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Communication Privacy Management Theory

Significance for Interpersonal Communication

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Lauren was a 20-year-old college student who seemingly had everything. She was voted football Homecoming Queen, her grades were exceptional, and she had a full-ride scholarship. Life was good. However, during the summer between her junior and senior year, Lauren's dreams were altered. Immediately following her junior year, her college sweetheart broke off their romantic relationship. Surprised and brokenhearted, Lauren began drinking and partying heavily, finding herself having a string of regrettable sexual encounters.

At the beginning of senior year, Lauren and her college sweetheart rekindled their relationship. Lauren was as happy as she had ever been. However, as she did every fall, Lauren donated blood during the university's blood drive. Four weeks after donating, Lauren was notified that her blood had tested positive for HIV. The counselor told her that she needed to notify all individuals with whom she had intercourse because they might have been exposed to the virus. Immediately, Lauren began to panic. She wondered how to tell her previous sexual partners, her parents, her friends, and more importantly her boyfriend.

Lauren's story indicates the tensions and decisions that can accompany managing private information. In our everyday lives, there is a complexity to privacy management. We need a road map to find the right path so we do not feel embarrassed, hurt someone's feelings, or reveal more than we want to others. Theoretical frameworks and research generated from theories can give insights

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into why we make certain decisions. They help us see potential mistakes, and assist in understanding ways we think about privacy and how we cope with privacy infractions. This chapter gives a brief introduction to a theory called communication privacy management (CPM), developed by one of the authors, Petronio (2002, 2013). In this chapter, we discuss the purpose, principles, and value of CPM. CPM is a theory that assists researchers, students, and practitioners to grasp how individuals reveal and conceal private information.

Intellectual Tradition of Communication Privacy Management Theory

CPM is a "homegrown" communication theory based on systematic research designed to develop an evidence-based understanding of the way people regulate revealing and concealing. On initially encountering CPM, it is helpful to leave previously held beliefs about disclosure behind. Unlike earlier theories, CPM views "disclosure" as the process of revealing private information, yet always in relation to concealing private information. Since these two concepts are in a dialectical tension with each other, the way revealing and concealing take place is through a rule management system. This notion shifts the frame from focusing only on "self-disclosure" to a broader, more comprehensive view that includes "private disclosures" capturing both the elements of privacy and the process of disclosure. Petronio (2002) argued that "CPM makes private information, as the content of what is disclosed, a primary focal point" (p. 3). CPM also depends on the notion of boundaries to give us a way to conceptualize how the management process works.

Unlike many theories fitting neatly within one particular methodological paradigm, CPM has proven to be a useful theoretical tool for interpretivists and post-positivists alike. This is largely because CPM was not developed as a methodology. An interpretivist's research methods capture human action that is purposive and socially embedded to determine meaning attributed by others who interact from within that same web of meaning (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Thus, CPM can be used within an interpretivist's methodological frame insofar as human action, such as the disclosure of private information, is purposive, rule driven, and interpreted by those participating in the disclosure event. On the other hand, CPM has also been used successfully to guide post-positivist research. According to Baxter and Babbie (2004), post-positivist research attempts to explain, predict, and control human behavior. For instance, Caughlin and his colleagues have effectively used CPM to guide post-positivist research on the correlation between topic avoidance and relational (dis)satisfaction (e.g., Caughlin & Afifi, 2004). This theory gives versatility of methodology because it was not developed with a methodological objective as its guide.

Instead, CPM theory offers principles and a prospective that allow researchers to use different methodologies.

Main Goals and Features of Communication Privacy Management Theory

CPM is organized around three guiding maxims. First, we discuss *assumption maxims* that underlie CPM theory. Next, we introduce *axiomatic maxims* that represent main principles defining privacy management according to CPM theory. Last, we discuss *interaction maxims* found in CPM theory that guide communicative actions in regulating privacy.

The assumption maxims include: (1) public-private dialectical assumptions, (2) privacy management assumptions, and (3) boundary metaphor assumptions.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE DIALECTICAL ASSUMPTIONS

CPM views the process of disclosure as inherently dialectical, meaning when people disclose, they manage a friction—a push and pull—of wanting to reveal and conceal private information. In Lauren's story, we see that she feels conflicted about revealing, knowing she has to and wanting to conceal her diagnosis to avoid humiliation, relational trauma, and coping with the outcome. The simultaneous nature of wanting to tell and also wanting to conceal makes CPM's theoretical map necessary to understand how people navigate privacy.

PRIVACY MANAGEMENT ASSUMPTIONS

CPM posits three validated assumptions about privacy management. First, people believe they rightfully own their private information, even when they might tell their information to someone. Second, because information is defined as private, with potential vulnerabilities, people believe they have the right to control the flow of information to others. CPM argues the best way to understand management ownership and control is through "privacy rules." These are not rigid rules. Rather, think about them as *rules* with a little "r" instead of unbending rules with a big "R" given the possibility of needed rule change. Privacy rules have to be flexible in order to be effective. If you break up with your relational partner you will no longer want to confide in him or her the same way you did when you were together, thus you change your privacy rules, similar to the way you might change your Facebook privacy setting when you unfriend someone. CPM accounts for the need to shift and change these rules. Third, since we do not live in a perfect world, managing private information can break down as a result of unsuccessful management of private information.

BOUNDARY METAPHOR ASSUMPTIONS

CPM uses a boundary metaphor to mark borders of ownership surrounding private information, and boundaries illustrate the transactional nature of how that information is managed with others. The boundaries can be "thick" when we are less likely to reveal information, the boundaries can be "thin" with higher likelihood of disclosure, and there can be fluctuations where disclosure or concealing is incremental, or shifts back and forth from openness to denying access. The boundaries represent symbolic lines denoting information with potential vulnerabilities considered private (Petronio, 2002).

Three axiomatic maxims define CPM theory: (1) conceptualizing private information ownership, (2) conceptualizing private information control, and (3) conceptualizing private information turbulence.

CONCEPTUALIZING PRIVATE INFORMATION OWNERSHIP

Private information is defined by CPM as information individuals believe they own and control because if it is known there would be potential for vulnerabilities. Hence, private information is something people believe is rightfully theirs to protect or disclose. Persons selected to know are considered "authorized" to become co-owners of the information. This is in opposition to being *unauthorized,* where private information is taken without the owner's permission, for example, having personal information sold without the owner's authorization. This particular CPM assumption has extended how the process of disclosure and privacy are understood and illustrates the assumption of boundaries regulation discussed above.

CONCEPTUALIZING PRIVATE INFORMATION CONTROL

Since individuals believe they own their private information and assume the right to control third-party disclosure, they need a means of regulating control over the flow of private information. CPM uses the concept of "privacy rules" to represent how people make choices about retaining control or permitting access to others. Privacy rules are developed and applied using two types of criteria, (1) *core* and (2) *catalyst* (Petronio, 2013). *Core criteria* are more durable, at times, functioning in the background and include criteria such as culture, gender, and privacy orientations. Cultural criteria are important because privacy can be defined as a societal or group value. If a culture values openness as important to societal functioning, people from that culture tend to embrace openness rather than secrecy. Men and women differ in the kind of privacy rules they use, leading to divergent requirements for revealing or concealing. Women need to feel confident in recipients they select, whereas men often

focus on whether the situation is appropriate (Petronio, 2002). Families develop and socialize members to have privacy orientations guiding the degree of family information openness or protection (Serewicz & Canary, 2008).

Catalyst criteria account for times when privacy rules are responsive to needed change. Rule change occurs when the risk-benefit ratios fluctuate, when motivations for telling or concealing are altered, or when situations occur that call for different privacy rules, such as in divorce or relational breakdowns such as the issues Lauren faced. Both core and catalyst criteria serve to guide the development and application of privacy rules people use to manage their boundaries.

CONCEPTUALIZING PRIVACY INFORMATION TURBULENCE

There are many ways privacy management breaks down, and we also know that there are levels of turbulence from minor ripples to full breakdowns like snooping or intentionally stealing identity information. When privacy rules do not work, people typically need to recalibrate them to fit their needs. If you disclosed private information to someone in confidence but, nevertheless, that person gossips, repeating the information without permission, you probably will not disclose personal information to that person again. Gossip, by definition, violates how a person wants their private information managed. Once the violations are discovered, trust is breached and access rules tend to change.

How Communication Is Conceptualized in Communication Privacy Management Theory

In the previous section we discussed assumption maxims that underlie CPM theory. These axiomatic maxims represent CPM operating principles. This section illustrates why CPM is considered a communication theory. CPM is born out of a communication perspective and is wholly *communication* theory. Fundamentals of the theory and tests of the principles are predicated on seeking an understanding of a communication phenomenon and as such, CPM is one of the first solidly positioned communication theories. Unlike earlier perspectives on disclosure, CPM makes the communicative process the central feature by taking into account both the recipient and the discloser (Petronio & Reierson, 2009).

Three interaction maxims represent how CPM is, at its heart, a communication theory, born and bred. These include: (1) shared privacy boundaries, (2) coordinating privacy boundaries, and (3) ramifications of privacy boundary turbulence.

SHARED PRIVACY BOUNDARIES

One of the most innovative and attractive features of CPM theory is the argument for a different way to think about the aftermath of disclosure. As Petronio (2002, 2013) points out, once a person discloses private information, this action fundamentally changes the nature of the information. Accordingly, the information is no longer solely owned by the discloser (aka, "original owner"). "Sharing" was once used as a substitute phrase for disclosure, but in many ways Petronio's conceptualization of sharing is more accurate. Thus, when you tell someone private information, you are making that person a co-owner or shareholder of the information. Together you create one mutual boundary around the information.

CPM explains that you can have many layers of privacy boundaries where shared information resides. For example, you can have dyadic privacy boundaries when only two people are co-owners, group privacy boundaries, family privacy boundaries, organizationally private boundaries (i.e., proprietary information), and even societal private boundaries (i.e., information in the United States protected by the Department of Homeland Security). Because shared privacy boundaries make the calculus for privacy regulation more complex, Petronio (2002) proposed three operations that regulate privacy boundary coordination for the mutually held private information.

COORDINATING SHARED PRIVACY BOUNDARIES

Operations used to coordinate shared privacy boundaries refer to how individuals co-own and co-manage private information. As mentioned, CPM does not view disclosure as a unidirectional or one-dimensional communication process. Instead, disclosed private information affects both the discloser and the recipient of disclosure. After people reveal private information, all recipients are considered responsible for co-managing the information. Petronio (2002, 2013) argues boundaries must be coordinated through negotiations of privacy rules to have synchronized and effective management. Coordination of privacy boundaries uses three operations: privacy boundary linkages, private information co-ownership rights, and privacy boundary permeability.

Privacy boundary linkages represent alliances formed between a discloser and recipients. Boundary linkages occur in numerous ways. A discloser can target a particular recipient in order to intentionally reveal private information, the information can be solicited, such as during a doctor's visit, or the original owner can grant access, for example, to their medical records. Sometimes, an unintended recipient can receive private information accidentally (Petronio, Jones, & Morr, 2003). For instance, a roommate may have overheard Lauren tell her boyfriend that she is HIV positive. While Lauren might have intended

to link her boyfriend into the privacy boundary around her status, she did not plan on the roommate finding out.

Private information co-ownership rights refers to privileges and amount of expected responsibility for co-owners of private information. In the example above, Lauren discloses her HIV status intentionally to her boyfriend. Her boyfriend becomes a shareholder or stakeholder of the information. The complication of knowing is, no doubt, dramatic for him. Although he may think it is important to know, knowing about her status may also prove dilemmatic (Greene, Derlega, Yep, & Petronio, 2003). This example illustrates that, although the role of recipient, as a co-owner, may be positive, it also may cause the confidant to experience conflict, particularly if he or she is not able to cope with the information disclosed. With disclosures, confidants also frequently receive privacy rules for how the information should be handled. In our example, Lauren is likely to ask her boyfriend to keep her status confidential, perhaps even pleading with him to have the information remain between the two of them. Petronio (2002) argued that if the parameters for dealing with private information are clear between the parties, then co-owners more aptly regulate access to the private information in a similar way. However, when these parameters are not clear, it is more likely that a co-owner will breach a rule about how the information should be co-managed. This discussion illustrates an underlying condition of smooth boundary coordination. In other words, when involved parties are intentionally privileged and negotiate rules this allows for efficient and effective regulation of the information with fewer complications.

Privacy boundary permeability refers to the amount of access to or openness within a privacy boundary. As access to private information increases, boundaries become more permeable. Since boundary permeability signifies the level of access, thinner walls represent more openness so private information flows more easily. In opposition to this, thicker boundary walls represent less access or no access, as with secrets (Petronio, 2002). No doubt, Lauren intended for the information about her HIV status to remain within an impermeable privacy boundary with her boyfriend.

When boundaries are jointly coordinated, CPM describes three ways that they are managed. First, collective boundaries can be managed in a "disproportionate" way: one person in the boundary discloses more private information than other recipients. For example, when people are in need of health care they willingly disclose a great deal of private information, yet information is not typically reciprocated by the health care worker (Petronio & Kovach, 1997). Second, collective boundaries can be managed in an "intersected" fashion: Each member shares and co-owns information in equitable ways. Third, collective boundaries can be managed in a "unified" way: Everyone is responsible for jointly held information. Unified boundaries are most often found in families,

where personal information affects the group as well as the individual family member (Petronio, 2002).

RAMIFICATIONS OF PRIVACY BOUNDARY TURBULENCE

As mentioned earlier, smooth management when private information is co-owned requires coordinated actions. Often, due to incongruent expectations, misunderstanding privacy parameters, or conflicted access rules for handling private information, boundary turbulence ensues. Suppose the roommate of Lauren's boyfriend heard Lauren disclosing she was HIV positive. Even if Lauren and her boyfriend keep her HIV-positive status private, her boyfriend's room-mate may not understand how the couple wants to manage that information. Ramifications such as recalibrating privacy rules may result if the roommate reveals Lauren's HIV-positive status to someone else without her permission. There are many cases where turbulence occurs: In particular, privacy violations, dilemmas, and misconceptions about ownership contribute to boundary turbu-lence. In each case, there are potential negative relational ramifications when privacy boundaries become turbulent.

Research and Practical Applications of Communication Privacy Management Theory

CPM is a dynamic theory that has been applied to explore a number of inter-personal communication issues. As examples, researchers using CPM have studied: (a) use of social media (Child, Haridakis, & Petronio, 2012; Kanter, Afifi, & Robbins, 2012), (b) stepfamily communication (Afifi, 2003), (c) marital communication (Petronio & Jones, 2006; Steuber & Solomon, 2012;), (d) inter-personal health issues (Bylund, Peterson, & Cameron, 2010; Petronio & Lewis, 2010), (e) child sexual abuse (Petronio, Reeder, Hecht, & Mon't Ros-Mendoza, 1996), and (f) family interactions (Docan-Morgan 2011; Durham, 2008).

Turbulent conditions, such as privacy dilemmas and breakdowns in disclo-sure processes, represent important areas of research in interpersonal commu-nication because of the intrinsically complex nature of privacy management within relational systems. Studying privacy turbulence gives a way to decipher the unevenness of human interaction. Besides helping to understand the dynamics of relational systems, privacy turbulence also highlights the recipient of disclosures. While emphasis of the confidant has been sparse, researchers using CPM have begun to examine such issues as pregnant women and the unsolicited disclosive advice they receive from others (Petronio & Jones, 2006). CPM theory has also provided insights into how stepchildren feel caught between two families. They must manage information that they

receive differently depending on which privacy rules prevail in different households, and they are concerned about regulating issues of loyalty (Afifi, 2003). Similar issues are found with academic athletic advisors and keeping confidence of student-athletes while also balancing loyalties to their university employer (Thompson, Petronio, & Braithwaite, 2012). Through CPM, we can better understand the dilemmas physicians and their families face when involved in medical errors as well as clinicians with patients (Petronio, 2006; Petronio, Helft, & Child, 2013). Furthermore, bereavement researchers have commented on the confusion that many recipients feel after an individual discloses information pertaining to the death of a child (Hastings, 2000; Toller & McBride, 2013). According to Hastings, although the recipients of particular disclosures may wish to provide support to bereaved parents, they might not know how to provide it. Some disclosures might thus be perceived by recipients as burdensome and those recipients take on the role of the reluctant confidant for the discloser (Bergen & McBride, 2008).

The privacy rules that guide disclosures in marital interactions characterize a burgeoning area of privacy (Durham, 2008). Petronio (2002, 2011) suggested that newlyweds often struggle with determining what private information they should disclose to one another as they develop privacy rules. As Serewicz and Canary (2008) pointed out, newlyweds go through a process of formulating acceptable levels of openness and closedness in their marriages; privacy rules are created through this process. Roloff and Ifert (2000) suggested that one of the most important determinants of successful boundary management might be how marital couples negotiate the disclosure of partner criticism. Withholding complaints has both positive and negative outcomes for marriages. By resisting the urge to criticize one's spouse, the individual may successfully avoid marital conflict; however, if spouses never verbalize criticism toward each other, then both spouses are unlikely to confront the undesirable or damaging behavior of the other. Because CPM provides a frame for the interface of privacy and disclosure, it encourages thinking about the conditions of both revealing and concealing. The research on topic avoidance illustrates a privacy rule strategy that is used when individuals feel compelled to keep information protected within the privacy boundary. For instance, researchers have studied (a) topic avoidance and the role of the reluctant confidant within friendships (Afifi & Guerrero, 1998, 2000), (b) privacy management on Facebook (Waters & Ackerman, 2011), and (c) explaining privacy turbulence erupting from spousal discrepancies in disclosures about infertility (Steuber & Solomon, 2012).

People with all kinds of relational connections are linked into privacy boundaries or isolated from information (Petronio, 2002, 2013). Research by Caughlin (2002) shows the way people regulate privacy rules in voluntary relationships like friendships. Friendship relationships tend to have more lenient

rules that guide disclosures than exist in involuntary, familial relationships. In some cases, however, individuals experience boundary turbulence when they mistakenly reveal too much information or withhold information from their friends. Consequently, relational problems can erupt because of turbulence in privacy management when individuals do not disclose enough (Afifi & Steuber, 2010) or when they disclose too much.

CPM argues that one of the criteria on which privacy rules are predicated is the motivation for revealing or concealing private information. Some research has begun to understand the ways in which motivations impact the choice to reveal or conceal. Afifi and her colleagues have directly studied the link between motivations and privacy management within a CPM framework (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Caughlin & Afifi, 2004). For instance, they found that relational dissatisfaction was moderated by an individual's motivations for avoiding disclosure of a topic, suggesting that motivational criteria for decision making regarding revealing and concealing is a robust theoretical assumption. An interesting study examined the relational impact of "punitive secrets," where one partner is motivated to conceal knowing that the other partner is keeping a secret, yet already knowing the content (Caughlin, Scott, Miller, & Hefner, 2009). As seems logical, when the secret was about betrayals of confidence or personal gain, for example, they were more hurtful to the relationship. Looking at disclosure patterns for child sexual abuse victims, Petronio and colleagues (1996) found that some of these children did not disclose information because they had been threatened by the perpetrators and were afraid to tell. Consequently, the children constructed a set of rules that were largely dependent on carefully managing their privacy boundaries. Such children told only after they "hint around," testing to see if they could trust the confidant, or they only told if someone gently inquired whether there might have been abuse. In other words, the children waited to be given permission, and they selected a setting where they felt safe. As CPM continues to be used to study a wide variety of issues, the verification of CPM principles continues to confirm the viability of the ideas and can judge its theoretical weight.

Evaluation of Communication Privacy Management Theory

CPM is a valuable theory containing significant strength. Unlike many previous theories adopted from other disciplines, CPM represents a theory explicitly grounded in and derived from "communication." CPM is a theory of communication that helps us to understand how and why we reveal and conceal private information. In its short life, CPM has generated a plethora of research in a multitude of contexts across disciplines such as computer science,

health, psychology, sociology, business, and government. In communication, CPM has been used primarily by researchers in interpersonal, family, and health communication. However, as the other disciplines show us, CPM can be used to understand privacy and disclosure in contexts such as health care, education, social media, business, economics, and organizations. The greatest strength of CPM is its utility and heuristic value in both basic and applied research. CPM's flexibility as a theory both aids researchers in fully understanding the privacy expressiveness dialectic and its applicability to real-world problems. Although there is much strength, we also recognize that CPM theory is very new. More work is needed in developing measures to capture the full complement of ways CPM can help us understand how people manage private information.

Continuing the Conversation

The directions for future research using CPM theory are numerous. Balancing privacy and disclosure is not only a task found in close personal relationships. The theory is applicable to address questions about social media and making choices about revealing information in online social networking. In health care, providers must both keep patient confidentiality and disclose their health information appropriately, for example, to another health care clinician. In the workplace CPM can help us understand how coworkers share personal information to be held in confidence. CPM can shed light on how educators attempt to balance immediacy with professional distance and make wise choices about how much they reveal about themselves to their students. CPM represents a theoretical perspective that allows us to better understand what individuals disclose, what they keep private, and how private information is handled among groups of people. Future research needs to continue testing the viability of applying the theory. In addition, it is necessary to develop a diagnostic tool to help us understand the reasons turbulence occurs and a repair mechanism to teach us how to mend privacy breakdowns. As we have seen, the heuristic value of CPM, for not only communication, but also many different contexts and disciplines, is very promising.

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