

# Examining Privacy in Blogging from the Reader's Perspective

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## Abstract

While previous work has studied bloggers' practices with respect to negotiating privacy, little research has been done on blog readers' perceptions of privacy. This poster presents results from a qualitative study of blog readers, describing how privacy is connected with contextual appropriateness, personal content, and perceptions of online and offline identity. These results are compared to previous, blogger-oriented findings to work towards a better understanding of privacy perceptions and practices in blogging.

## Introduction

Despite the abundance of research on bloggers, blogs, and blogging, little work has focused primarily on blog readers. Nardi et al. note that "blogging is as much about reading as writing" and assert that "future research is sure to pay attention to blog readers" (Nardi et al. 2004, p. 231). This poster reports results from a qualitative study of blog readers (Baumer et al 2008) pertaining to privacy. While not the main focus of the study, privacy concerns emerged as an important issue for blog readers. This poster presents these results, specifically, the technical term private versus the social notion of personal, the definition of private in terms of contextual norms, and the connection of privacy to the negotiation of online and offline identity.

## Related Work

Viégas (2005) presents results of a survey of bloggers' perceptions of privacy and liability. While bloggers are generally aware of the scope of their audience, often obfuscating names or other private details, they usually consider a core audience of intended readers rather than actual or potential readers. Viégas attributes this to the limited or low-fidelity feedback bloggers receive from their audience: server logs, trackbacks, comments, etc.

Palen and Dourish (2003) provide a framework for privacy in technologically mediated social interaction. They describe privacy "as a *dialectic* and *dynamic boundary regulation process*" (original emphasis) (ibid., p.

129), specifically boundaries of disclosure, identity, and temporality. Privacy "is neither static nor rule-based" (ibid., p. 130) but is a process of constant negotiation through social interaction. This poster examines that negotiation in blogging from the reader's perspective.

## Methods

Participants for this study were recruited via physical fliers and via postings on online community bulletin boards that asked for people interested in participating in research about reading blogs and offered up to \$20 US. Ultimately, 15 subjects participated in the study. The primary data collection method was a set of two interviews with each participant. In addition, participants filled out a short survey for basic demographic data. All interviews were transcribed and coded using open coding followed by axial coding (Lofland and Lofland 1995). For further methodological details, see (Baumer et al. 2008).

Though privacy was not the primary focus of this study, initial analysis of the interview data indicated that negotiations and perceptions regarding privacy were an important issue for participants. Based on these initial indications, the data were reanalyzed for aspects of blog reading pertaining, either directly or indirectly, to participants' experiences with respect to privacy.

## Findings and Discussion

Participants' experiences and perceptions of privacy centered around three main themes: personal content as private; privacy in terms of contextual appropriateness; and privacy's relationship to online and offline identity.

### Personal as Private, Personal vs. Private

In discussing their perceptions of blogs' contents or purposes, 13 of our 15 participants describe blogs as somehow personal, with 10 explicitly connecting notions of personal and private. Personal was often used in place of or along side the word private to refer either to information that was specific to an individual blogger or to "sensitive issues." For example, when trying to define the term "blog," Natalie described it as "a less private journal.... it's

not going to be as personal.” Similar sentiments were expressed by Laura, who believes that “sensitive issues” and “personal stuff” belong on a separate, private blog, not a blogger’s primary, topical blog.

The relationship between the terms private and personal merits attention. Many blogging sites use “private” as a technical term, referring to specific settings or rules about who can access what content. With this meaning of the word private, it could be incongruous to refer to a sensitive discussion as private unless a post containing the content had been set as private by the blog author. Thus, the use of the word “personal” may be a way of getting around the overloading of the term private, similar to the overloading of the term friend on social network sites (boyd 2006).

### Contextual Appropriateness

In the data from our study, the contextual definition of privacy (Palen and Dourish 2003; Viégas 2005) at times intermingled it with other concerns in nuanced ways.

One such concern was social acceptability. For Lillian, there are “certain things [she] can handle, but not like, I’ve been trying to get pregnant forever and I can’t.” Fern goes so far as to avoid reading content that she considers too personal. Here, a blogger has made something publicly available, but the reader decides that this content is too personal and should remain private. Although no other participants explicitly mentioned not reading overly personal content, 6 mentioned specific times when they thought that a blogger was being too personal and hinted that such content was not something they wanted to read.

The acceptability of the same content for a given reader may also vary at different times. Cheryl reads a blog with commentary on popular culture, but occasionally the blogger writes posts about his cats. While she initially “thought it was a little nutty,” as she became a regular reader and got to know the blogger, the cat posts became less annoying and even endearing. This blogger was engaged in creating a particular online identity. Though they initially seemed inappropriate, as Cheryl became more familiar with the blogger, the cat posts ceased to be too personal and became an integral part of the blogger’s identity. In this instance, privacy negotiations occurred simultaneously along both temporal and identity boundaries (Palen and Dourish 2003).

### Online and Offline Identity

Online and offline identities are neither completely distinct nor coincident. Our participants described how they cope with the fluidity of online privacy with respect to offline identity and vice versa. One means of negotiating this tension is privacy through obfuscation, or “security through obscurity” (Viégas 2005), using secret nicknames, initials, or unclear pronoun reference. Laura appreciates that, if the blogs she reads contain overly personal content, the blogger will “do a play of words and be all subtle about it.” However, the obfuscation is not always as effective as intended. Fern describes how a former friend “complained

about her relationships a lot online and she direct [sic] them anonymously, but you would know..., who she was talking about—it felt kind of annoying.”

Lillian, who generally associated online activity with her knitting interest and offline identity with her professional science career, was initially uncomfortable expressly connecting the two. As a blog reader, she does not “necessarily want science life to be linked with knitting life,” and so does not comment on the blogs she reads by scientists or science professors. However, “in terms of blogs being an important part of [her] life, [she doesn’t] hide it from [her] family or anything like that,” neither entirely merging nor entirely severing her offline and online identities.

Despite interconnections between online and offline identity, the two are in some ways still separate and distinct. According to Lillian, the public of online is often the private of offline, and vice versa. In this way, the content on blogs dances the border between being public and private. On the one hand, it is public, in that anyone can read it. On the other, it is private, because the content of blogs is often not a topic for face-to-face discussion.

### Conclusion and Future Work

This poster presents results from a qualitative study of blog readers pertaining to privacy. While this work helps to further understand the complexities of privacy in context, it is also part of a larger goal to examine blogging from the reader’s perspective and study the interactions between readers and bloggers. This research has potential impact beyond blogs, including examinations of “readership” in other social media, such as Flickr or YouTube, to fully understand these new modes of cultural production.

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