12-31-1998

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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF IDENTIFICATION IN THE PRIVACY DECISIONS OF WEBMASTERS

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Abstract

This paper integrates identification and ethical decision making theories to understand how webmasters form moral judgments about the privacy of users on the World Wide Web. This integration is warranted because communication is fundamental to the role of webmaster, yet ethical decision making theories fail to acknowledge communication. The integrated theory will be tested using a scenario-based survey of webmasters.

1. INTRODUCTION

The explosive growth of the World Wide Web (WWW) has resulted in the emergence of webmasters as a new class of information systems (IS) professional. Webmasters manage WWW servers, the computing resources we communicate with as we “surf the web.” Their control over these resources gives webmasters power over millions of Internet users. Therefore, as IS researchers, we should endeavor to understand this organizational role and the individuals who occupy it. The broad purpose of this research-in-progress is to investigate how webmasters think and act, specifically in relation to issues of WWW privacy.

Privacy is an IS ethics issue which has garnered increasing interest (Agranoff 1991; Culnan 1993; Culnan and Regan 1995; Johnson and Nissenbaum 1995; Mason 1986; Mason, Mason, and Culnan 1995; Milberg et al. 1995; Smith 1994; Smith, Milberg, and Burke 1996; Wang, Lee, and Wang 1998). In addition, privacy on the WWW is receiving much attention in the media and from policymakers, such as in the Federal Trade Commission’s report to Congress on online privacy (1998). Because webmasters have the potential to monitor behavior at an unprecedented level of detail, and can do so unobtrusively, they pose a potential threat to the privacy of WWW users. For example, using cookie technology allows a webmaster to track a user’s browsing habits within a given site, and in some cases from one site to another (St. Laurent 1998). Capturing data entered into search engines gives the webmaster the ability to create a detailed, comprehensive profile of an individual, which is a very valuable product to direct marketers.

Privacy is often framed as a philosophical, legal, or technical issue; however, Gotterbarn (1991) suggests it, as well as other computer ethics issues, must be framed as a professional ethics issue. This new view of privacy suggests we must focus on the individual decision maker, acting within his or her organizational role to make privacy decisions. For this reason, I argue the unit of analysis for the study of webmasters and privacy must be situated within the field of ethical decision making.

Yet, the webmaster role is different than other IS roles in a fundamental way, so our knowledge of IS professionals may not apply in this new context. I contend webmasters are boundary spanners. They are conduits through which organizational messages travel on their way to the mass audience of Internet users. In order to define these messages (by determining the content, structure, and style of an organization’s web site), the webmaster must communicate with members of the organizations. They are also the channel for communication in the opposite direction, as they receive messages from members of this mass audience when they sent comments or feedback to the “webmaster” mail account. In this boundary spanning role, the technology
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webmasters manage is less significant than the communication they manage. Any attempt to explain how webmasters think and act should take into account the communication-based nature of the role, yet theories of ethical decision making and IS research fail to acknowledge communication.

The goal of this research-in-progress is to extend ethical decision making theory with the communication-based concept of identification, which has a strong theoretical relationship with decision making. The integration of this communication theory with ethical decision making yields propositions that may better explain the thoughts and actions of webmasters. The specific research question addressed is: How does identification influence webmasters’ decisions about WWW privacy?

To explore this research question, this paper will first outline the theoretical foundation of this study by reviewing identification and ethical decision making, explaining how the two concepts are logically related, and concluding with a proposition framed in the context of webmasters and privacy. Next, it will describe the methodology used, as well as the current progress. The final section will outline the presentation of this research.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Identification

The communication concept of identification is often defined as a perception of one’s relationship with a specific collective or group, deemed the identification target (Conrad 1994; Scott 1997). Communication both produces and reproduces the feeling of identification with a specific identification target (Cheney and Tompkins 1987). Through communication, the individual and the identification target begin to understand each other’s values, goals, and interests, as well as the degree to which they are similar (Cheney 1983). From this, individuals develop feelings of similarity, belonging, and membership with the identification target (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Bullis 1991). In addition, individuals may begin to accept the values and goals of the identification target as their own (Schneider, Hall, and Nygren 1971), similar to how an individual adopts the shared values of an organizational culture.

Because identification results in individual values and goals similar to those of the identification target, identification is considered an integral part of the decision making process (Simon 1976). Identification has been defined in relation to decision making, as Tompkins and Cheney (1983) explain: “A person identifies with a unit when, in making a decision, the person in one or more of his or her organizational roles perceives that unit’s values or interests as relevant in evaluating the alternatives of choice” (p. 144). Identification provides individuals with the cognitive tools needed to make decisions that will be most favorable to the identification target. While recent communication research has illustrated the link between identification and decision making (Barker 1993; Levinthal and Fichman 1988; Tompkins and Cheney 1985), as well as the benefits of identification for organizations (Sass and Canary 1991), theories of ethical decision making have yet to examine the role of identification.

2.2 Ethical Decision Making

Ethical decision making theories focusing on the relationship between the decision maker and other individuals or groups use social learning, impression management, peer pressure, and teleologism to explain this relationship. Social learning suggests we learn what is appropriate and inappropriate by observing significant others (Ferrell, Gresham, and Fraedrich 1989; Stead, Worrell, and Stead 1990; Trevino 1986). These others earn the status of “significant” by interacting with the decision maker (Ferrell and Gresham 1985; Ferrell, Gresham, and Fraedrich 1989), or by earning high regard from the decision maker (Stead, Worrell, and Stead 1990; Trevino 1986). Impression management examines how decision makers try to position themselves favorably in the eyes of supervisors or significant others (Knouse and Giacalone 1992; Payne and Giacalone 1990). Ethical or unethical behavior may also be the result of peer pressure, or conformance to the expectations and demands of other individuals (Bommer et al. 1987) or organizations (Hosseini and Brenner 1992; Stead, Worrell, and Stead 1990). Hunt and Vitell’s (1986) descriptive theory includes four factors in the teleological evaluation of an action, one of which is the importance of the different stakeholder groups. This implies decision makers do not consider victims or beneficiaries of their actions equally, they do not
count “each person as one and no person as more than one” (Cornman, Lehrer, and Pappas 1987, p. 290), as the teleological theory of utilitarianism claims they should.

While these four theories are consistent with the concept of identification, they do not explicitly recognize its role in the process. Identification is a logical extension that considers the mechanisms through which social learning, impression management, peer pressure, and utilitarianism operate. Identification offers theoretical and empirical support for the claim that decision makers consider how their actions will affect different stakeholder groups, and that they favor the interests of some groups over others when making decisions. Integrating the concept of identification with ethical decision making can thus offer an important extension to ethical decision making theory.

2.3 Integration of Identification and Ethical Decision Making

The preceding theoretical discussion frames identification as an independent variable in an integrated theory of ethical decision making. While multiple identification targets for webmasters are possible, this study considers only one: users of the WWW. This target is most relevant because, as discussed earlier, webmasters are the channels through which WWW users and organizations communicate. In this role, webmasters communicate extensively with members of this group. Furthermore, this target is most directly linked to the decisions webmasters make about privacy.

The dependent variable examined in this study is moral judgment, which is generally agreed to mean a “determination of what behavior is right or wrong” (Harrington 1997, p. 365), or “a considered opinion of what should be done…when confronted with an ethical dilemma” (Morris and McDonald 1995, p. 715). Moral judgment is a key component in several models and empirical studies of ethical decision making (Ferrell, Gresham, and Fraedrich 1989; Harrington 1996; Hunt and Vitell 1986; Jones 1991; Reidenbach and Robin 1990; Rest 1986; Robin, Reidenbach, and Forrest 1996; Trevino 1986; Zey-Ferrell and Ferrell 1982). In Rest’s (1986) model of moral reasoning, a moral judgment by an individual must precede the development of moral intent, which in turn precedes moral behavior. Its central role in the ethical decision making process makes moral judgment a relevant and important construct to predict.

The proposition to be explored in the study suggests identification with users is related to moral judgments about behaviors affecting the privacy of users.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sample and Protocol

Webmasters are the target population, but no comprehensive list of webmasters exists from which to draw a sample. Therefore, the sampling frame will be defined as organizations with WWW sites, based on the fact that each of these WWW sites is managed by a webmaster. The scope for this study will be limited to organizations in the health care industry (planned research will expand the scope to other sectors, such as retail and financial services). A recent Federal Trade Commission (1998) study of online privacy used a systematic sample of 137 health care WWW sites from the Dun & Bradstreet Electronic Commerce Registry. This sample will be used in the current study.

The webmasters of these 137 sites will be contacted using electronic mail and invited to participate in the study. A follow-up e-mail message will be sent to the non-respondents after 10 days, with a final follow-up after another 10 days. Given the historically low response rates from surveys of IS professionals, a response rate of 50% is the target. Non-response bias will be assessed by comparing early and late respondents, and by comparing the demographic data from the respondents with that listed in other available sources, such as Young (1995) and the WWW trade press.
3.2 Design

This study will use a cross-sectional survey based on WWW privacy scenarios. The scenarios will be based on the Fair Information Practices, which are summarized in the Federal Trade Commission study. Culnan (1998) describes the Fair Information Practices as:

procedures that provide individuals with control over the disclosure and subsequent use of their personal information. They are global standards for the ethical use of personal information and are at the heart of U.S. privacy laws, the privacy directive adopted by the European Union in July 1995, and the Clinton Administration’s June 1995 guidelines for personal information use by all National Information Infrastructure participants.

Each of the five dimensions of the Fair Information Practices will be developed into a scenario in the study. These dimensions include notification, choice, access, security, and integrity. Respondents will be asked to read each scenario and then respond to items based on the scenario.

3.3 Measures

Identification will be measured by modifying the organizational identification questionnaire (OIQ) (Cheney 1982; Tompkins and Cheney 1983), particularly the version adapted by Scott (1997) that recognizes multiple simultaneous identification targets. Items included in this scale are “I am very concerned about the success of my organization” and “I don’t feel much loyalty to my organization.” Scott’s modified OIQ had reliability scores from .707 to .857 for the four identification targets. Rubin, Palmgreen, and Sypher (1994) review the OIQ and provide additional evidence of its reliability and validity. Each item on the OIQ is measured on a 7-point Likert scale.

Moral judgment will be measured using the multidimensional ethics scale (MES) developed by Reidenbach and Robin (1988; 1990). The scale includes eight semantic differential items that capture three dimensions of moral reasoning. Examples include “fair/unfair,” “just/unjust,” and “morally right/not morally right.” Reidenbach and Robin have studied marketing and accounting issues with this instrument, and it has had consistently high reliabilities ranging from .71 to .92 (Reidenbach and Robin 1990), and .75 to .92 (Flory et al. 1992). Factor loadings of the eight items have been high and generally consistent across these studies. Reidenbach and Robin (Flory et al. 1992; Reidenbach and Robin 1990; Reidenbach, Robin, and Dawson 1991) additionally argue that the scale is valid because it is highly correlated with a univariate measure of moral judgment, and because it predicts behavioral intention better than this univariate measure. The MES has come under close scrutiny and criticism (Hansen 1992; Jones and Ponemon 1993; Skipper and Hyman 1993), and its authors have offered reasonable arguments in defense of the MES on each occasion (Flory et al. 1993; Reidenbach and Robin 1993, 1995).

3.4 Analysis

The relationship between identification and moral judgments about privacy will be explored using multiple regression procedures. The structure of the OIQ and MES will be confirmed using factor analysis procedures; the reliability of the scales will be confirmed using Cronbach’s alpha.

3.5 Current Status

The survey instrument will be complete by mid-September, and data collection will be complete by mid-October. This will allow at least two months for the preliminary data analysis in preparation for the Conference.
4. PRESENTATION AT THE CONFERENCE

The research outlined here will likely still be “in progress” when the Conference convenes. However, the data collection will be complete, making it possible to answer several questions stemming from this research: (1) Why should identification be a factor in the ethical decision making process of webmasters? (2) How do webmasters think about the issue of privacy? (3) With whom do webmasters identify? (4) What is the relationship between identification and ethical decision making in the WWW privacy context? These questions and their answers should elicit an interesting discussion among the session’s participants.

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