

Losing face on Facebook

April 3 2014, by Bill Steele

We're often reminded that what we post on the Internet about ourselves may come back to haunt us. Research at Cornell and Northwestern universities suggests that we also should think twice before posting about someone else.

A survey of Facebook users turned up many stories of how something posted by a friend was uncomfortable or "face threatening." Examples range from a photo showing someone drunk to giving away secrets or posting something counter to how a person would want their image projected to the world – what [social scientists](#) call "self-presentation."

In the [digital age](#), your self-presentation is determined as much by others as by yourself, according to Jeff Hancock, professor of communication. "These [[social media](#)] worlds are not external to our everyday life; they're part of it now," he explained.

Hancock, graduate student Erin Spottswood and colleagues presented their study, "Awkward Encounters of an 'Other' Kind: Collective Self-Presentation and Face Threat on Facebook," at the ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing, Feb. 15-19 in Baltimore.

They asked 150 Facebook users to describe other people's postings that made them uncomfortable and to rate the severity of their discomfort. Users reported unflattering photos, political statements or associations that respondents didn't want seen by certain friends, and being caught in lies. Many worried about what a potential employer might see.

The aim of the research was not just to find out what might happen, but to see how the targets responded. "My personal goal was to understand how people manage embarrassing situations on a very public scale," Spottswood said.

The researchers point out, that a person may have different "audiences." What may be appropriate for one audience might not be for others, and posters sometimes are unaware of other audiences their friends might have. Something a co-worker thinks is hilarious might be offensive to your church group. When you post something about a friend, "You can't necessarily predict how they're going to feel about it," Spottswood said. Survey participants who had more diverse groups of friends usually rated the severity of their face-threatening experiences higher.

Some people pay more attention to their public image than others, and those who scored higher on a scale of "self-monitoring" also rated face-threatening events as more severe. If the target thought something negative was posted intentionally, the event was seen as particularly severe. In the most extreme case – cyberbullying – the bully is intentionally crossing boundaries. "Cyberbullies accomplish their meanness by violating someone's self-presentation," Hancock said.

The survey also asked participants to report their Internet and Facebook skill level. As expected, Facebook pros are less bothered by face-threatening posts because they know how to deal with them by, for example, untagging themselves from photos. On the other hand, those with good overall Internet skills are more uncomfortable, perhaps because they understand how far-reaching the consequences might be.

Designers of social media sites should include features to forestall these problems, the researchers suggested. For example, posters could be advised about the kinds of groups that would see their posts, or users could be allowed to restrict posts about themselves only to the group the

poster belongs to. The user could be given warnings like "Do you want everyone to see this post?" It would also be helpful to provide people with more opportunities to learn how to manage online technologies, Spottswood added.

With or without these safeguards, we all should be aware that what we post on the Internet about our friends "can have serious consequences for the target," the researchers said. And probably that applies to real life, too.

Provided by Cornell University

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