tagging family and friends without their prior permission was common (68.8% had done so), and uploading photos or videos of strangers an accepted practice (36.4%). Before an interview or other important meeting 62.4% of this group would check the profile of the person(s) they were to meet. 87% of the group have checked the Facebook profiles of people they met casually, such as in class, and 81.8% of them reported that they had looked up the profile of people that had not actually met, but were personally interested in. 14.3% of the survey respondents had considered checking the profile of an ex-partner or former friend to keep track of their activities, and an additional 71.4% had actually done so. Amongst this group of Millenials there seemed to be an understanding that the personal details of other people was information that was available for their use, with the majority accessing that information in circumstances where it provided them with a benefit or advantage.

Conclusion

The risk of intimate data being circulated is balanced by the ability to receive immediate information on others, to be the first with the latest social news, or to be immediately armed with personal information. Immediacy has become a primary factor in the way that Millenials understand and engage with the internet and social media (Lee and Cook, 2014), and while privacy for their own information is a concern, it seems that this group willingly traded that privacy for immediacy of access to information about others.

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