Chapter 2

Identity, Credibility, and Trust in Social Networking Sites: Old Issues, New Mechanisms, and Current Challenges for Privacy and Security

Stefania Manca
Institute for Educational Technology - CNR, Italy

Maria Ranieri
University of Florence, Italy

ABSTRACT

Over recent years, the notions of identity, credibility and trust in digital contexts have been gaining renewed interest from scholars in different fields (from social studies to engineering and computer science), especially for their consequences for privacy and security. Emerging and urgent questions are: What does the management of online personal data entail? How much personal information are we entitled to share with others? What measures do people usually adopt to protect their identity and privacy? Are they always aware of the risks they may run? What consequences may emerge in the long term if cautions are ignored? These are some of the questions that should be addressed by users, experts and scholars engaged with digital environments, especially social networking sites. This chapter focuses on these issues trying to provide a wide overview of the current literature on identity, credibility and trust, and their implications for privacy and security, from the perspective of social and behavioral sciences. Some measures provided by experts on how to protect against the most common security and privacy threats are also outlined.

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of social networking sites (SNSs) over the past ten years has been one of the most relevant phenomena among Web 2.0 tools. Although there is no unique way of classifying the current forms of techno-sociability (e.g., Hussein et al., 2009), social networking sites are a particular subset of online social networking, whose distinguishing characteristic is that they “are specifically designed to support and develop friendship and whose overt purpose is to provide a context and appropriate tools for doing so” (Merchant, 2012, p. 4). Typical examples of SNSs are Facebook, Twitter, MySpace or LinkedIn, which are now gaining momentum as shown by recent studies (Rainie et al., 2012). According to a Pew Research Center survey on the use of SNSs in the US (Smith, 2011), two-thirds of adults use tools such as Facebook or Twitter, and declare that they use them mainly to stay in touch with friends and family members, while half use them to connect with old friends they have lost touch with. SNSs are becoming dominant especially among young people with 80% of teens now using many of them (Lenhart, 2009; Lenhart et al., 2011). Internet users’ growing interest in SNSs is also confirmed by other studies. According to one of them (Nielsen, 2011), Americans spend more time on Facebook than they do on other websites, and a similar trend is also emerging in Europe.

In the meantime, there is a growing convergence between social networking services and mobile devices. Increased ownership of smartphones and other mobile devices amongst the youth and adult population is well documented today, also in relation to SNS access. At the end of 2010, almost 40% of social media users accessed these tools through their mobile phones and social networking apps were the third most downloaded applications by mobile owners (Nielsen, 2011). This tendency seems to be destined to grow as testified by recent statistics. Indeed, 2011 saw the continued rise of mobile social networking with an increase of about 75% from the previous year both in the US and Europe, and more than half of mobile social networking users’ access social media almost every day (ComScore, 2012). Of the various SNSs, Facebook, now the most popular with more than 950 million users, has more than 500 million users that log in through mobile products (Facebook, 2012).

The wide diffusion of these technologies has raised new questions in the public and academic debate about their impact on users’ personal and social life. Indeed, a social networking site is a category of websites where individual users create their public or semi-public profiles, list connections with others (friends, followers or buddies) and traverse the site through their own and others’ friend lists forming a public networked space (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The profiles typically include identifiable information about users (e.g., age, gender, interests, etc.) and have unique URLs that can be visited directly. Users can keep their profiles updated posting comments and other information as well as being able to see comments posted by visitors. All these functions generate an online network space where each profile is linked to the profile of the other individuals giving rise to a traversable network of “friends of friends”.

If SNSs are changing the way people communicate and interact, at the same time they also generate new risks for security and privacy. The huge amount of personal data now available online raises new challenges on how to protect privacy and guarantee security, especially for young people. However, considering that this is an inescapable global trend, our societies must learn to balance their benefits with their drawbacks, putting a particular emphasis on education as a means to develop media awareness and appropriate socio-technical skills.

With this in mind, this chapter focuses on these issues trying to provide a wide overview of the current literature on identity, credibility and privacy in SNSs, and their implications for trust and security, from the perspective of social and