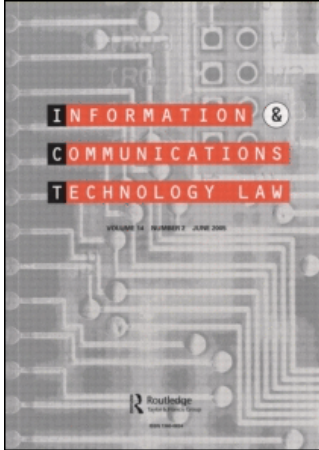


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### Blogging: self presentation and privacy

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## **Blogging: self presentation and privacy**

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Blogs are permeating most niches of social life, and addressing a wide range of topics from scholarly and political issues<sup>1</sup> to family and children's daily lives. By their very nature, blogs raise a number of privacy issues as they are easy to produce and disseminate, resulting in large amounts of sometimes personal information being broadcast across the Internet in a persistent and cumulative manner. This article reports the preliminary findings of an online survey of bloggers from around the world. The survey explored bloggers' subjective sense of privacy by examining their blogging practices and their expectations of privacy when publishing online. The findings suggest that blogging offers individuals a unique opportunity to work on their self-identity via the degree of self-expression and social interaction that is available in this medium. This finding helps to explain why bloggers consciously bring the 'private' to the public realm, despite the inherent privacy risks they face in doing so.

**Keywords:** blogging; personal information; privacy; private data; survey

### **Introduction**

In this article, I begin by explaining the technological phenomenon known as blogging. I then provide background information on privacy issues in relation to blogging, as well as exploring a number of conceptions of privacy, before electing to use DeCew's cluster concept of privacy as a framework for testing the subjective privacy attitudes and expectations of bloggers. Thereafter, the findings of a survey that explores bloggers' privacy attitudes and expectations are presented. Finally, the concluding remarks summarize the major findings and point to the need for further work in this area.

### **Blogs from a privacy perspective**

A fundamental difference between blogs and other web-based publishing sites, such as personalised home pages, is that rather than substituting new materials for old ones, a blogger simply adds new posts, creating an ever-growing compilation of entries and an archive of previous posts. Compilations of postings serve as context for readers of blogs. Thus regular readers can get a sense of the identifying 'voice' or 'persona' behind the posts. Over time, a blog archive can read very much like an evolving portrait of the blogger's interests and experiences. Thus, by their very nature, blogs raise a number of privacy issues. On the one hand, they are persistent and cumulative. On the other hand, they are easy to produce and disseminate which results in large amounts of sometimes personal

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information being broadcast across the Internet. The survey explores the tension between the freedom of expression experienced by bloggers and the potentially problematic privacy consequences of public, persistent blog entries.

### **Defining privacy**

Privacy is an elusive concept.<sup>2</sup> Numerous different definitions of privacy have been offered.<sup>3</sup> For instance, Warren and Brandeis defined it as ‘the right to be let alone’.<sup>4</sup> Westin defined it as ‘the claim of individuals, groups, or institutions to determine for themselves when, how and to what extent information about them is communicated to others’.<sup>5</sup> Bloustein claims that privacy protects against conduct that is demeaning to individuality, an affront to personal dignity or an assault on human personality.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Reiman asserts that privacy ‘protects the individual’s interest in becoming, being and remaining a person’.<sup>7</sup> Benn recognises the important element of choice in this conception. He states ‘respect for someone as a person, a chooser, implie[s] respect for him as one engaged on a kind of self-creative enterprise, which could be disrupted, distorted or frustrated even by so limited an intrusion as watching’.<sup>8</sup> Van Hove argues that privacy means two things: (1) that ‘a person has the right to a private sphere, and (2) that a person has ‘the right to control the flow of information about his private life’.<sup>9</sup> Clarke offers a broader definition, stating that it is ‘the interest that individuals have in sustaining a “personal space”, free from interference by other people and organizations’.<sup>10</sup> Van Der Haag defines it as ‘the exclusive access of a person to a realm of his own. The right to privacy entitles an individual to exclude others from (a) watching, (b) utilizing, (c) invading his private [personal] realm.’<sup>11</sup> Rachels sees privacy as being ‘based on the idea that there is a close connection between our ability to control who has access to us and to information about us, and our ability to create and maintain different sorts of social relationships with different people’.<sup>12</sup> By emphasising the value of relationship-orientated privacy, Rachels’ conception of privacy tries to define what aspects of life an individual should be able to control, keep secret or restrict access to. These definitions differ greatly in the fundamental way that they approach privacy, with some referring to physical aspects of privacy, others to personal information, and still others to issues of autonomy. Privacy encompasses a variety of different issues and is important for a number of reasons. Therefore, a single definition that adequately incorporates all the subtle differences that privacy evokes has so far proven impossible. However, a comprehensive and useful framework for the purposes of this study is offered by DeCew’s cluster concept of privacy.

### ***A broad conception of privacy: A cluster concept***

DeCew argues that privacy is ‘a broad and multifaceted cluster concept’,<sup>13</sup> which encapsulates ‘our ability to control information about ourselves, our ability to govern access to ourselves, and our ability to make self-expressive autonomous decisions free from intrusion or control by others’.<sup>14</sup> Thus, DeCew envisages privacy as a ‘complex of three related clusters of claims concerning information about oneself, physical access to oneself, and decision making and activity that provide one with the independence needed to carve out one’s self-identity through self-expression and interpersonal relationships’.<sup>15</sup> The cluster includes three aspects of privacy: (1) informational privacy; (2) accessibility privacy; and (3) expressive privacy.

***Informational privacy***

Informational privacy centres on the notion of control over one's information. Informational privacy considers the arguments that much information about oneself 'need not be available for public perusal'.<sup>16</sup> The importance of informational privacy lies in its ability to shield individuals from intrusions, as well as from threats of intrusions. It also affords individuals control in deciding who should have access to the information and for what purposes.<sup>17</sup>

***Accessibility privacy***

The second aspect of the cluster concept of privacy concerns physical privacy 'focus[ing] not merely on information or knowledge but more centrally on observations and physical proximity'.<sup>18</sup> It protects against traditional privacy violations, such as a house being wiretapped, or a family consistently being watched via a neighbour's telescope, or a 'peeping Tom' creeping around a house. Such examples indicate the importance of accessibility privacy so people can dictate who has access to them, and to what degree. Implicit in the discussion of accessibility privacy is also the degree to which someone is aware of the accessibility violation, on the basis that being wiretapped without one's knowledge intuitively feels like a privacy violation. Accessibility privacy, while perhaps the most narrow understanding in the cluster, is nonetheless an important aspect.

***Expressive privacy***

Expressive privacy concerns an individual's ability to freely choose, act, self-express and socially interact. It is closely linked with intimacy, emotional vulnerability, autonomy, and social roles. It is integral to protecting individual autonomy.<sup>19</sup> For instance, if an individual is aware that they are under constant observation and have no privacy in a domain where they would normally have 'wide discretion concerning how to behave',<sup>20</sup> they will presumably structure their actions not just according to their own will or intention, but will also try to keep them in line with what they envisions their observers would like to, or expect to, see. In this way, issues of expressive privacy and autonomy are also inherently intertwined with the social pressure that results from social judgments and norms. Thus, in a transparent society where all are visible to everyone, we would be completely subject to public scrutiny and would likely conform to societal norms for fear of being ostracized. This would have serious repercussions for autonomy. First, individuals would no longer be able to play with, and test, social norms backstage, which is a crucial act to forming self-identities.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, under such constant social scrutiny, individuals would be implicitly forced to conform to societal norms. Thus, society could quickly become an undifferentiated mass where everyone says and does the same things in order to be deemed socially acceptable. In this situation, there would no longer be any room for individual thoughts, feelings, or emotions – our self-expression would be seriously limited. And even if such individual thoughts could continue to occur undetected, the actions that would normally correspond would likely cease to exist due to fear of social judgment.

Thirdly, expressive privacy also plays a crucial role in developing social roles and relationships<sup>22</sup> as it works to protect and maintain intimacy. This would inhibit intimate relationships because intimacy is premised on the fact that individuals know particularly

personal, or otherwise unknown, information about each other. Without privacy, an individual's relationship with their mother would be no different from their relationship with their employer, as both could know exactly the same amount and degree of information about them. Thus, without expressive privacy, social relations could not be as varied and social interaction would be seriously diminished.

Finally, expressive privacy also enables work on self-identity to proceed as it regulates and allows social interaction to occur. Since the self can only be developed via social interaction with others, expressive privacy and the reflexive formation of self-identity are closely connected.<sup>23</sup>

### *Self-reflexive identity and privacy*

According to Giddens, self-identity in late modernity is highly reflexive so that sustaining a coherent yet continuously revised biographical narrative is key. First, the self is a reflexive project for which the individual is responsible. In this way, individuals are what they make of themselves. Self-identity is routinely created and sustained in everyday activities, via the routines of practical consciousness, so that it is continuously revised. Self-identity is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of their biography. A person with a stable self-identity has a feeling of biographical continuity so that they can grasp and communicate it. In this respect, a person's identity is really about the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. Moreover, a person's biography can not be wholly fictive and must continuously integrate events into the ongoing story of the self. In essence, 'In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become and of where we are going.'<sup>24</sup>

This reflexivity of the self is thus continuous and all-pervasive and the narrative of the self is made explicit in an attempt to sustain an integrated sense of self. As Giddens makes clear, 'in the reflexive project of the self, the narrative of self-identity is inherently fragile'.<sup>25</sup> Making a coherent and continuous narrative amidst a constantly changing life experience is a continuous burden for the individual in modernity. One's self-identity 'must be continually reordered against the backdrop of shifting experiences of day to day life and the fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions'.<sup>26</sup> Overall, Giddens concludes that the difficulty in sustaining a coherent narrative is because of modernity's dynamism and reflexivity. In this way, the relationship between self and society can be understood as follows, 'The self establishes a trajectory which can only become coherent through the reflexive use of the broader social environment. The impetus towards control, geared to reflexivity, thrusts the self into the outer world in ways which have no clear parallel in previous times.'<sup>27</sup> In this way, the abstract systems of high modernity allow the self more mastery over the social relations and contexts incorporated into self-identity.

Giddens' insights into the role of self-identity and society in late modernity are particularly useful for the purposes of this study because they may aid thinking and understanding of the ways that bloggers negotiate the boundary between public and private and, hence, the society and the self.

## **The study**

### ***Methodology***

The findings presented here are from an online survey of bloggers from around the world. Participants answered questions about their blogging practices and their expectations

of privacy and accountability when publishing online. The questionnaire consisted of multiple-choice Likert-scale questions, and open-ended essay questions to allow for further qualification of answers. Out of the total number (1,314) of responses received, 1,258 were selected for data analysis; the remainder of the responses were incomplete and were disregarded. The respondents were not randomly selected, but were found through a variant of the snowball-sampling strategy. Announcements for the online survey were posted to mailing lists in three universities in the UK as well as on a few high-traffic blogs. The viral nature of blogs meant that the links to the survey page quickly spread to many other blogs and to YouTube. However, the resulting population of participants does not qualify as a random sample and, accordingly, the results from this survey cannot be generalised to the entire blogging population. Rather, the findings are representative of certain niches of the English-speaking blogging world.

### ***Study population***

The majority of respondents in this study (49.1%) were female. Even though some of the popular blogging sites attract mostly teenagers, the respondents tended to be older, with over half of them between 19 and 34 years of age (54.9%). Over one-third of participants were from the UK (39.5%) which is not surprising, given that the survey questionnaire was available only in English and that announcements for the survey were posted to email lists in three UK universities.<sup>28</sup> These demographic characteristics contrast with findings from other blog surveys in which participants in these spaces tended to be 'young adult males residing in the United States'.<sup>29</sup> Almost equal percentages of respondents were single (39.7%) or living with someone (37.1%),<sup>30</sup> and the majority (60.7%) were working though only a minority claimed to be the main earner (31.5%).

### ***Limitations of study***

The respondents were not randomly selected, but were found through a variant of the snowball-sampling strategy. Announcements for the online survey were posted to mailing lists in three universities in the UK as well as on a few high-traffic blogs. The viral nature of blogs meant that the links to the survey page quickly spread among many other blogs and YouTube. However, the respondents were not randomly selected and, accordingly, the results from this survey cannot be generalised to the entire blogging population. Rather, the findings are representative of certain niches of the English-speaking blogging world. Indeed, the demographic profile of respondents here differs from what is known from studies and popular blogging sites in relation to age. On popular blogging sites, such as LiveJournal, where usage statistics are available, teenagers account for the majority of the blogger population, whereas most of the respondents in this survey were between 19 and 34 years old. The results from this survey might thus have been different had the pool of respondents been randomly sampled.

In the survey, respondents were asked to self-report on their blogging practices, and their privacy attitudes and expectations. Unlike other studies where researchers accessed participants' blogs and conducted content analysis of posts,<sup>31</sup> here it is the bloggers' subjective sense of privacy and liability that is revealed. This self-disclosure approach has two important implications: (1) there can be disparities between stated privacy attitudes and actions; and (2) participants' perceptions of their blogs might differ from those of outside observers and researchers. It is well documented that people's perceptions of their own behaviour can differ from how they actually behave.<sup>32</sup> In addition, because of the

self-reporting nature of this study, accuracy is difficult to verify. For example, no external validation was conducted on the sites of participants who described their blogs as being mostly 'My life (personal diary/journal)'. Therefore, comparisons between the present and previous findings should be made with these caveats in mind.

### *The findings*

#### *1. Bloggers value self expression and social interaction*

In a previous study Herring et al.<sup>33</sup> coded a random sample of blogs based on the nature of the content posted. They found that the majority of blogs (70.4%) were of the personal journal type: 'in which authors report on their lives and inner thoughts and feelings'.<sup>34</sup> In a subsequent study Herring et al.,<sup>35</sup> looked at gender and age-based differences in the content of blog sites. They found that women and teenagers tended to write personal journal-style blogs.

Table 1. Main blog topic.

Main topic of blog	Percentage
My life (personal diary/journal)	58.4%
Politics and government	4.7%
Entertainment (movies, music, MP3s)	5.7%
Sport	0.6%
News and current events	4.0%
Business	0.5%
Technology (computers, Internet, programming)	8.3%
Religion/spirituality/faith	0.7%
A particular hobby	1.7%
Health (general health, a specific illness)	1.2%
Gossip	0.4%
Other	11.9%
Prefer not to answer/No answer	1.8%
Total	100%

(Blog Survey 2006, n = 1258).

In agreement with previous studies, Table 1 indicates that most respondents (58.41%) said their entries could be characterised as 'My life (personal diary/journal)'. Thus, bloggers value self-expression and use blogging as a medium for self-reflection. Furthermore, because the self is only developed through interactions with others and because the reflexive project of the self is a characteristic of late modernity, the opportunity to continuously work on the project of the self via the interaction on blogs and comments to posts was the main reason why the majority of bloggers engaged in blogging.

Table 2 illustrates that when asked to select reasons for blogging, the highest percentage (62.6%) of respondents indicated that their main reason for blogging was to document their personal experiences and share them with others, whereas the lowest percentage (1.6%) indicated that their main reason for blogging was to make money. Indeed, 88.3% indicated that making money was not a reason for them to blog. This confirms that bloggers value the self-reflection and social interaction features of blogging.

Table 2. Reasons for Blogging.

Reason for blogging	Main reason	Minor reason	Not a reason	Prefer not to answer	Total
To document your personal experiences and share them with others	<b>62.6%</b>	27.2%	8.1%	2.2%	100%
To express yourself creatively	50.9%	35.9%	10.8%	2.4%	100%
To influence the way other people think	12.0%	31.2%	53.0%	3.8%	100%
To motivate other people to action	10.8%	30.0%	54.8%	4.4%	100%
To share practical knowledge or skills with others	16.5%	36.8%	42.4%	4.3%	100%
To network or to meet new people	18.1%	41.1%	37.0%	3.8%	100%
To entertain people	31.9%	42.3%	21.6%	4.2%	100%
To discuss problems with others	18.9%	39.3%	37.4%	4.4%	100%
To stay in touch with friends and family	31.0%	24.2%	41.0%	3.8%	100%
To make money	1.6%	4.7%	88.3%	5.4%	100%
To store resources or information	14.5%	35.2%	46.3%	4.0%	100%

(Blog Survey 2006, n = 1258).

*Knowledge of audience.* Audience knowledge potentially raises serious implications for privacy as bloggers who do not have good knowledge of their audience may decide to refrain from publishing details about their private life. Table 3 indicates widespread variation in levels of audience knowledge.

Table 3. Knowledge of audience.

How well do you feel you know your blog's audience?	Percentage
Extremely well	8.1%
Very well	23.1%
Quite well	32.2%
A little	18.4%
Not at all	7.6%
Prefer not to answer	2.1%
It is more complicated	8.5%
Total	100%

(Blog Survey 2006, n = 1258).

A range of reasons for the widespread variation in levels of audience knowledge was expressed:

- new – audience unknown
- in real life only
- online only
- different audiences for different blogs, and
- mix of real-life and online audience.

These responses concur with the findings of Nardi et al. who characterised blogs as a 'studied minuet between blogger and audience'<sup>36</sup> and distinguished two kinds of audiences: the bloggers' own, known social networks, and a larger audience beyond the author's friends and family. Of those bloggers who formed online friendships, trust and sharing of information appears to be an issue:



It really does vary. I have made good friends with a handful of people through blogging who I have gone on to meet. In fact, I had a year long relationship with someone who ‘met’ me by initially reading my blog. And there are other people who I have had a degree of contact with for 18 months or so who I may not have met, emailed or spoken to, but over such a time it is hard not to form some sort of bond – real or imagined – with such people. However, there is another section of my audience who I don’t know much about. Some people read regularly, and from reading their comments and blogs I decide I don’t want to get to know them any further and pay them scant attention, and yet they continue to return, getting to know me better by the day whilst I remain purposely oblivious to them. Finally, there is the section of readers who never interact, and yet return on a frequent basis.

The audience changes frequently. Some remain faithful readers and some drift away from you. Some you ‘know’ better than others.

You don’t really ‘KNOW’ your audience; it could be anyone, preacher, teacher, convict, sexual predator, or anyone in between. You never truly ‘know’ who is watching or what their motives are.

Some bloggers have different identities for different blogs, on which they disclose different types of information to different audiences:

My first name is publicly available on my blogs, as I don’t believe in pseudonymous blogging, I believe it leads to bullying and arrogance. However, hypocritically, as I used to work in local government, I never include my last name in any of my blogs, and I guard the links between all four blogs jealously so that anyone who identifies me as the author of one would find it difficult to identify me as the author of another ... as one of my blogs deals with work, one with factual information about my life, one with family, and another with the more traditional personalised style of blogging ...

I have a major blog, with a large readership. It’s pretty personal, but because it is associated with my real name and if you Google me you find it, I limit what I write about dating, sex, and money. I have a ‘secret’ blog, with a small (but growing) readership, where I write about dating. That is done with a pseudonym. I’ve revealed the existence of my other blog to three readers who read both blogs (and who I don’t know in person) but I don’t know of any other crossover.

Nardi et al. also found that, even though bloggers delighted in their audiences, there was a clear desire to keep the audience at arm’s length: ‘interactivity was valued, but only in controlled small doses.’<sup>37</sup> Likewise, Gumbrecht characterised blogs as ‘protected space’.<sup>38</sup> He asserts that because readers’ comments are subservient to the blogger’s posts, blogs create a protected arena in which authors feel safe to express emotions and experiences. When asked whether they do anything to limit who gets to read what they post, 72.3% of respondents said no. However, in the open-ended responses it became clear that access control is of major importance to a minority of bloggers. These respondents reported a using variety of differing privacy settings to limit audience access. For instance, they would only reveal identifying information if they were satisfied that their blogs were only accessible by a trusted audience. Of those who revealed detailed identifying information, many stated that they were happy to do so because they controlled audience access, e.g. limited to friends only – and as they know such people in real life they are happy to continue sharing such information on the internet:

In ‘Friends only’ entries I sometimes reveal my full name.

My blog is password-protected, so even though I identify myself by name on the blog, only about a dozen people even have the URL and a password to see it.

Mine is a locked Livejournal blog, so I trust the people on there with my real name. But from the outside, no, you can’t identify me.

I have mentioned my first name, and the names of most people around me, so technically I could be identified ... but really only by someone who already knows me. Does that make

sense? I mean you couldn't look me up in the phone book from the information on my blog. But if you were my Mother, you'd work out it was me pretty quick.

Thus, the importance of expressive privacy to bloggers is evident because 62.6% of respondents claimed that social interaction through sharing of personal experiences was their main reason blogging, despite the privacy risks. One of the most important functions of expressive privacy is its ability to allow meaningful relationships to develop. Without expressive privacy regulating social interaction and preventing the overreaching of others, such relationships would be impossible and a major reason for the popularity of blogging would cease. Nevertheless, when faced with different people who hold different values, beliefs, lifestyles etc., bloggers were forced to continuously factor in the shifting circumstances caused by different levels of knowledge and trust in their online relationships and adjust their narrative of the self accordingly.

## 2. Bloggers value privacy

It was clear that bloggers value privacy. Respondents were asked to rate a list of issues that could be considered of social importance on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all concerned and 5 is very concerned.

Table 4. Social importance of issues.

Socially important?	1 Not at all concerned	2	3	4	5 Very Concerned	No answer	Total
Preventing crime	5.2%	7.9%	22.7%	27.8%	22.5%	13.9%	100%
Improving standards in education	3.3%	3.5%	11.9%	26.3%	41.3%	13.7%	100%
Protecting people's personal information	2.8%	6.1%	17.4%	27.6%	33.3%	12.8%	100%
Protecting freedom of speech	3.0%	2.3%	8.6%	21.5%	51.9%	12.7%	100%
Equal rights for everyone	3.1%	2.6%	7.2%	21.0%	53.2%	12.9%	100%
Unemployment	4.7%	13.0%	29.6%	25.3%	13.4%	14.0%	100%
Environmental issues	4.0%	7.7%	18.7%	27.4%	28.4%	13.8%	100%
Access to information held by public authorities	4.1%	11.2%	23.2%	22.0%	25.4%	14.1%	100%
Providing health care	4.5%	6.7%	16.0%	27.1%	31.6%	14.1%	100%
National security	9.4%	14.9%	25.4%	19.8%	15.4%	14.9%	100%

(Blog Survey 2006, n = 1258).

Of the issues listed, Table 4 indicates, the highest percentage (over half) of respondents were very concerned about equal rights for everyone, whilst over one-third of respondents were very concerned with the protection of personal information. A higher percentage of respondents were very concerned with the protection of personal information than with the issues relating to preventing crime, unemployment, environmental issues, access to information, or national security. Only 2.8% were not at all concerned with protecting personal information.

Almost one-quarter (24.8%) of respondents said that they had posted personal information on their blog 'all the time'. Only 2% of respondents said they had 'never' posted anything highly personal on their blogs. However, bloggers seem to reflect regularly on the content of posts when deciding whether or not to post personal information online. Most respondents (65.6%) said they had considered some information 'too personal' to write

about on their blogs. When asked to elaborate on the types of information that would be too private, the comments of one blogger encapsulate the sentiments expressed by others:

Basically anything negative in your personal life. You may not mind sharing it at the time, or may want to talk to people about it, but you probably don't really want it indexed forever or available to copy and paste or otherwise spread through gossip.

Several categories of information were considered too private to post in blogs, namely:

*a) Personal information that could identify the blogger.*

Anything that can identify me, my personal life, as opposed to my online life.

My last name. Anything too specific about where I live. Anything I would mind my mother and my boss reading.

As a Jordanian belonging to a very small community (we're a small country), I find that I need to maintain a certain level of disclosure because everyone knows everyone.

- Information regarding others.

Anything that could adversely affect people I love, e.g. talking about a friend's bereavement, discussing my or someone else's sex life.

Things concerning the people in real life, like if I have feelings about them they don't know about. Or personal events that happen in OTHER people's lives that I know off, cause it's not my information to tell.

Personal information told to me by others who do not know I have a weblog.

My barometer is whether the information involves someone else and could embarrass/upset them. I'm fairly open about myself but wouldn't dare force someone else to share my standards of openness.

I won't post about anything personal that is not about me exclusively.

I refrain from talking about what happens in school or making opinions about my lecturers or other students in school because I am practising for future employment. My blog remains personal, but I only make posts about things that I have done outside.

*b) Emotions.*

A break up between myself and my partner, or family arguments. They are personal information and it is very rude to go broadcasting it to all your friends and potential strangers.

Stuff that I've tried to talk about but couldn't explain coherently without sounding like a desperate/emo/completely crazy person.

Many of my innermost feelings and experiences.

I'd find it difficult to write about my late wife's death in any detail, because it's a painful topic (though I have alluded to her long illness and death a few times).

I tend not to write about my sex life, or blather on about my angst. I don't want to be looking back at what I write and cringing because it's so 'teenage diary'. I tend to use it to try and look at the bright side of life, so I can laugh at it.

Anything considering other people where I might have to call names. How I REALLY feel about some things or someone. What is REALLY affecting me or is my intention behind certain actions. Sexuality, religious beliefs, political affiliations etc.

Information related to the divorce that I am currently negotiating with my husband. I'd love to be able to vent about it, but it doesn't seem prudent.

c) *Sex/relationships.*

My sex life is personal and now that my daughters are getting older (17 at present), I write less and less about them. I no longer write about work either, although I used to 2 years ago.

I don't give specific details and names. I don't talk about sex. I am describing events and my feelings about them. There is a difference between personal and intimate.

Details of sexual life; not because I wouldn't write it up online, but because I prefer to separate it from my other activity; more as a consideration to others/my parents than anything else.

Stuff about my wife: arguments, sex life, her weight, her behaviour towards me.

Mostly stuff about sex. For example, if I've slept with someone who is, along with their family or friends, on my friends list.

Things like sexual activity (when it actually happens), I won't discuss because a lot of times, it involves someone my other readers know. Also, masturbation. I'm not going into the details about that no matter how hard they beg.

This has shifted over time – I used to write explicitly about my sex life and my work as an escort, these days I keep my sex life private, though I still write about sexuality in a more general sense.

My sex life. Because most of my audience knows my girlfriend. Otherwise there'd be no problem.

Decisions to disclose information about sex life or relationship were influenced by how the other people involved would feel and whether the other person was known to the blog audience. In many instances the bloggers were aware of the need to protect the other party's personal information.

d) *Arguments.*

I once wrote half a post about rowing with my husband, then thought better of it.

Relationship related stuff, arguments with other people who are not 'online' (hence usually don't know I blog) would be unfair.

Fights with my husband, our sex life, issues with my extended family that really aren't anyone else's business.

Anything negative relating to anyone but myself also does not get blogged about; my blog is not my personal grievance platform.

e) *Financial information.*

Financial and health issues.

Money, family.

Financial problems, personal relationships and sometimes work situations.

f) *Work.*

At least one of my employees was made aware of my blog before I became his supervisor. Since becoming his supervisor, I've been leery of writing about anything that might undermine my credibility in his eyes.

I know some of my friends read my blog, and some people from where I used to work. I have posted things that I now consider 'too personal' and it got me into some trouble at work. These would be: sexual practices and with whom, blatant one-sided opinions.

Mostly if it is work-related, as I work with some pretty sensitive information.

Several incidents that might be recognisable to someone reading my blog, most of them concerning patients in hospitals. I tend not to write about my partner; he doesn't even know I blog, so I respect his privacy by not discussing him in detail.

*g) Health information.*

Health/personal thoughts/mental issues.

My abortion, my eating disorder. I try to keep it light.

Both times I miscarried I had to wait a few weeks before posting about it, mainly because I needed to be distanced from it slightly before I could start to write about it. Otherwise I don't really limit what I write. I don't write about my sex life.

*h) Other issues e.g. illegal activities, political beliefs, religious views.*

... the fact that I am an atheist and I don't want family members who read my blog to know, the fact that I am planning on voting Liberty.

Because I blog about and in dialogue with Muslims I prefer to keep the fact that I am gay to myself because it can get in the way of an otherwise positive dialogue with some people.

Last time I've been high on weed, if I enjoy anal sex, sexual acts I performed with my [partner]... Some of my experiences growing up.

These comments indicate a desire to protect informational and expressive privacy. Bloggers are aware of a risk posed by external parties who might be interested in collecting or collating the information, they post; thus they seek to restrict their blog readership and content. Also, the comments reveal that bloggers were likely not to blog about controversial social, moral or philosophical issues which would draw negative responses or criticism from readers or members of wider society. This suggests that bloggers consciously and intentionally negotiate the boundary between public and private. They take responsibility to ensure that their posts are in line with their desires as to how public or private they want to be at that specific time – a process that may shift from day-to-day, and from topic-to-topic. This finding concurs with an assertion by Palen and Dourish<sup>39</sup> that privacy in networked environments is a dynamic, dialectic process of negotiation that is conditioned by people's own expectations and experiences and by those of others with whom they interact. This author concurs with Rosen,<sup>40</sup> and Grudin,<sup>41</sup> and Palen and Dourish<sup>42</sup> in noting that these negotiation processes are fundamentally dependent on people having control over their information and over the contexts in which that information is presented. Thus, bloggers strive to negotiate a boundary between self and society that they feel comfortable with, yet at the same time they are able to interact socially with their readers. In this way they are able to define and maintain the desired level of publicness or privateness that they wish to achieve through the level of personal exposure that they allow. By controlling their information disclosure, bloggers are able to decide where to draw the boundary between themselves and others. Thus, managing their participation via that shifting public/private continuum is an important part of bloggers' experience.

*3. Bloggers are aware of privacy risks*

More than one in ten bloggers had experienced privacy invasion through the activities of other bloggers. When asked to explain the ways in which their privacy had been invaded, respondents described the following situations:

*Some bloggers had their identity exposed by others or are aware of a risk of exposure due to web interconnectivity.*

Some of my friends call me by my first name when they comment.

A friend linked to me and when she talked about me in her blog, she used my real name.

Personal health information was babbled to the world by an ex.

A white supremacist named me and gave sufficient details about my home address.

Putting my picture on their blog without asking me, though I have done the same.

A friend's partner's family were very upset when they discovered her religious beliefs and made accusations against her and paid a private detective to investigate her.

*Changes in behaviour over time.* There is evidence of a growing concern about protecting anonymity among some respondents

- (1) A common reason for limiting details was to prevent it from leading 'google' searches by employers to their personal blogs.

I use my first name, but always leave out my surname. I also try not to mention by name where I work or where I grew up. This isn't so much because I don't want my audience knowing these details, but rather that I am aware that including such details makes it much more likely an employer, former acquaintance or anyone I wouldn't want reading might accidentally 'google' their way onto my site. Despite these safeguards, some friends have still managed to google their way to my blog, so I think my concerns are well founded. If I were to start blogging afresh, I would give serious consideration to adopting a pseudonym.

I don't have my full name on the blog about page, but I have mentioned it many times. I want my day job work to be my primary Google search result for my name.

Like to keep work and home life separate (I'm a social worker) so using my real name is not a good idea in case a client did an internet search.

Restricting personally identifiable information is another mechanism bloggers employed to lessen the likelihood of privacy risks, here implicating more of the traditional understanding of privacy, one where control of personal information can protect the individual.

- (2) Some bloggers initially preserved their anonymity, but are aware that the reasons for their initial behaviour are changing.

I use a fake name, which I originally assumed to keep my blogging completely separate from my work life. I've since left that job, and now am a lot more forthcoming with personal details, but I've kept the name, partly because I've become fond of it, and partly because other bloggers now know me as Ben.

I do not openly list my name on my blog, however I do reference my family members by first name, have listed my last name on occasion and list the city in which I live. I suppose that I had at one time planned to remain an unknown, however have not found that to be as important as time has gone on.

I started the blog anonymously and posted under a pseudonym. Then I launched a web site with my name in the URL. The blog is now hosted on the website, but I still post under the pseudonym. ... Obviously we're one and the same, but I still find the alter ego a useful psychological and literary device.

## (3) some bloggers are moving towards anonymity.

First my name was public, now I changed that and my name is hidden.

I did at first, but then after a while realized that I didn't want to have my name be so easy to google . . . I don't really have an issue if people know who I am and where I live, but since the purpose of my blog is to keep my family updated on the lives of my kids, it doesn't seem necessary. The blogs that I keep for my children's birth families do NOT have names.

It was on all my blogs until a few months go. My main blog has a pseudonym while I apply for jobs, and will revert back to my real name afterwards. On my secondary blogs, I use my real name, but these are primarily professional/hobby-related. My name is unique, which makes me quite careful.

Some bloggers noted that they rely on anonymity in their blogging activities, particularly when posting information they considered to be more personal or private by traditional standards – the anonymity of blogging made them more likely to post such information.

These findings suggest that privacy norms are emerging among bloggers. For instance, as the comments above illustrate, some bloggers are beginning to create informal guidelines for publishing the names of people and employers in their blog entries. It is suggested that there is evidence of bloggers altering their behaviour according to employment prospects as the comments indicate that some bloggers are wary of revealing personal information to prospective future employers, and of revealing such information to potential clients.

#### 4. *Blogs are perceived to be public spaces*

The degree of accessibility is a major part of what makes a blog public or private. In this regard, the more accessible or visible a blog is, the more it is considered to be public. Some bloggers opined that anonymity or privacy is not possible on the Internet.

Anyone publishing anonymously in any medium must accept the risk of being 'outed'. Though I deplore the gratuitous and often destructive identification of anonymous bloggers, it would be foolish for anyone to assume anonymity is a right.

Blogs are a public thing. Some might think that they are private like emails, but should realise that both emails and Blogs are public in the sense that they can be found by someone who wants to find them. It's like paparazzi taking a photo of a famous person topless on a public beach . . .

The web is a public place, anything you write is not private. Being identified is a known risk of any web activity, either reading or writing. Same as sitting in a library reading or writing.

Many bloggers know that there is no real privacy and that anonymity is just a temporary matter. If someone wants to find out the person behind the blog, it would be quite easy to do so.

It's very hard to have a totally anonymous blog. People who know you may reveal who you are. There is also a chance that you can make a slip that reveals who you are.

When you made the conscious decision to put a blog on the internet, you know that it is not at all private. Blogs are not protected the same way that bank accounts are. Anyone can find them and they are easily hacked into. Just because you blog anonymously does not mean that your privacy is protected.

I feel the nature of blogs is public . . . by writing and publishing online one is exposing one's text to public scrutiny (unless a privacy lock has been placed on the blog). I feel that people who publish in blog format are basically asking to be read, hoping to be noticed.

The degree of accessibility is a major part of what makes a blog a public or private space – the more accessible or visible a space is the more it is considered to be public. Also, level of familiarity/audience knowledge is a key determinant of whether a blog is considered a public space. Hence, the fact that a blog could be read by strangers could mean that the space is considered as public by many bloggers.

### 5. *Bloggers employ mechanisms to protect privacy*

Blogging software allows differing levels of privacy. The most private blog is password-protected. The most public blog is listed by the user's blog service and will be easily found by search engines. An unlisted blog is less likely to be found, but is not fully private; it is unlisted by the blogging service's directory (similar to an unlisted phone number). Such an unlisted blog cannot be found without knowing the URL, although there is a way such blogs can become public, namely, if the blog contains a link to a webpage that a viewer could click on, then the new webpage will receive the URL as the 'referrer', and it is possible for the 'unlisted' blog to be picked up by search engines. Since most blogs contain links that anyone might click on, unlisted blogs are not secure, although they may remain relatively invisible if they link to sites that few people access and if the links are not activated often. The survey respondents reported a variety of differing privacy settings and approaches, for instance, over a quarter of bloggers took action to limit who could read their blogs. These limitations included:

#### 1) *Leaving out key details.*

I made the title and address completely unconnected to me and don't use my surname so a google search of my name wouldn't flash it up.

I do not document everything that has happened to me on my site. While my blog is predominantly a personal one (i.e. 'What I did today', 'What I learned today', 'Who I spoke to today', etc.) I prefer having a sense of anonymity.

#### 2) *Using passwords.*

To avoid Spammers I have put a computer word verification in place. I only did this after receiving some questionable responses to my posts.

Some entries are completely private and require personal login. The rest are completely public.

Password for blog is only provided for friends.

#### 3) *Keeping the fact that they blog secret.*

Most people who know me personally will never know about my personal blog. Only folks I totally trust and already share all my stories and inner issues with were invited.

I use a pseudonym so that close family members about whom I may write (using an initial, not their full name) cannot easily come across my blog if they were to search one day. I do not want to have to explain myself if what I write is 'injurious' ...

Other than my partner, my family does not know that my blog exists. Two real-life friends know about it. All other readers do not know me personally.

#### 4) *Editing robot.txt file.*

Edit the robots.txt file which controls whether search engines are allowed to crawl your site.

I use blogger and I blocked the search engine option. So, only if you click on a link from someone else's blog can you stumble across mine.



5) *Blocking IP addresses.*

I ban IP addresses of people who come to my site just to insult me. I also use private categories to tuck away posts that I'd rather not have the general public read.

I block the IP address of my sister-in-law as well as the IP of my company, but I turn that on and off, as sometimes I update at work.

I block a lot of spambots, and the occasional troll – but the main thing I do is block any IP addresses and domains that I know my parents use, to stop them accidentally coming across it.

6) *Using privacy filters.*

I tend to make more personal posts friends only; sometimes even limiting posts to people I don't know in real life as I sometimes prefer to limit my depressed/suicidal musings to people who can't do much about them.

Most of the posts are public; these include ones about what I do, my fandoms etc. I have several custom friends groups to discuss things I think some people on the list would disapprove of (for example my religious and spiritual beliefs).

Generally I make my entries open for all to see and respond to. However, if I'm discussing something either particularly personal or something that involves people who might be reading the blog, I make my entries friends-only.

Some of the content of my blog is lightly filtered to avoid spoiling surprises for people or to talk about work or to preserve other people's privacy or to send a message or invitation to a certain section of people.

The bloggers who responded to the survey indicated an awareness of a range of privacy risks which fall under De Cew's cluster dimensions of accessibility privacy. The degree of accessibility is a major part of what makes a blog a public or private space – the more accessible or visible a space is, the more it is considered to be public. Inherent in this concept of accessibility of public spaces is the idea of restricted access. Respondents used a variety of mechanisms to restrict public access to their blogs, such as locks, password access, friends only. Such behaviour indicates that bloggers negotiate a boundary between self and society that they feel comfortable with, yet at the same time they are able to interact socially with their readers. In this way they are able to define and maintain the desired level of publicness or privateness that they wish to achieve through the level of personal exposure that they allow.

## **Discussion**

Bloggers face unique privacy concerns because, on blogs, meaningful and private information is often shared. Thus, the type of 'information' that could be collected, because it is more closely tied to one's self-identity and self-expression, poses a serious privacy risk to bloggers. While the storage of information is a concern for all Internet users, the archiving of blog posts poses threat. For instance, I may have posted on my blog ten years ago my teenage opinions on animal testing. As humans, we tend to change and grow over time. My opinions on animal testing may be different now. However, if I now apply for a job at a pharmaceutical company, the hiring committee could unearth my opinions through a simple Google search. In this case, the storage of my opinions and personal experiences for such a long time poses a serious threat to my privacy and presents consequences that I presumably did not anticipate at the time of disclosure. The storage of information that was initially public presents a unique privacy risk for bloggers because they often assume that the posts are private. It is the presumption that the blogs are

private that ensures that the storage of information can be a serious privacy risk for participants as private information is shared more easily.

Additionally, the collation of all of my posts could easily paint a picture of me as a person. If this picture was then used in a different context, it could pose a serious privacy risk. For example, let's say that my teenage years were emotionally difficult for me and that I frequently blogged about my low moods when I was experiencing mild depression and generally was not happy with myself. Now, however, I am a well-adjusted and happy family lawyer who is up for partnership. What would happen if my appointment committee dredged up my blog posts from ten years ago and made the decision that my emotional well-being is questionable at best because I was quite emotionally unstable ten years ago. There is an increased chance, they argue, that I will become so again and hence am not a 'desirable' candidate. The fact that I disclosed this information could now have potentially serious effects on my career and life plans. Arguably, blog sites serve as the context for the entries they contain. There is no guarantee, however, that individual entries will not be extracted from their original context and exposed in radically different forums in the future. Grudin<sup>43</sup> refers to this 'loss of control' as the steady erosion of *clearly situated action*. 'We are losing control and knowledge of the consequences of our actions, because if what we do is represented digitally, it can appear anywhere, and at any time in the future. We no longer control access to anything we disclose.'<sup>44</sup> Future employers, insurance companies, police investigators or even a future spouse could locate decontextualised, and possibly damaging, statements. Rosen highlights the contextual basis of privacy violations when stating that disclosure of personal information is a highly circumstance-sensitive matter.<sup>45</sup> When taken out of context, the same information can be severely misjudged by others.

Therefore, the disclosure of personal information by bloggers appears to pose very unique privacy threats as expressive privacy plays a fundamental role in our lives. It enables us to choose and dictate the way that we will live, it promotes the creation of our self-identity, and it allows us to enjoy a wide variety of social relationships and roles, including intimate relationships. Expressive privacy sets the stage for social interaction to occur and additionally enables the creation of one's identity by preventing other people's social overreaching throughout this interaction. Furthermore, the degree of accessibility to others and the amount of information one wants others to have are all connected to privacy. It is suggested that acknowledgement of the social dimension of privacy is crucial to understanding how bloggers perceive and negotiate privacy. Expressive privacy protects people from the overreaching social control of others that would inhibit self-expression and freedom of association. In this way, the disclosure of personal information by bloggers appears to pose very unique privacy threats. While blog posts may appear to be posted in public arena, it does not negate the fact that the information they share is often intimately tied to a person. As a result, violations would likely have serious repercussions for bloggers' self-expression and thus their ability to socially interact and develop meaningful relationships.

## Conclusion

Most respondents in this study described their blogs as the personal diary/journal type which indicates that blogging provides a unique opportunity for expressive privacy and furthermore allows bloggers to work out their reflexive project of the self in new ways, despite the inherent privacy risks posed by this medium. Whilst, blog posts may appear public, it does not negate the fact that the information they share is often intimately tied to

a person. Blogging poses new opportunities for privacy violations to occur, as individuals discuss personal matters and provide opinions openly in a format that can be archived indefinitely and easily accessed by anyone with an Internet connection. As a result, violations would likely have serious repercussions for bloggers' self-expression and thus their ability to socially interact and develop meaningful relationships. Participants in this study described tactics for keeping certain information private even when it is publicly published. Despite the emerging privacy strategies described in this study, bloggers reported having difficulty negotiating privacy boundaries under certain circumstances. The workplace is one setting where such problematic situations regularly occur. Bloggers' privacy boundaries in the workplace have yet not been clearly established, either socially or legally. Accordingly, one recommendation that emerges from the findings of this study is that organisations should provide blogging guidelines for employees. A few companies have posted written policies concerning personal blogs on their websites, including clear, point-by-point suggestions that address issues that are sensitive to the company, but that may not occur to employee bloggers when they choose to discuss matters related to the company's technology or business. Such policies could serve as the first step in a broader process of negotiation between employers and employees as blogging practices continue to evolve.

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