"Disclosure motivations" for airing private matters in online public places

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Parents just have to ask: "What were you thinking when you shared that personal information on Facebook?"

Children don't have to answer – even if Mom is a Facebook friend – but many told all when social media researchers at Cornell asked about their "disclosure motivations" for airing private matters in online public places.

"People think about getting those negative feelings and emotions out of their system more than future consequences," says Natalie Bazarova, principal investigator in the self-disclosure study and co-director of Cornell's Social Media Lab. "Their focus is on releasing pent-up feelings – right now. Our study found that this type of disclosure (motivated by what we call 'self-expression') is more intimate than disclosure motivated by 'self-validation' goals. Regrettably, some of these disclosures can get them into trouble if they go beyond their Facebook circle."

The Cornell study involved 80 volunteers who received extra credit in communication or psychology courses to participate. Most had Facebook accounts for at least four years, between 500 and 1,000 Facebook friends apiece, and were spending an hour a day on Facebook. Participants were asked to log on to their Facebook accounts – then copy and paste the six most recent status updates, wall posts and private messages into a Web survey. That gave the researchers a total of 1,295 self-disclosures to ponder.

Results were reported at the November 2013 conference of the National Communication Association and are set for publication (with Cornell Ph.D. student Yoon Hyung Choi as a co-author) in the August 2014 *Journal of Communication*, as "Self-Disclosure in Social Media: Extending the Functional Approach to Disclosure Motivations and Characteristics on Social Network Sites."

As Bazarova designed the experiment, she wondered: "What drives people to share personal information on Facebook – especially with large and diverse audiences on status update posts?"

Furthermore, "How are the rewards sought from public disclosures different than those we seek in one-on-one interactions? And can looking at disclosure motivations explain why people sometimes share quite intimate information about themselves?"

Self-disclosure motivation boiled down to seven kinds of goals, ranging from "personal identity management" to "benefiting others through sharing personal experiences." For public disclosures via status updates, the two main goals were social validation – looking for general liking, social feedback and approval – and self-expression, which often involves venting emotions, especially negative, and talking about problems.

"Although self-expression disclosures are less frequent, compared to the social validation ones, they are the ones that can get people in trouble," Bazarova says. "And we saw that every fifth status update on average involved some kind of self-expression goal."

Bazarova's children are still too young for Facebook, but here's the lecture they'll get when the time comes: "The problem is, these disclosures may not always stay with the intended audience on Facebook and can even lead to negative consequences, especially if they get outside one's Facebook circle.

"And they often do," the mom and college professor warns. "So next time you are ready to spill your feelings and emotions on Facebook, it might be a good idea to take a breath and think whether you really want to do it to avoid problems now – or in the future. Digital information persists in the future. It can be stored, replicated and passed around. What you posted years ago can become available to future audiences – like, future employers."

"Like keeping that in mind, Mom."

All about me

Natalie Bazarova and Yoon Hyung Choi knew, from previous studies by other researchers, that 30 to 40 percent of everyday speech involves ourselves and our personal experiences – and that in today's wired world, at least some of that all-about-me is going online.

So they weren't totally surprised to learn, from the self-examining, self-disclosing students: "About 60 percent of what we share on Facebook involves some kind of personal disclosure or talking about ourselves and our experiences," dished Bazarova, assistant professor of communication in Cornell's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. "Talking about ourselves is intrinsically rewarding, and one of the reasons why Facebook is so popular. Social media help people to achieve social and personal rewards of self-disclosure."

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