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Nathan Jurgenson & P. J. Rey

COMMENT ON SARAH FORD'S 'RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF PRIVACY AND PUBLICITY'

Sarah Ford's recent article, 'Reconceptualizing the Public/Private Distinction in the Age of Information Technology' demonstrates how social media shifts our understanding of privacy and publicity and proposes a continuum model instead of a simple dichotomy. In this commentary, we argue that Ford's proposed model does not go far enough to break down the problematic dichotomous thinking and propose a further reconceptualization of privacy and publicity as a dialectic.

Keywords sociology; ICTs; surveillance; privacy; publicity; social change; Web 2.0; continuum; dialectic; theory

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Social media force us to revisit many of the fundamental concepts through which we make sense of our social reality – not the least of which are our notions of privacy and publicity. The media frequently reports on how these new forms of publicity produce troubling results (e.g., Facebook privacy issues, the Anthony Weiner scandal, etc.). Academic research, such as danah boyd's (2010, 2011a, 2011b) work, has found a better balance in describing both the potential pitfalls as well as the benefits of online visibility. However, much work remains to be done in theorizing the shifting relationship between publicity and privacy in digital age.

In the June 2011 issue of *Information, Communication & Society*, Sarah Ford (2011) argued that privacy and publicity should not be thought of as a dichotomy (as these categories have been traditionally treated), but instead as a continuum, where an infinite number of combinations exist between the poles. We wish to critique Ford's continuum model in two ways: (1) Her conclusions are somewhat contradictory and do not neatly follow from the evidence presented and (2) this is because her new model does not make the radical break with the traditional conceptualizations of publicity/privacy that is required to fully capture the

enmeshed nature of the concepts. Alternatively, we propose that, in the digital age, privacy and publicity might be better understood as a *dialectic*.

In her conclusion, Ford (p. 14) clearly expresses the logical tension that we believe characterizes her model, when she states that:

The public and private realms have bled over into one another, and can no longer be treated as a dichotomous pair [. . .] a more fruitful conception of the public/private realms is one that treats them as anchors on either end of a continuum, with liminal categories being created and destroyed as needed. The line between public and private has become blurry; these concepts are no longer polar opposites [. . .].

The problem highlighted in this passage is that privacy and publicity are described as being ‘anchors on either end of a continuum’, while simultaneously ‘no longer being polar opposites’. Yet, by definition, the ends (or ‘poles’) of a continuum *must* be (polar) opposites. Presumably, Ford’s intent was to say that publicity and privacy are no longer discrete categories – that a particular space or activity need not be *only* public or only private, that, instead, we can have something that quasi-public and quasi-private. The logic of this argument is similar, by analogy, to saying that, while things can be black or white, they can also be many shades of grey. This is made explicit in Ford’s Figure 1.

Ford’s observation that we have, historically, treated the categories of publicity and privacy as discrete is important, and social media has, undoubtedly, rendered this simple binary obsolete. However, we find that the continuum model is still too reductive to sufficiently account for even the examples Ford provides. This is because continua imply a zero-sum balance. If, for example, I am mixing a gallon of paint, two-quarters of black and two-quarters of white will give me medium grey. If, however, I want the paint to be darker, I must *replace* some of the white in the mixture with black. To have maximally dark paint, I

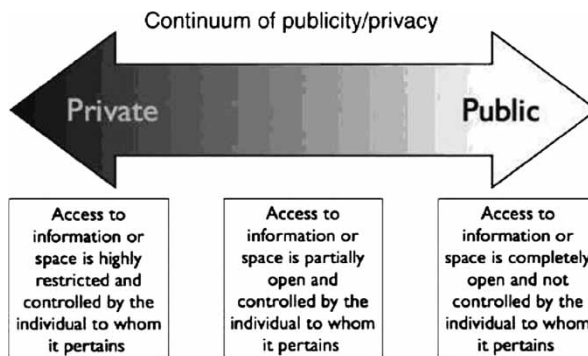


FIGURE 1 Sarah's Ford's continuum model of privacy and publicity.

must add only black to the can *at the expense of* adding any white. Because our phenomena of interest (publicity and privacy) are qualitative variables, we can improve the analogy by saying that increasing the intensity of the darkness of our paint requires diminishing the intensity of the lightness of our paint.

The problem with the continuum model is that *an increase in publicity does not necessarily imply a decrease in privacy* or vice versa. In fact, we need only consider some of the examples that Ford provides. She cites danah boyd's (2011b) notion of 'social steganography' as a reason why we need a continuum model of privacy/publicity. However, this example is an evidence of precisely why the continuum model does not work. 'Social steganography' refers to the practice of social media users hiding messages in plain sight by posting information publicly that seems innocuous unless a particular reader has certain information that allows them to decode the message. For instance, a teen might post what appear to be simple song lyrics, but to a group 'in the know', it might signal that the person who posted the content has just experienced a painful breakup. Thus, a single post can be highly public in that anyone can read or access the information put forth, even if it seems cryptic or, even, altogether meaningless, while conveying a very controlled and personal – and thus very private – message to those who 'get it'. Social stenography demonstrates that a single act of communication can be at once very public as well as quite private. To return to our previous analogy, it can be both intensely black and intensely white without dissolving into grey.

We reach a similar conclusion when reviewing a second practice described by boyd (2011a) that is often called 'white-walling'. This is a practice whereby social media users post information and allow others to post information on their social media profile (usually Facebook) and then, periodically, delete everything. A person can be hyper-public by posting a lot of information about oneself and others. And then, by deleting it all at the end of the day, the same person also practices intensely private behaviour. The continuum model would suggest that the white-wall-er's behaviour is comparable to a person who posts limited amounts of information on social media. It leads us to lose sight of the fact that those who white-wall are devoting far more energy to ensuring both publicity as well as privacy. In fact, there is a major qualitative difference between the white-wall-er and the limited user: The limited user is likely to see only limited benefits from using social media while being exposed to only limited risk, whereas, the white-wall-er maximizes the benefits of social media while still mitigating its risks. These two user-types *cannot* be grouped together as the continuum model would suggest.

Not a continuum, a dialectic

In contrast to Ford's continuum model, we argue that privacy and publicity produce a dialectic – that each concept *implies* the other. Before we proceed

to advance this argument, we wish to make clear that we are *not* claiming that the terms ‘public’ and ‘private’ no longer make sense when separated. In the abstract, we agree with Nippert-Eng (2010) that these discrete concepts can be deployed as Weberian ‘ideal types’ (i.e., conceptual guides that are helpful for theorizing), even if the phenomena never manifest themselves in ideal typical forms. Nevertheless, we find that viewing privacy and publicity as opposite ends, poles, or anchors on a continuum is often misleading. We, thus, call for a model that begins to deconstruct this binary thinking. When theorizing about the breaking, or deconstructing, of previously held binaries it is often useful to look to post-structural and post-Modern thought. One such thinker that we find useful here is Georges Bataille (who, subsequently, influenced Jean Baudrillard).

Bataille (1988, 2004; Richardson 1994), a philosopher and fiction author notorious for his pornographic writing, argued that every instance of knowledge is simultaneously an instance of non-knowledge. Simply, and not precisely the way Bataille uses the concept, each time you learn something new, you also learn more about what you do not know. For example, with each new scientific discovery, we might learn something new, but, simultaneously, we also start asking questions that we never could have before.¹ Each time we learn something new (*knowledge*) the stock of what we do not know (*non-knowledge*) grows ever larger. Following Bataille, philosopher Baudrillard (1983/1990) develops the concepts ‘obscenity’ and ‘seduction’ around the knowledge/non-knowledge relationship. ‘Obscenity’ is the drive to reveal all and expose things in full, whereas ‘seduction’ is the process of strategically withholding in order to create magical and enchanted interest (what he calls the ‘scene’ opposed to the ‘obscene’). That is, non-knowledge is the seductive and magical aspect of knowledge. Using Baudrillard’s metaphor, we might say that burlesque is ‘seductive’ because each layer removed reveals something new that is still concealed, whereas pornography is said to be obscene because it immediately reveals everything, often in close-up.

Drawing on Baudrillard’s metaphor – and borrowing a term from Smith (2009) – we might say that self-presentation on social media takes the form of a *fan-dance*, a space where we both reveal and conceal, never showing too much, else we have given it all away, but always enticing by strategically concealing the right ‘bits’ at the right time. Each status update suggests that which has been left out. Bataille typically discussed non-knowledge as an ecstatic ‘inner-experience’, and with Baudrillard’s contribution we can say that the inner-experience is one of seduction, enchantment, and enticement. Thus, publicity is understood to be always rife with its conceptual opposite: concealment. A status update is a public act, but it also expresses its conceptual opposite as it obscures the rich detail that lies between each of the updates. *How does each update relate to the next? What else do they imply?* When posting a picture publicly, one is also, potentially, concealing information such as: *Who took the picture? Who else was there? Where was this? How does this photo relate to the others in the album?*

Which photos were deleted/never posted? What wasn't photographed in the first place? While some of this information may be provided with the photo, the information cannot ever be exhaustive (remember, more information only leads to more new questions). In short, the screen ever contains only a very partial story.

As the conceptual antithesis of publicity, privacy does not simply consist of behaviours like hiding identities or simply posting nothing at all. Rather, when one reveals something in a post, even when using one's real name, there is always a private layer of information that is concealed, yet implicitly suggested. As the conceptual antithesis of privacy, publicity (in its absence or its potentiality) lends private information value and importance. That is to say, when we share part of a story publicly, the rest of the story becomes more valuable to those who have private access. This understanding has always been implicit in gossip. For example, when we disclose a particularly juicy detail of our personal life to a close confidant, the value of that information is twofold: (1) we are signalling that our relationship with the confidant is important by giving them exclusive, private access, and (2) our confidant is doubly rewarded with our implicit permission to make that information public and, subsequently, to bask in all the interest and attention. Similarly, as Davis (2011) notes, friend purges (i.e., the practice of periodically deleting all but the people one feels closest to) are a public declaration of who does and does not merit access to one's private information. This very public act, in fact, intensifies privacy.

The reformulation we have offered, one that views privacy and publicity as 'intertwined' (boyd, 2011c) and co-implicated, suggests a dialectic understanding. The dialectic model asserts that publicity and privacy do not always come at the expense of one another but, at times, can be mutually reinforcing (Figure 2).

The actions that promote and support publicity are not cancelled out by those that promote and support privacy, nor is the inverse true. Instead, information sharing that is characterized by intense concern for both publicity *and* privacy must be viewed as qualitatively distinct from those situations where little concern is devoted to either. This realization may prove to be useful in understanding the differences, for example, in the ways in which social media is engaged by digital natives versus digital migrants. The media tend to describe natives as obsessed with publicity and migrants as more concerned with privacy. Our new model would allow us to offer an alternative hypothesis that natives are, in fact, more concerned with and more adept at managing both publicity *and* privacy (of course, such a claim demands empirical testing).



FIGURE 2 Proposed dialectical model of privacy and publicity.

There is a broad consensus, both within and outside academia, that the relationship between publicity and privacy is changing in light of recent developments in communication technologies. Ford has made an important contribution to our understanding of the historical context surrounding this shift and has helped to formalize our assumptions about these two social phenomena. We call for an ongoing discussion about publicity and privacy towards the development of future theoretical refinements. While it was impossible to fully develop a dialectical model in this short commentary piece, we hope to have made a compelling case as to why the continuum model remains inadequate and to have stimulated further consideration of how a dialectic (or other) approach might better capture privacy and publicity online.

Note

- 1 This insight is central to the Socratic method which brings wisdom by leading pupils to formulate questions that themselves are only the pre-condition to the next set of questions. In fact, the Oracle of Delphi was purported to have called Socrates, the wisest man in Athens, because he was the only person who knew what he did not know.

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