

Computer Mediated Self-disclosure

David Schieler

Minnesota State University, Mankato

With the Internet becoming a fast and natural background part of everyday life (Bargh & McKenna 2004) it is no wonder more and more attention is being given to the methods and effects of communication within its many networks. One area of particular interest, related to the growing dependence on the Internet, is the level to which individuals choose to self-disclose on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn. In order to fully evaluate what may be barriers or channels of self-disclosure online, we must first understand the nature of self-disclosure and computer mediated communication separately.

Computer mediated communication (CMC) arguably represents the fastest growing method of communication, and is the process of encoding and decoding messages from sender to receiver by electronic means. While not all of these electronic means take place via the Internet, a vast majority of them do. And according to German politicians, “It [the internet] has become a medium that plays a vital role in the lives of most people, and whose absence has a significant impact on daily life.” (Wünsch 2013). Notable forms of CMC include telephone calls, text messaging, emails, and online posts, tweets, shares, “likes”, “favorites”, and “+1’s”. In fact almost everything we do online, in some way sends a message, and can therefore be a form of CMC.

For the purpose of this paper, we will limit our definition of computer-mediated communication to only include communication via the Internet. And further it should be understood that in this review we are talking specifically about social media sites, online. A social media site is one where a user may choose, on their own behalf, to encode a message, which may be viewed at anytime by a larger audience than the message is originally directed toward, or where a specific audience may not be clear. Specifically,

we will use Facebook as a model for social media sites.

Self-disclosure, while more readily seen than the abstract and digital nature of the Internet, is perhaps more difficult to describe. Julia Omarzu (2000) says this difficulty is due to the very flexible behavior of self-disclosure. An individual has the ability to choose to which level they disclose and what tone or intent they disclose with. As a generalization however, we can describe the basic act of self disclosure as "... (the) purposeful disclosure of personal information to another person." (Real World 2012).

It would follow then, that if self-disclosure is a purposeful decision, that a person may also choose the degree to which they disclose. When discussing self-disclosure this variation can be divided into three dimensions, frequency, breadth, and depth, or how much, how different, and how intimate of information is shared (Nguyen, Sun Bin, & Campbell 2012). Omarzu (2000) supports this and continues to state, "disclosure is also a discretionary behavior. We rarely are required to disclose much except superficialities about ourselves."

So then, what interaction between the Internet and CMC with self-disclosure, causes our social media networks to be filled with more frequent, broad, and deep disclosure? This question may best be answered in parts. First, understanding why individuals choose to disclose at all online, may allude to why they continue to do so with such frequency. Looking as far back as may be reasonable, George Homans (1958) credited discretionary behavior to a medium of exchange. He stated that:

Social behavior is an exchange of goods, material goods but also non-material ones, such as the symbols of approval or prestige. Persons that give much to

others try to get much from them, and persons that get much from others are under pressure to give much to them (p. 606).

This understanding of social exchange came about long before the Internet and social media sites, but begins to shed light on two major reasons individuals may choose to self-disclose- approval and prestige.

Derlega and Grzelak (1979) as cited by Julia Omarzu (2000) outline five basic functions of self-disclosure, two of which Homans first proposed. According to Derlega and Grzelak, a person will choose to disclose in hopes of; self-expression, self-clarification, social-validation, relationship development, or social-control. Further, Omarzu explained “the default goal for most individuals is that of social approval.”

The reason why individuals choose to disclose is clear then. But what causes them to continue to do so? Again, the social exchange theory may be utilized and expanded. Congruent with the norm of reciprocity, “disclosure... create(s) an obligation in the listener to return the favor.” (Worthy, Gary, & Kahn 1969). This proposition poses an argument to the earlier cited notion however, that self-disclosure is a discretionary act, assuming that while the first interaction involving disclosure may be voluntary, further disclosure is a result of an “obligation”. Let it be clarified then, that initial disclosure may be a discretionary act, but that further disclosure may be seen as a means to a - perhaps deindividualized - social identity (Nguyen, et. al., 2012). This reciprocal, and seemingly cyclical, disclosure model answers then why we continue to self-disclose online.

But rarely what is posted or disclosed online is the same from person to person. In a USA Today news article, entitled, *online privacy? For young people, that's old-school*, reporter Janet Kornblum interviewed Linda Young, a psychologist at Seattle University,

who stated “The private self and public self become intertwined in a way that we (older folks) can’t possibly understand.” (2007). This intertwining means individuals are finding ways to represent their entire self online, a difficult task given the lack of cues that are present offline in face to face communication (FtF). The absence of sight is perhaps a reason then for greater breadth of disclosure online. Quite simply, individuals are required to disclose more, different, information about themselves, to achieve the same level of familiarity online with CMC as offline that is possible with FtF communication.

Now being able to answer what causes individuals to disclose online and why online disclosure has a great range, an answer may be sought as to why individuals choose to disclose such personal or intimate information. Already it has been seen that online self-disclosure follows an exchange pattern, or give and receive relationship. This pattern also incorporates a risk and reward dialectic. How then does this dialectic affect the depth of disclosure of an individual? In Omarzu’s (2000) review, it is examined that the depth component of self-disclosure is the most readily affected by the perceived level of risk and has little affect by the perceived level of reward. The study went on to define risk as, social rejection, betrayal, and discomfort of the listener. In Bargh and McKenna’s 2004 study this risk was responded to, “The relative anonymity of the internet can also contribute to close relationship formation through reducing the risks inherent in self-disclosure.” Because of the ambiguity then in the term of the “listener”, the discloser is less likely to perceive an actual risk.

Earlier, the cyclical nature of disclosure was also discussed. It is easy to see then, how target ambiguity is reduced in these reciprocal cases, often further disclosure is direct response to previously posted or commented disclosure. What then explains depth

in these non-ambiguous cases? In line with the hyperpersonal CMC theory (Nguyen et. al., 2012) and norm of reciprocity and social exchange theory, a study done in February 2013 by Jiang, Bazarova and Hancock at Cornell University, individuals idealize their perception of the original discloser, and therefore reciprocate disclosure with greater depth.

It is perhaps more clear now, why individuals choose to self-disclose online. An assumed reward of social approval drives many individuals to initially disclose information, which may make an audience feel more comfortable with them. This audience then perceived a social exchange obligation to reciprocate the disclosure, with their own information. However, due to idealized perceptions of the original message, caused by reduced cues and hyperpersonalization, further disclosures are often more intimate.

What does this mean for the Internet and for our society as a whole? Posited by Nguyen, Sun Bin and Campbell (2012), CMC self-disclosure is "...integral to, and indicative of, relationship growth and decline." While, Bargh and McKenna propose that general Internet use, including that of CMC self-disclosure, decreases instances of depression and loneliness, as well as [strengthen] existing close relationships (2004). Overall it can then been seen that the use of social media sites, which elicit user self-disclosure, may contribute increased offline FtF communication and relationship formation. In my own experiences, groups I have worked with via Facebook, or other social media site, tend to work more cohesively and efficiently when they feel connected to each other. This sense of connection seems to correlate directly to the level of disclosure present on group "pages". Further, the level of disclosure correlates to the

perceived privacy of the “page”. All of these observations are supported by the above theories and should be seen as practical small group applications of them in a non-experimental setting.

Taking this theory to a final macro-level application, the overall relational satisfaction of society may be improved by supporting social media user self-disclosure on a micro, or individual level, and decreasing barriers to access the technology necessary for CMC, including Internet access.

## References

- (2012). *Communication in the Real World: An Introduction to Communication Studies*.  
Published by Creative Commons and Donors Choice. Available online:  
[http://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/communication-in-the-real-world-an-introduction-to-communication-studies/section\\_06\\_04.html](http://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/communication-in-the-real-world-an-introduction-to-communication-studies/section_06_04.html)
- Bargh, J. A., & McKenna, K. Y. A. (2004). The Internet and social life. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 55, 1-23. doi: 10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.141922
- Homans, G. C. (1958). Social behavior as exchange. *American Journal of Sociology*, 63(6), 597-606.
- Jiang, L. C., Bazarova, N. N., & Hancock, J. T. (2013). From perception to behavior: Disclosure reciprocity and the intensification of intimacy in computer-mediated communication. *Communication Research*, 40(1), 125-143.  
doi:10.1177/0093650211405313
- Kornblum, J. (2007). Online privacy? For young people, that's old-school. *USA Today* Online. Retrieved from:  
[http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/webguide/internetlife/2007-10-22-online-privacy\\_N.htm](http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/webguide/internetlife/2007-10-22-online-privacy_N.htm)
- Nguyen, M., Sun Bin, Y., & Campbell, A. (2012). Comparing online and offline self-disclosure: A systematic review. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 15(2), 103-111. doi: 10.1089/cyber.2011.0277
- Omarzu, J. (2000). A disclosure decision model: Determining how and when individuals will self-disclose. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 4(2), 174-185.



Worthy, M., Gary, A. L., & Kahn, G. M. (1969). Self-disclosure as an exchange process.

*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 13(1), 59-63. doi:

10.1037/h0027990

Wünsch, S. (2013). Internet access declared a basic right in Germany. Deutsche Welle.

Retrieved from: <http://www.dw.de/internet-access-declared-a-basic-right-in-germany/a-16553916>