Privacy in a networked life

Collective privacy practices, audience management and visualizations in social network sites

The ways in which we communicate have been altered substantially in our contemporary society. Smartphones, tablets, and laptops all connect people, and it is especially by using social network sites (SNSs) that people flourish as networked and connected individuals. Users of SNSs are granted the opportunity to expand their bridging and bonding social capital, present the self with fewer constraints in space and time, and are provided with a never-ending source of information to explore. On the contrary, users are also monitored and controlled by third parties, their information is part of an ongoing commodification process and they have to manage the exacerbation of context collapse and the information flow towards various parties. Being a networked individual thus comes with privacy problems on different levels and burdens the individual user with as many responsibilities.

The main goal of this study is to mitigate the responsibilization process and facilitate control over information flows. Specifically, the dissertation investigates the social privacy practices of users in the context of SNSs and integrates the users’ voice in the development process of new privacy technology, using a mixed method research design. The empirical parts are divided in two research lines: networked audiences and group privacy management.

Social scientists have long emphasized the importance of knowing one’s audience when presenting the self. On SNSs where the audience has to be imagined and is typically collapsed it becomes difficult for users to know their actual audience. In a first research line the ways in how people perceive and manage their audiences were studied. Hereafter, various audience management strategies were translated into audience visualizations in collaboration with computers scientists that are specialist in data mining and artificial intelligence. Much research has been devoted to the study of personal and interpersonal privacy management in SNSs. It was unclear, however, how group information is managed. Therefore, in a second research line, the group privacy practices of youth organizations were carefully examined and analyzed.