What is there to lose?

Privacy in offline and online friendships

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Friendship enables us to relax the rules of privacy we need in other types of social relationship. When friendship goes online, however, controlling privacy becomes more problematic. Are social networks causing a change in friendship as such, and if so, should we be concerned?

Technological changes have always had an influence on human relationships in general as well as on social norms of privacy more particularly – think only of Georg Simmel’s observations on people’s behaviour while sitting squeezed in trains after the invention of the metropolitan subway. The question I want to raise in the following is concerned with the transformation of one specific form of relationship – friendship – on the basis of one specific communication technology: social media. Arguing that privacy is central to friendship, I will ask what the difference is between Facebook “Friends” and offline friends and why the difference should be important.

The role of friendship

We all live in different relationships: with family and friends, with colleagues, with neighbours, with strangers in the city and with fellow citizens of the state. Part of what distinguishes these relations is what (groups of) people know about one another. My family and friends know more about me, and different things, than my neighbours, my colleagues and my employer. Put simply, we can say that norms of informational privacy regulate the knowledge that other people have about us. These privacy norms regulate our behaviour as well as our expectations towards other people in the roles they present to us.

Why is this so important? Because norms of privacy enable us to present ourselves to others in different roles, in different ways. Privacy norms thus protect autonomy: it is only because we can – roughly – regulate what others know about us and – roughly – anticipate what others know about us that we can interact with others in a free and trusting way. However, privacy norms work two ways. While they protect my autonomy by enabling me to interact in different ways in different relationships, they are also
determined by the role or relationship itself. Talking about too many private things in a relationship that demands more distant behaviour can be fatal for that relationship.

If social relations are constituted, among other things, by norms of informational privacy, then how do those norms regulate the specific relationship of friendship? One can broadly define friends as the people whom we care about and trust deeply, to whom we feel loyal, with whom we share our sorrows and our happiness. Towards friends and in friendships we acknowledge different, more far-reaching moral obligations and duties than towards strangers. Thus, friendships are characterized by a special form of trust, affection, partiality, and a high degree of loyalty. [1] Interestingly, empirical research suggests that, regardless of culture, people have between three and five really good (offline) friends. [2]

But when we look at friendships from the point of view of norms of privacy, something else comes to the fore: communication between friends differs essentially from communication with other people, both in subject-matter and style. A central characteristic of friendships is that they allow a form of self-disclosure and dialogue that seems to be essential for the constitution of a person’s identity. Who we are and who we want to be, what sort of life we want to live, is – perhaps more implicitly than explicitly – discussed in conversations with friends or partners, since it is here that we find we can be open, honest, vulnerable, unguarded. It is precisely because we are able to hold back or to disclose information about ourselves that we are able to maintain more or less intimate friendships. [3]

Yet, in friendship like in any other relationship, the norms of informational privacy work the other way, too: the role of being a friend demands that we present ourselves to friends in a special way, that we make ourselves vulnerable, share personal problems, share good or bad experiences. If I never shared important personal problems or experiences with my friend, I could be reproached for not being a real friend, for being distanced. The role of being a friend thus demands a special form of commitment.

Friends and connections

This is, at least, what seems to be the case in the offline world. In the online world, things become more complicated. First: in social media, privacy plays a role – and could be in danger – when I write about myself, when I write about other people, and when other people write about me. [4] I’ll come back to these three perspectives in a moment. Second: young people are, contrary to common prejudice, clearly privacy-conscious: they care about the presentation of their self, they care if people gossip maliciously, they try carefully not to mix audiences. So the idea that privacy has vanished as a value is clearly false when we talk about young people on social networking sites. On the other hand, ideas of what should be kept private and what shouldn’t have obviously changed. [5]

One of the main functions of social media is to enable young people to “hang out” and live their friendships. This is what they say time and again when interviewed. Media studies scholar danah boyd summarizes: “Social media are integrally tied to the processes of building, performing, articulating, and developing friendships and status in teen peer networks. Teens value social media because they help them build, maintain, and develop friendships with peers. Social media also play a crucial role in teens’ ability to share
ideas, cultural artefacts, and emotions with one another. [...] The value of social media rests in their ability to strengthen connections.” [6]

Social networking sites do, then, have important social functions in the lives of younger people and it is important not to lose sight of this. However, there is a general problem confronting especially young people. It has to do with the fact that they are often not conscious of the consequences of their online behaviour. This doesn’t only concern the regret one might have after having posted the wrong holiday pictures; it also concerns the fact that young people often feel that no clear rules exist about when friending or defriending is appropriate, and about how online communication differs or should differ from offline communication. To quote boyd again: “Different challenges are involved in choosing whom to select as Friends. Because Friends are displayed on social network sites, there are social tensions concerning whom to include and exclude. Furthermore, as many IM [instant messaging] clients and most social network sites require confirmation for people to list each other, choosing to include someone prompts a ‘Friend request’ that requires the recipient to accept or reject the connection. This introduces another layer of social processing.” [7]

But let us come back to the privacy problems. The literature on privacy and social network sites shows that a central issue for the protection of privacy is the reproducability, storability and searchability of all entries, of every input on Facebook. The most serious problem, however, is the design of the website itself. Facebook makes it very difficult to present oneself in significantly distinct ways, to separate the audiences the way we do in the offline world, in order to play the different roles and to have the different relationships we want to have. Although Facebook’s design has changed significantly over the last few years, young users still find it wearisome to distinguish between groups or audiences, and often find themselves unable to make distinctions in ways they find adequate. Norms of informational privacy are supposed to guarantee and regulate different self-presentations, and therefore different forms of interaction. Exactly this proves to be hindered by the architecture of Facebook. Although users can create different groups and communicate within these groups, “Friends” remain undifferentiated. However, young people apparently do have the need to exclude some people from some communications – if they don’t want to have, for instance, their parents or teachers reading them. [8]

Reviewing the film The Social Network, Zadie Smith observed that it never seemed to have occurred to Mark Zuckerberg to ask the fundamental ethical question, namely: “Why? Why Facebook? Why this format? Why do it like that? Why not do it another way?” According to Smith, Zuckerberg “uses the word ‘connect’ as believers use the word ‘Jesus,’ as if it were sacred in and of itself. [...] Connection is the goal. The quality of that connection, the quality of the information that passes through it, the quality of the relationship that connection permits – none of this is important. That a lot of social networking software explicitly encourages people to make weak, superficial connections with each, and that this might not be an entirely positive thing, seem to never have occurred to him.” [9]

Her point is that the architecture of the website is far from neutral: it actually determines the relationships which are possible on the website. The idea that we simply use the social networking sites the way we want proves to be naive and illusionary. If, as I
mentioned above, we can not easily make a difference between close friends, good friends, friends and acquaintances on Facebook, then this clearly has consequences for the content of the communications as well: if we want to avoid being vulnerable we had better avoid certain topics or certain confessions. The confessions we find on Facebook are, mostly, deliberately and consciously staged. If forms of communication become homogenized, they become more conventional. Moreover, on the side of the recipient, communication goes hand in hand with a certain lack of commitment – if I am not the only one who is being addressed, then I don’t have to feel responsible for reacting or answering as I would if the message had been communicated to me alone. Thus, forms of commitment get levelled down.

What is there to lose?

Again: informational privacy works both ways. It enables individual self-presentation and interaction, but also demands obedience to certain intersubjectively valid rules that delimit the roles we play. Friendships on social media are regulated in a different way than friendships offline: they admit far fewer distinctions between very close, close, or less close friends that we apply as a matter of course in the offline world. That also means that different forms of loyalty, affection, partiality and trust cannot be applied to online friendships.

One might argue that this is not a problem for our ideas of friendship, since even the most obsessive Facebook users usually also have a couple of traditional offline friends. But why not go a step further and ask whether, even if this wasn’t the case, even if people tended to have only online Friends – or connections – this would matter? Forms of relationships change and there are no iron laws prescribing how precisely to conceptualize friendship.

There are two reasons why I think that such a transformation of social relationships would come with great ethical, social, and psychological costs. For one, the possibility for autonomous interaction, based on different presentations of the self, opens up a space for variously deep and meaningful relationships – a variety of relationships that people need in order to live their lives freely and individually. The different forms of commitment that come with different social roles are an expression of our autonomy, and we would lose precisely this autonomy were we to give up the possibility of conducting different relationships – some of them intense and deep, others more distant and shallow.

There is a second reason, however, to be wary of changes in traditional friendship. Changing norms of informational privacy, or more generally the loss of privacy, would lead to what Daniel Solove calls a “suffocating society”. [10] Homogenous groups, where everyone knows roughly the same about everyone else, are also conventional groups: everyone must have the same status, everyone fears being punished (defriended) for unconventional behaviour, and so on. In this suffocating society, different and subtle social norms of informational privacy play a far less important role – and maybe no role at all.

Perhaps the most important question to be asked, however, is not only what we lose when we lose certain forms of privacy, but also: how do we change in a society with more connections, fewer friends, and less privacy? The predictions of many of the early texts
on privacy have long come true – CCTV at every street corner, web 2.0 for every person, as well as data collection on a scale that was completely unimaginable twenty or thirty years ago. [11] Clearly, we don’t think that the consequences are as disastrous as people back then feared. But then again, maybe we don’t realize how much we’ve changed.

Footnotes


6. boyd, It's Complicated

7. Ibid.


