

# Controlling social media flow: avoiding unwanted publication

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**Abstract:** Social media blurs the boundaries of social life and brings together different spheres such as family, work or friends in the same online space. Users begin to post less intimate details about themselves, and they want to see fewer details of the private lives of others as well. Users want to better control what they read on social media. This paper studies the use of information and communication technology in social and cultural context. A qualitative approach provides a rich and detailed description of contexts and motivations of social media use. It shows that users are still negotiating the endless flow of information coming from social media.

**Keywords:** context collapse, boundary, privacy, social media, media connectivity, boundary regulation practices, oversharing

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## *Contrôle du flux des médias sociaux : éviter les publications indésirables*

**Résumé :** Les médias sociaux effacent les frontières de la vie sociale et regroupent différentes sphères tels que la famille, le travail ou les amis dans un même espace en ligne. Cependant, les usagers commencent à moins diffuser des détails intimes sur eux-mêmes, et ils veulent moins voir les détails de la vie privée des autres. Les usagers cherchent à mieux contrôler ce qu'ils lisent sur les médias sociaux. Cet article étudie l'utilisation des technologies de l'information et de la communication dans le contexte social et culturel. Une approche qualitative fournit une description riche et détaillée des contextes et des motivations de l'utilisation des médias sociaux. L'article montre comment et pourquoi les utilisateurs négocient le flux incessant d'informations provenant de médias sociaux.

**Mots-clés :** effondrement de contexte, médias sociaux, protection de la vie privée, partage d'information

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## **Introduction**

Within the context of social media, issues of disclosing personal information, impression management, and self-presentation (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) have been

intensely researched, but few have studied how users receive this personal information or whether they want to see them. Users have appropriated social media in order to communicate with friends and family. Now they are appropriating social media for their cultural and information needs. Increased use for these purposes results in users now facing the problems of control of the flow of information and dealing with other people's privacy (Child & Petronio, 2011).

This paper analyzes communication issues linked with the oversharing of personal and useless information on social network sites (SNSs): based on my Ph.D. research, I explore how individuals share online videos with a methodology combining multi-sited ethnography (Falzon, 2009; Marcus, 1995) and online ethnography (Orgad, 2009). The observations in this article are based on thirty interviews with ten participants. The interviews were analyzed based on the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The qualitative approach produced a rich and detailed description of the contexts and motivations of social media use. This paper addresses the lack of knowledge of Internet practices for using social media in their daily activities by providing a rich and detailed description of actual practices. And it responds to the criticism of Nancy Baym to the Internet Studies field:

Many studies of Internet use, (...) measure time online, divide people into heavy and light users, or users vs. non-users, and then correlate that measure with outcome variables such as loneliness or time spent with family. What a person was doing online is not addressed, collapsing such diverse activities as keeping in touch with one's mother, banking, researching political information, and looking at pornography into a single causal agent: the Internet (Baym, 2010, p. 26)

The reasons for sharing motivations are diverse, and can be for bragging purpose (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2012) or recommendations (Bondad-Brown, Rice, & Pearce, 2012). How users share content is also shaped by the way other users are sharing content. Participants expressed a strong dislike of useless information, referring to this behavior as spamming news feed. Users try to control the flow of content on social media and try to not overshare posts, themselves. Social media users have to deal with media connectivity, which "may be understood as an ever-thickening net of communication possibilities and communication flows of the people who, to an ever-increasing extent, live in a complex media environment" (Krotz, 2008, p. 25).

This paper will focus on how users interpret, react to, and manage the oversharing of private and/or uninteresting posts on SNSs. In the first part, the article present how too much self-disclosure on SNS becomes a nuisance. In the second part, we describe how users describe the different type of unwanted post. We discuss the peculiarity of users trying to avoid seeing too much publication from other users. In the last part, we show how SNS are used to be less visible publicly.

### 1. When too much self-disclosure becomes a nuisance

I don't like reading about other people's lives,' I don't do it. But I understand why some people feel the need to do so, to feel connected to others. They don't go out because they have kids, and go on Facebook to talk about their days. And others leave comments, so it must interest someone. So they are two types of people. It gets on my nerves, but I do not despise the fact that people do it. (Pascal, 3rd interview)

Users consider SNSs as public space (Jensen & Sørensen, 2013). Revealing information on Facebook has been studied in terms of self-presentation, relationship and privacy issues (R. E. Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). The literature shows a shift in users' attitudes toward greater privacy concerns. However, an inconsistency between reported concerns and behavior has been noticed (R. E. Wilson et al., 2012). Users may not see the risks associated with revealing mundane information on SNSs, but self-disclosure fulfills popularity and interpersonal needs (Lai & Yang, 2014). Self-disclosure is indispensable when turning strangers into relational partners and when maintaining ongoing relationships (Baym, 2010, p109). But many Facebook friends fall in between being strangers and friends, and people who fall between these two categories are known as acquaintances. Individuals are not acquaintances for everyone in their social network. They also have close relationships, and may share personal information to maintain them. Individuals that are not close to each other may not want to view self-disclosure publications on social media such as Facebook.

The flood of information that constantly flows on SNS feeds has a double constraint on users: not only is online life automatically exposed, it also is a social overload (Stenger & Coutant, 2010). Stenger and Coutant (2010) explain that social overload is linked to the continuous flow of information, orchestrated by the SNSs, and encouraged by the users who want to share about themselves and their latest "finds," such as a funny video, an article, or a new website. Participants talk about unwanted posts as spam. However, we need to make the distinction between participant vocabulary and academic concepts. In the literature, social spamming refers to fake accounts (Webb, Caverlee, & Pu, 2008). In my research, participants did not mention fake accounts on SNSs. Instead, participants suffered from seeing too many uninteresting or irrelevant publications, messages, or videos:

There are many people who really pollute. People who share their Instagram photos of all their meals. We do not care. People who share their check-in in Four-square. I do not care that you're at a Bixi stop. Frankly, I could not care less. (Frederick, 2nd interview)

Frederick does not want to know what his friends are doing every minute of the day. Another participant employs the term "spaghetti" as an allegory for unnecessary sharing: "you see the spaghetti of a guy you were in 2nd grade with, but you do not care" (Aurélié, 2nd interview). Users may want to stay in touch, but from a distance, and most importantly without too many details of everyday life. The issue with the "unwanted spaghetti" is that some members of the SNS might want to see

it, and some won't. First, we shall discuss who want to see those details as a way to maintaining close relationship. Then we will discuss those who are not interested because they are not the targeted audience of those unwanted post due to context collapse.

Sharing of mundane everyday activities may be used to create "ambient intimacy" among "friends," or networked contacts, by which "small details and daily events cumulate over time to give a sense of the rhythms and flows of another's life" (Crawford, 2009, p. 259). Ambient intimacy is another way of describing how people stay in touch by sharing photos and comments about their daily lives. This online behavior has its roots in the need to share anything and everything, known in the real world as gossip or chattering (Vries, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Kibby, 2005). Gossip and other small talk can be fun when done in small groups, but when dozen or hundred of them occur in the same online space, it can quickly become too noisy.

Online videos are also a way to keep in touch in SNS without being too intimately mundane. Here is an example from one participant. One morning, Aurélie got up with the song Day-O in her head. She was referring to a dinner scene from the Tim Burton film *Beetlejuice* (1988) in which the characters are possessed and begin to sing and dance. She searched for the film clip on YouTube and shared it on Facebook because she thought it would make people smile at 8 a.m. Indeed, she says she received a lot of likes, and many "oh my god, I forgot that scene, it's so the best scene ever." They appreciated the fact that she shared the video because not only did it remind them individually of the film in question, but it has led them to share their memories of the well-know film in public, in the form of a discussion among young adults her own age. This example illustrates users' creativity in expressing themselves without being too mundane. Because *Beetlejuice* is part of the pop culture, sharing a scene from it facilitates remembering common references and strengthens the sense of belonging to a group.

On SNSs, users belong to many groups that are regrouped into a single online space. Users may not want to share the same content to their close friends, family members, work colleagues, and acquaintances. This issue is known as context collapse. "Social media technologies collapse multiple audiences into single contexts, making it difficult for people to use the same techniques online that they do to handle multiplicity in face-to-face conversation" (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 114).

One participant, Nathalie, is well aware that she has too many different audience on Facebook, and that inhibits how much online content she shares. She explained that if she had 15 friends on Facebook, she might be less embarrassed to publish things. She would know who those 15 people are, and how to speak to them. With 350 friends, however, she does not remember some of them.

Marwick and boyd (2011) explained that twitter users develop techniques to address multiple audiences at once: either avoid certain topics or try to balance personal and informative topics. The first technique, self-censorship, is often used, and we will discuss it in detail in the last section of this paper. The second technique, bal-

ance, can be assumed by being open about who the person is: a professional, a relative, or a friend.

Some try to bring back context by separating audiences on different SNS. For Frederick, Facebook is more for friends, and Twitter is more professional and serious. Therefore, he is not happy when he sees too much personal information on Twitter, calling it “pollution”: “On Facebook, they are your friends, you may want [to see] ... But on Twitter, it’s more professional. There are many people who pollute, which is a shame, people I love to follow, but they pollute and put interesting post” (Frederick, 2nd interview).

Aurélie gives a detailed explanation of why she does not synchronize all her SNS accounts:

I think it is not the same audience that this is not the same way of speaking, that’s not the same message to be delivered. Facebook, for me it’s much more personal, my friends, even though I have 600 of them. I give my opinion in greater details. On Twitter I use punch line, or ... sometimes I can get the same content on both, but this is not systematic. (Aurélie, 2nd interview)

As Dumitrica (2013) pointed out, “the banal and uninteresting details of personal lives were not seen as legitimate online content, yet professional contributions were unproblematically considered as part of the ‘wealth’ of online information” (p.601).

To overcome the problem of context collapse, Facebook offered the possibility to separate friends into different lists. Nathan says he has 420 contacts on Facebook, rather than friends, because he only sees 20% of them regularly; the other contacts live far away, he meets them occasionally, or they are friends of friends. He has eight lists on Facebook, separating colleagues from old schoolmates, best friends, and family. Other participants don’t want to have a selection of people. Stephane finds this function useless. As Malinen (2015) suspected, updating friendship categories according to the current state of relationships can be too laborious for some users. Others don’t worry about the different audiences on their Facebook.

Aurelie explains how her boyfriend, who is also her business partner, handles the distinction between private life and professional life:

He will put personal and not politically correct things on Facebook. When I tell him that half his Facebook friends are people from our professional network. For him, it’s the same, that’s how he is in real life. And if people are not happy they can be on their way. He shared videos he made himself for his job, he shared videos that are vulgar... I am no way like that. I have a hard time to share videos we do professionally in my personal Facebook. I think the link is wrong, I think it is too much self-promotion. In our couple, professional partner, we have two completely different ways of seeing social media. (Aurelie, 2e entrevue)

As Aurélie emphasizes, practices are not systematic and fixed. And it would be risky to draw clear and precise separations, because it does not represent the reality

of individual practices. Moreover, users can be flexible, as when Frederick complained about pollution on Twitter. Frederick still did not unfollow people who posted both interesting information and pollution. If they only tweet pollution, Frederick acts like others and unfollows those who either tweet too much, or tweet about uninteresting topics (Kwak et al., 2011).

## 2. Typology of Unwanted posts

In its beginning, the Internet was considered a world apart, to which to escape. Surfing the web was an escape from the material world into an immersive environment. But the Internet became banal, mundane, and even boring (T. Wilson, 2004). Within the social web, the mundane becomes even more visible online. In this section, we will examine what types of content are considered unwanted and how participants describe their annoyance with them.

Participants were very explicit about “good manners” on SNS, and what should not be publicly shared. A post that should not have been published on SNS is defined as not appropriate. Using Jensen and Sørensen (2013) findings as well as mine, I classified unwanted posts into three categories: too irrelevant, too private, and too trivial.

Items of content that do not have common interest with the rest of SNS friends are irrelevant. This category includes most animal videos. It also includes very specific topics that will be of little interest, such as the technical aspects of car tires. Participants explain how they think about others on SNS before posting a video:

I shared a scene from *Lost*, because I know it’s a show that is loved by many, but another show that I know I’m all alone to watch, even if it’s a scene that touched me so much, I will not put it on Facebook, because it speaks to no one. (Aurelie, 3rd interview)

Posts that are too private might have details about “serious illness, death, sexuality and bodily functions” (Jensen & Sørensen, 2013, p. 58). One participant, Kevin, gives a perfect example of a “too private post,” about a girl who wrote about her endometrium. He rhetorically asked, “Why do you want everyone to know that you have a stomach cramp? It does not interest me” (1st interview).

Posts that are too trivial are “reporting of daily affairs such as cleaning, shopping, etc.” (Jensen & Sørensen, 2013, p. 58); because they don’t interest others, they can quickly become embarrassing. The spaghetti mentioned earlier by Pascal and Aurelie is the perfect example of posts that are too trivial.

While describing what they consider “good practice” on SNS, participants expressed their dislike of unwanted videos and information. First, they described unsolicited information with words such as pollution and SPAM: “it’s really about spreading junk in the world. Like ‘I ate spaghetti for dinner and it was not good’” (Pascal, 3rd interview). This social incentive to voyeurism (Stenger & Coutant,

2010) is felt like an intrusion, an imposition, to thrust oneself offensively upon others. Secondly, their vocabulary reflects a lack of control over the flow of information. They use verbs like: feeling insulted, run away to avoid something, to suffer, be a victim.

In the next section, we will examine some strategies used by participants to avoid seeing too many unwanted publications.

### 3. Unvoyeurism

I know a guy, smart, who manages online communities on Facebook. At one point, he got a girlfriend, and it became nonsense. He updated everything: “I do this with my girlfriend, here is a picture of my girlfriend, foursquare check-in on Facebook with my girlfriend.” We do not care. You can put something once occasionally, like birthdays. It’s funny, the family will like it. I’m not the only one. Many people removed him from their timeline. It was discomfort after discomfort (Frederic, 3rd interview)

The above interview extract shows how users deal with posts that are too private. Other users removing that one person from their news feeds can be described as an unsocial behavior. But this unsocial behavior is not hostile; it indicates personal preferences, thus enabling users to avoid negative or awkward social situations (Malinen, 2015). Linked with the typology of unwanted posts, Malinen (2015) has found that reasons for unfriending someone on Facebook were linked either to posts being too frequent, or being unimportant or/and polarizing.

As boyd (2011) remarked that people develop strategies to manage the realities in which they are observed, monitoring affects the behavior of people. With surveillance and voyeurism, users find creative ways to manage this monitoring and protect their privacy (boyd, 2011). One behavior, called unsociability, “refers to the use of features intended to limit, control and remove social contacts and content on SNSs” (Malinen, 2015, p. 2). Unsociability deals with what users want others to see. What should we call it when users want to select whom they see on SNSs, or limit the content visible to them? Can we call this behavior unvoyeurism? Users also develop strategies to not see the lives of others, trying to not be a voyeur; this behavior on SNSs is part of boundary regulation practices.

First of all, filtering content is hazardous. Users don’t always understand how their feed is populated, especially on Facebook. Kevin tried to stop receiving private content about babies: statutes like “my baby moved, my baby moved again.” At one point, I opened my page and I saw just that. At that time, it annoyed me and I took it off. Anyway, I tried to remove her from my newsfeed. As explained Kevin; even removing unwanted friends, and publications about her new baby, they came back anyway, even when he hadn’t visited their pages. On Twitter, social norms against “oversharing” and privacy concerns mean that information deemed too personal may be removed from potential interactions (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 130).

Despite intensive activity on social networks, Frederic shows the same behavior as non-users (or non-adopters). According to Bobkowski and Smith (2013), non-adopters do not have the social connections that motivate them to use social media. They, therefore, have less need to monitor the activities of their friends online, but also less need to assert their online presence. In reality, it is not that Frederic has no friends on SNS, he just prefers to meet his close friends face to face. He prefers to use SNS as a source of information. Another participant explained that he is disappointed by people who will do anything: "I've just been so often spammed on Facebook... I have the impression that some people put anything." (Kevin, 2nd interview).

Faced with this ongoing problem, the SNSs began to provide tools for people to manage these problems. The Facebook application offers the reason "I never want to see it," and offers solutions such as removing the person from one's friend list or writing a private message so that it avoids publishing this kind of content.

Facebook offers few options to manage unwanted posts, though, such as: hide post (hide a post from News Feed), unfollow (stop seeing posts of that person, but stay friends), hide all from (stop seeing posts from a specific page), or report post. With the report post option, users are asked to choose between four reasons: 1) it's annoying, 2) I'm in this photo and I don't like it, 3) I think it shouldn't be on Facebook, or 4) it's spam.

No participants decided to report posts: they either scrolled past uninteresting posts or unfollowed people. Kevin explained that he does not unfollow people on Facebook on a daily basis. If someone does not publish interesting posts in a while, he decides to unfollow them so that they will no longer be visible on his news feed. Unfortunately, this option will stop every post of the unfollowed people from appearing in one's news feed, making them completely invisible and forgotten. Managing the visibility of others can be tricky.

Stephan decided to create a list of all of his Facebook friends in order to bypass the Facebook algorithm, so that he can see in chronological order what is happening on Facebook.

I realized by the new list is that there is someone who posts stuff on Facebook, I thought he was posting anything more. As my friend is there, I think it was posting anything more. Because he had changed country and it is right. He's a very funny, we had discussed in relation to politics, because he had a vision right, but always had a very respectful and open reflection. Always interesting. There are people I've rediscovered. Things that are more visible. Even my wife, she made a list with all these friends to be able to see everything. You cannot see everything, as you see there when people change their status. Normally it appears in the small bar on the right, where it appears directly in it. You do not have to go into the bar to the right, look at the center. (2nd interview)

Because participants realize how annoying it is to see unwanted posts, and how delicate it is to control what to see, they treat SNS as a public place, where one must behave accordingly. In the next section, we will explore how participants avoid being annoying on SNS.

#### **4. Post less for the sake of others**

Individuals tend to show consideration for others when posting on public space or forum (Höflich, 2006). The participants considered Facebook as a public space in which to consider the well-being of others. First, it indicates that the participants evaluate and know the tastes of their friends. Private messaging is an ideal way to share, with discernment, personal or questionable videos. As we noted, participants, all members of the SNS who are not interested in this kind of content, can be saved by this type of sharing. By avoiding the public space of SNS, the sender and the recipient will not see their reputations called into doubt by a distasteful video. Participants also take precautions with content that is too private due to the fact that other people may be the subjects of the video.

A good deal of communication on SNS takes place through private messages, similar to e-mails (Jensen & Sørensen, 2013, p. 57). For Stephan, Facebook acts as his telephone: he contacts his friends thru private messages. Participants shared video through private messages for two main reasons. The first reason was that a video will only interest one person. When sharing videos on Facebook, Pascal does not publish on someone's wall, because he, himself, does not like others to post on his wall. Thus, if a video only concerns one person, then he prefers sending a private message to that person. The second reason is a privacy issue. Nathan, who likes to film events like birthdays, will share the video privately because he wants to protect the privacy of his friends visible in the video. People would feel betrayed if Nathan publicly released videos of drunk friends. Nathan and his friends are happy to see the videos of their own parties, but even if they are archived on YouTube, the videos are strictly private. For a last example, Aurélie uses a private group to share news about her son, for both of the reasons mentioned above. On the one hand, it protects the rest of her Facebook friends from being swamped with photos and videos of her baby, but, on the other hand, it also protects the privacy of her son.

Participants extensively developed reasons not to share a video. It is easier for participants to comment on behaviors to avoid. They have sharing rules based on social etiquette. Participants develop rules for not sharing based on their own experiences: especially on SNS, the participants learned lessons of ethics and reciprocity. Participants said that they are constantly bombarded with information, or have seen videos they would have preferred not to see. So they make the decision to not reproduce what they have experienced. This is summed up by the famous saying of Confucius: "What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others."

Participants are sensitive to the fact that sharing too many videos can quickly become a nuisance to others. Kevin explained how he shows consideration for his friends by not sharing too many videos: “If people who want to see funny videos, they go to sites like the one I go to: 9gag.com. They’ll be able to find lots of videos. Unless the video is really exceptional, I’ll spare my Facebook friends” (Kevin, 1st interview).

### Conclusion

We learned how people tweak their Facebook accounts in order to get more useful information out of their news feeds, while seeing fewer inappropriate posts. Even if the participants were trying to monitor the privacy of others, they demonstrated a certain ambivalence and reluctance to judge others too harshly. They try to be understanding toward those who share too much intimate content on SNS, by recognizing that those other people have a need that they, themselves, do not experience. This constant negotiation of what is visible is closely linked to context collapse and to users trying to create intimacy on social media.

“Everyday life involves continuous movement across boundaries and thresholds: between the public and private; (...), the individual and the social” (Silverstone, 1999, p. 59). To pay attention to the privacy of others serves primarily to retain the trust of friends. Online behaviors are not just individual choice, they are also socially motivated as a way to preserve friendship, avoid awkward situations, and discover new things that can be used later on in discussion. This article shows how the use of social media has changed since it was introduced. Unlike other technologies such as the washing machines, Internet practices cannot be stable (Boullier & Charlier, 1997); users adapt and change their online behaviors along social norms and technological capabilities. Social media are no longer used for making new friends or self-presentation, it is also about managing other publications, awkward situation and trying to be more thoughtful when sharing contents.

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