



Erasmus Research Centre for Media,
Communication and Culture

“Work and personal life, they just blur together” Messaging
apps and the amplification of
workplace surveillance and context collapse

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Anouk Mols (mols@eshcc.eur.nl)

Jason Pridmore (pridmore@eshcc.eur.nl)

Use of group messaging apps in the workplace

Messaging apps (most often WhatsApp) used in workplaces for:

- Formal purposes
 - Practicalities, shared discussion space, updates and results
- Informal purposes
 - Organisation of social activities/events, gifts/surprises, private life updates
- Group chats as well as one-to-one conversations
- During and outside of work hours

Use of group messaging apps in the workplace

Sample

- 14 workplaces, maximised diversity:
 - (corporate) start-up (x3), technology and software firm (x2), multinational (x2), advertising agency, hotel, government, consultancy firm, municipality, zoo, bar/restaurant

Research method

- 13 in-depth interviews
 - 1 small focus groups with 3 respondents
 - Audio-recorded, transcribed
 - Inductive qualitative content analysis (using *Atlas.ti*)
 - Constructive grounded theory approach (inspired by Charmaz 2014)
Open, axial & selective coding

Communication Privacy Management (CMP)

- How people establish boundaries to manage tensions between concealing and disclosing private and public information
- Flows of private information between and among individuals in order to understand privacy management on multiple levels beyond the individual
- Takes into account dialectic tensions between
 - Privacy and openness
 - Telling and concealing
- 5 principles
 - Principle 1: Private Information Ownership
 - Principle 2: Private Information Control
 - Principle 3: Private Information Rules
 - Principle 4: Private Information Co-Ownership and Guardianship
 - Principle 5: Private Information Boundary Turbulence

Petronio (2002, 2010) Child, Haridakis & Petronio (2012)



Results

The (inter)personal side of privacy	Privacy as (a lack of) control	Coping with context collapse	Bricolage nature of work messaging
Privacy safe in private sphere	Controlling privacy	Managing blurring boundaries	Multi-purpose work messaging
Personal nature messaging	Worrying about privacy	24/7 smartphone pressure	Supporting work messaging
Lateral surveillance	Importance privacy awareness	Managing messaging pressure	Digital divides
Messaging risks by others	Privacy users' responsibility	Restricting phone use	
Online contact not meaningful			



The (inter)personal side of privacy

- “Whatsapp has a character of personal communication. It is not email, it is not a letter, as far as people still send letters, WhatsApp has an informal basis.” (Mark, project manager in a municipality)
- Consequence: lateral surveillance (Andrejevic, 2005, 2007) via WhatsApp affordances
- “It happened that I read a message, but didn’t react yet, and got a message with ‘Hey, I see that you’ve read it, why didn’t you respond?’” (Lara, graphic designer at a tech company)

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The (inter)personal side of privacy

- Respecting privacy rules
- “Well, if one of my employees is sick on Monday and I find out that he partied all weekend, because **that is visible on Facebook** (...) Well, that is pretty weird. But it is difficult to address this with this employee because, **officially, I don't know this.**”

(Jake, manager in a botanical garden)

- Strategies to avoid boundary turbulence and lateral surveillance
- “Sometimes, when I don't want to answer, I just leave it on ‘unread’. Or I only see it when, eh, when you switch on your phone you read it [in the start screen], so that the other person doesn't see that I've read it. Or that I hope.”

(Michael, logistics assistant in a multinational company)

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Privacy as (a lack of) control

- Information privacy (Clarke, 1997, 2006; Finn et al., 2012)
- Commercial organisations as anonymous co-owners of private data – lack of trust
- “All the information that WhatsApp and Facebook combined so far, which is already dangerous in my view, but if it falls into the wrong hands because of hacks, they can blackmail or destroy basically everyone.” (Victor, project manager Dutch government)

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Privacy as (a lack of) control

- Strategies to control privacy
- “I make a deliberate choice about which things I do or don’t share via WhatsApp or, more generally, digital communication. On all platforms I'm using online, whether it's OneDrive, my email, Twitter or Facebook, I've set-up two-step verification. Because I do not want anyone to steal my data. On the other hand, I'm an open book in everyday life.” (Erik, account manager in a software company)
- Thick boundaries and privacy rules
- “In January, my son was born, but if people say something like: Hey, I cannot find any pictures of your child on Facebook, please send me a one”. Well, I’d never do that because Facebook or Google shouldn’t be able to possess my pictures. So I’ll use Signal or iMessage or something.” (Jay, owner of multiple start-ups)

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Coping with context collapse

- Context collapse: “the flattening of multiple distinct audiences into a singular group” (Vitak et al., 2012, p. 1).
- “Especially with WhatsApp, all conversations take place in one location. This can lead to confusion between groups. This happened to me a couple of weeks ago, I send my partner a message with: ‘I’m at work’, with a heart-emoticon. But my colleagues received this because I’ve sent it to the wrong WhatsApp group. So that resulted in jokes like ‘Nice, we love you too!’” (Tom, HR manager multinational)

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Coping with context collapse

- Boundary seeking vs. boundary reluctance (Shallow et al., 2013)
- “I also send more private messages via Slack, that is, with direct colleagues I just share personal stuff. For instance, we have a group of colleagues we do sports with, and that is just a channel within our company Slack group.”
(Lara, graphic designer tech company)
- “For me Facebook is a completely personal space. And I have quite some people there from my work and I don’t like it because it’s my personal stuff and I try to keep it very separate. Like, I just don’t enjoy mixing these things too much.” (Ciara, consultant for start-ups)

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Coping with context collapse

- Presence bleed/presence creep (Walden, 2016)
- “Even if I wake up in the middle of the night, I check my emails and if there’s something going on, I will reply.” (Jay, owner of multiple start-ups)
- “Before I had the habit that the first thing I did in the morning was waking up and I used to look at my phone what had arrived during my sleep. Which is a really bad thing so now I try to do it the other way round, so that I switch everything off and then I wake up and take a shower and everything. And then in the meanwhile it needs to, because it’s Android it’s slower in connecting to the network, so it takes a bit of time, so I have time to just come back to normal before I'm starting to get overwhelmed.” (Ciara, consultant for start-ups)

Bricolage nature of work messaging

- “I use 16 different chat applications on my phone (...) Eh, let’s see.. Skype, iMessage, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Hangouts, FaceTime, Snapchat, Slack, Telegram, Firechat, Discords, Signal, what else? GoogleDuo, GoogleHallo, GoogleVoice, Basecamp.”
- Bricolage practices require improvisation (Orlikowski, 1996)
- “I noticed that I keep track of my private phone better, so I basically transferred all WhatsApp conversations with colleagues to my private phone (...) Yes, because I missed messages, and especially when it happens in the weekend. And also because I use ehm, my WhatsApp desktop messenger and their I use my private phone number. And when I’m working, I think it is more convenient to also WhatsApp via desktop messenger with my colleagues” (Lauren, process coordinator in post company)
- Cyberloafing (Shalow, 2013)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Erasmus', located in the bottom right corner of the slide.

Conclusion

- Messaging apps collapse contexts by design
- Use of messaging apps for work purposes leads to pressure
- Lateral surveillance can lead to problematic situations
- Employees need assistance in managing messaging overload

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Thank you for listening!

Mapping Privacy and Surveillance Dynamics in Emerging Mobile Ecosystems project

Anouk Mols (mols@eshcc.eur.nl)

Jason Pridmore (pridmore@eshcc.eur.nl)

Daniel Trottier (trottier@eshcc.eur.nl)

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