"I" on the Web: Social Penetration Theory Revised

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Abstract : The widespread use of New Media and particularly Social Media, through fixed or mobile devices, has changed in a staggering way our perception about what is "intimate" and "safe" and what is not, in interpersonal communication and social relationships. The distribution of self and identity-related information in communication now evolves under new and different conditions and contexts. Consequently, this new framework forces us to rethink processes and mechanisms, such as what "exposure" means in interpersonal communication contexts, how the distinction between the "private" and the "public" nature of information is being negotiated online, how the "audiences" we interact with are understood and constructed. Drawing from an interdisciplinary perspective that combines sociology, communication psychology, media theory, new media and social networks research, as well as from the empirical findings of a longitudinal comparative research, this work proposes an integrative model for comprehending mechanisms of personal information management in interpersonal communication, which can be applied to both types of online (Computer-Mediated) and offline (Face-To-Face) communication. The presentation is based on conclusions drawn from a longitudinal qualitative research study with 458 new media users from 24 countries for almost over a decade. Some of these main conclusions include: (1) There is a clear and evidenced shift in users' perception about the degree of "security" and "familiarity" of the Web, between the pre- and the post- Web 2.0 era. The role of Social Media in this shift was catalytic. (2) Basic Web 2.0 applications changed dramatically the nature of the Internet itself, transforming it from a place reserved for "elite users / technical knowledge keepers" into a place of "open sociability" for anyone. (3) Web 2.0 and Social Media brought about a significant change in the concept of "audience" we address in interpersonal communication. The previous "general and unknown audience" of personal home pages, converted into an "individual & personal" audience chosen by the user under various criteria. (4) The way we negotiate the nature of 'private' and 'public' of the Personal Information, has changed in a fundamental way. (5) The different features of the mediated environment of online communication and the critical changes occurred since the Web 2.0 advance, lead to the need of reconsideration and updating the theoretical models and analysis tools we use in our effort to comprehend the mechanisms of interpersonal communication and personal information management. Therefore, is proposed here a new model for understanding the way interpersonal communication evolves, based on a revision of social penetration theory.

Keywords : new media, interpersonal communication, social penetration theory, communication exposure, private information, public information