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FRIENDS, CONNECTIONS, AND SOCIAL NORMS OF PRIVACY
DO SOCIAL NETWORK SITES CHANGE OUR CONCEPTION OF
FRIENDSHIP?

To Pieter, in friendship

Technological changes have always had an influence on human relationships in general, as well as more particularly on social norms of privacy – think only of Georg Simmel's observations on changing norms of privacy after the invention of the metropolitan subway and its influence on our behaviour while sitting squeezed in the trains. The question I want to raise in the following is concerned with transformations of one specific form of relationships on the basis of one specific form of changing communication technologies: friendships, and Social Network Sites (SNS). My question is whether and how norms of friendship are changing or are under pressure because of the influence of the new social media such as Facebook, Hyves, Myspace etc. I will approach this question from a specific point of view, namely the point of view of privacy. Why norms of informational privacy are central to our ideas and concepts of social relations I will argue in the first part. In the second part I will briefly discuss tradi-

tional ideas of friendship, and subsequently I will have a more precise look at one of the new social media: Facebook.[1] Are Facebook-friends real friends? And if not, why should that be a problem?

I

We live in different relationships in our society: in relations with family and friends, with colleagues at work or neighbours in our street, with strangers in the city and as citizens of the state. *Part* of what differentiates these relations from one another is what the respective (groups of) people *know* about a person. My family and friends know more, and different things, about me than my neighbours, my colleagues, my employer etc. (Roessler and Mokrosinska 2013, Roessler 2005). Very briefly put, we can say that *norms of informational privacy* regulate the knowledge that other people have about me. These privacy norms regulate our behaviour as well as our expectations regarding other people in the respective roles in which they present themselves to us. This analysis has its forerunners in the liberal tradition in the work of Charles Fried and James Rachels. Rachels, for instance, writes: 'What we cannot do is accept […] a social role with respect to another person and then expect to retain the same degree of privacy relative to him that we had before. Thus, if we are asked how much money we have in the bank, we cannot say "It's none of your business", to our banker, to prospective creditors, or to spouses, because their respective relationship entitles them to know' (Rachels 1975). This captures precisely the idea of norms of informational privacy regulating different relationships in different ways.

Why is this so important? Because norms of privacy enable us to present ourselves to others in different roles, in different ways. In this way, privacy norms protect autonomy: it is only because we can – roughly – regulate what others know about us or because we can – roughly – have the right sort of expectations regarding what others know about us, that we can act in autonomous ways, and interact with others in a free and trusting way. This has far-reaching consequences for the idea of privacy protection in the age of the internet – concerning the economic interests involved, or

also the enormity of sheer mistakes committed, for instance that of losing a USB stick with huge amounts of sensitive data on it – but I will not go into any more detail about this here. (See Nissenbaum 2010, Allen 2011, Solove 2008).

Let me point out, though, that privacy norms *work two ways*: on the one hand, they protect my autonomy and enable me to present myself in different ways to different people and therefore to interact in different ways, in different relationships. On the other hand it is the role or relationship itself which sets the limits to possible self-presentations: to talk about too many private things in a relationship which demands a more distant behaviour can be fatal for the relationship itself. We will see more precisely in which way the relationship itself sets standards for the adequate form of privacy when we discuss the relationship of friendship.

II

If social relations, as we have seen, are (co-)constituted by norms of informational privacy, how should we then describe and interpret these norms regulating the specific relationship of friendship? Let me first outline a rather general and uncontested idea of friendship: friends are the people we care for and whom we trust deeply, we feel loyal to, we share our sorrows as well as our happiness with. For friends and in friendships we are partial and we acknowledge different, more far-reaching moral obligations and duties than vis-a-vis strangers. Thus, friendships are characterized by a special form of trust, affection, partiality, and a high degree of loyalty (Friedman 1993, Lanzing 2013). Interestingly, a brief look at empirical research on the (offline) question 'how many friends do we have?' suggests that with cultural invariance people, on reflection, maintain to have between three and five really good friends (Reader 2007) .

But when we look at friendships from the point of view of norms regulating informational privacy, something else comes to the foreground: communication between friends differs essentially from communication with other people, with respect to subjects as well as to the ways of pres-

entation. One of the central characteristics of friendships is that they allow a form of self-disclosure and dialogue which 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 – maybe often more implicitly than explicitly – centrally discussed in dialogues with friends or partners, since it is here that we find we can be open, honest, vulnerable, unprotected. It is precisely this form of self-disclosure which is made possible by norms of informational privacy: it is because we are able to hold back and to disclose information about ourselves, that intimate or friendly relationships are possible in the first place. If I had no – rough – control over what other people know about me, then *a fortiori* I could not, through self-disclosure, constitute more or less intimate relationships (Rachels 1975, Fried 1984, Reiman 2004).

On the other hand, as I was arguing above, the norms of informational privacy work two ways: 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, as a friend, shared important personal problems or experiences with my friend, I could be reproached for not being a real friend, for keeping too much distance. With the role of being a friend thus goes the sharing of experiences and a special form of commitment.

III

This is at least what seems to be the case in the offline world. When we now turn to the online world, things become more complicated. If we start with the norms of informational privacy on social network sites, for instance on Facebook, we can notice, *firstly*, that different theories of privacy all describe more or less the same problematic aspects: privacy plays a role – and could be in danger – when I write about myself on Facebook, when I write about other people, and when other people write about me. Allen (2010), Nissenbaum (2010), Boyd and Marwick (2011), although very different theoretical approaches, all make out these three perspectives when they describe and analyze the forms in which privacy is an issue on

Facebook. I'll come back to these three perspectives in a moment. We can notice, *secondly*, that empirical studies generally agree in demonstrating that young people are, contrary to general prejudice, clearly privacy-conscious: they care about the presentation of their self, they care if people gossip maliciously, they carefully at least try not to mix audiences. So the idea that privacy has vanished as a value is false when we talk about young people on SNS, but ideas of what should be kept private and what shouldn't have obviously changed (Steeves 2009, Acquisti and Gross 2006, Guerses and Diaz 2013).

One of the main functions of SNS which has often been underestimated in its importance, is to give young people the opportunity to 'hang out' and to live their friendships. This is what they answer time and again when interviewed, and 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 artifacts, and emotions with one another […] the value of social media rests in their ability to strengthen connections' (Boyd and Marwick 2011).

Thus, SNS do play central roles in the social lives of younger people and it is important not to lose sight of this. Before I discuss particular problems of SNS connected to privacy issues, let me point out a general problem which especially young people on SNS are confronted with. What I mean is the fact that young people are often not yet still completely conscious of and clear about the consequences of their behaviour on Facebook. And this concerns not only the regret people might have after having posted embarrassing notes, the wrong pictures etc. (Wang, et. al. 2011); it also concerns the fact that often young people still feel they do not have clear rules of when *friending* or *defriending* is appropriate, or of how online communication differs or should differ from offline communication. Let me 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 clients and most social network sites re-

quire 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'. Part of the tragedy of the case of Tyler Clementi is, I think, that much of the terrible damage that Dharun Ravi with the publication of Clementi's private data did was not really voluntarily chosen, it more or less 'happened' because Ravi didn't sufficiently reflect upon the consequences of his own behaviour on Twitter and Facebook. [1]

But let us come back to the privacy problems: as the literature on privacy and social network sites demonstrates, issues for the protection of privacy certainly are the repeatability, the reproducibility of all entries, of every input on Facebook, the storage of all data and the possibility to search through them. The most serious problem from the perspective of privacy, however, is the design of the website itself. The design of Facebook makes it almost impossible 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 have the different relationships we want to have. This central problem from a normative perspective seems actually to be a real problem for the young users themselves: not being able to make a difference between contexts, addressees, or at least not being able to draw these differences in ways which the users find adequate. Norms of informational privacy are supposed to guarantee and regulate *different* self-presentations, and therefore different forms of interaction, and precisely this proves to be almost impossible on Facebook. Although on Facebook users by now can create different groups and communicate within these groups, 'friends' in general remain undifferentiated. Young people, however, apparently do have the need to cut off some people from some communications – if they don't want to have, for instance, their parents or teachers read them – but the design of the website doesn't allow this. (Leenes 2010, Steeves 2009, Guerses and Diaz 2013).

Earlier on, I quoted Danah Boyd and her analysis that the value of social media lies in its ability, as she puts it, 'to strengthen *connections'*. Connections, however, do not seem to be the same as friends. What is the difference?

IV

In a wonderful review of the film *The Social Network* about Mark Zuckerberg and the invention of Facebook, the author Zadie Smith criticises the ideology of *connect*. She points out how simplistic and undifferentiated the profiles on Facebook are and why these simple profiles can never do right to the complicated and changing relationships young people do have.

Smith argues that it never actually seems to have occurred to Mark Zuckerberg to ask, as she puts it, the fundamental ethical question, namely the question (and I'll quote at length): 'Why? Why Facebook? Why this format? Why do it like that? Why not do it another way? The striking thing about the real Zuckerberg, in video and in print, is the relative banality of his ideas concerning the "Why" of Facebook. He uses the word "connect" as believers use the word "Jesus," as if it were sacred in and of itself: [Smith quotes Zuckerberg] "So the idea is really that, um, the site helps everyone connect with people and share information with the people they want to stay connected with…" 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, seems to never have occurred to him.' (Smith 2010).

The design, the architecture of the website, this is Zadie Smith's point, is far from neutral: it actually determines or at least forms the relationships which are possible on the website. The idea that we simply *use* the SNS the way we want to proves to be naive and illusionary. If, as I mentioned above, we cannot 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: we don't want to be vulnerable so we better avoid certain topics or certain real confessions – the 'confessions' which we do find on Facebook are, of course, (mostly) deliberately and consciously staged. If forms of communication are being homogenized, they get more conventional. Also, on the side of the recipi-

ent, internetcommunication usually 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 feel if the message had been communicated to me alone. Thus, forms of commitment seem to get leveled down.

However, even though the website isn't neutral and even though it seems to determine our relationships from behind, it does not yet seem to influence offline forms of communication. But Zadie Smith articulates a fear which concerns precisely this possibility of making a difference between the traditional, offline friendships which I described above and the connections on SNS: changing norms of informational privacy go hand in hand with changing norms of relationships, and in this case changing norms of friendship. These norms not only affect the possibilities of different self-presentations – and therefore of autonomy – but also the meaning of relationships themselves.

V

Above I argued that norms of informational privacy work two ways: they enable individual self-presentations and interaction but they also obey certain intersubjectively valid rules which delimit the roles we play. We can now see that friendships on SNS are regulated in a different way than friendships offline: they do not admit of distinctions between very good, good, or more distant friends which we apply as a matter of fact in the offline world. That also means that the different forms of loyalty, affection, partiality and trust which we saw are definitive of (close) friendships cannot be applied to online connections.

One could argue that this is not really a problem for our ideas of friendship since even the most obsessive Facebook users usually have a couple of traditional good offline friends as well. Hence, different degrees of friendship still do play a role in the offline world. But why should one not go a step further and argue that even if this wasn't the case, even if people tended to have only online friends – connections – this wouldn't really mat-

matter? Forms of relationships always change and there are no iron laws prescribing how precisely to conceptualize friendship.

In my concluding remarks I want to briefly point to two reasons why I think that such a transformation of social relationships would come with too many ethical, social, psychological costs. For one, the possibility for autonomous interaction, based on different presentations of the self, opens up a space for differently deep and differently important relations which people need in order to live their lives freely, individually, variedly. The different forms of commitment which come with the different roles in social life are an expression of our autonomy and we would lose precisely these spaces of freedom and autonomy were we to give up the possibility of conducting very different relationships – some of them intense and deep, others more distant and shallow.

There is a second reason, however, I would like to point to: the changing norms of informational privacy, or more generally, the loss of privacy, Daniel Solove (2008) argues, would lead to what he calls a 'suffocating society'. Homogeneous groups, where everyone knows roughly the same about everyone else, are also conventional groups: everyone has to have the same status, everyone fears to be punished (defriended) for unconventional behaviour etc. In this suffocating society, different and subtle social norms of informational privacy would play a far less important role – and maybe no role at all – than we were used to.

Maybe the most important question to be asked, however – and the question I want to conclude with – is not only: *what do we lose* when we lose certain forms of privacy, but also: *how do we change* in a society with more connections, less friends, and less privacy? Much of what the early texts on privacy and the dangers of its violations predicted, back in the sixties and seventies, has long come true – CCTV at every street corner, web 2.0 for every person as well as institutions, collections of data which were then completely unimaginable, 'Big Data' as a common phenomenon (Westin 1967, Mayer-Schoenberger and Cukier 2013). However, we clearly don't think that the consequences are as disastrous as people then feared. But then again, maybe we simply don't realize how much we have changed.

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[1] See for the story of Tyler Clementi Parker (2012); there are many general problems concerning Facebook which I can't discuss here: for instance the problem that the 'sharing' of information on Facebook demonstrates in which ways social and economic interests and imperatives are intertwined on SNS.