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### Privacy and Utility

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## PRIVACY AND UTILITY: IM USE IN A CHINESE PROFESSIONAL SERVICES FIRM

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### **Introduction**

Social media applications, such as instant messengers (IM), are no longer restricted to the social world. Instead, they are seeing use in regular work contexts (Handel and Herbsleb, 2002; Ou and Davison, 2010) as a communication tool that provides great utility by virtue of the immediacy and interactivity of the communication that it engenders. However, such ubiquitous use in the workplace raises privacy concerns, because these social media applications can only flourish in the presence of detailed, yet private, contact information about individual people. Where data privacy laws exist, for instance in the EU, Hong Kong and Australia, domestic (i.e. purely social) data is often excluded from legislative oversight; however, work-related data is most definitely not excluded. In other jurisdictions, e.g. China, a variety of laws may be drawn on to protect personal privacy. When social media applications are used in the workplace, they are therefore well within the purview of data privacy legislation. In this position paper, we focus on the privacy-utility dichotomy associated with IM use in two Chinese professional services firms. Following a brief introduction to the technology and research context, we describe the utility of current technology use and how privacy issues are conceived by employees and management. This will lead us to a discussion of both the practical and the research related issues.

### **Technology Background**

Traditionally, the IM has been viewed primarily as a social communication tool. Instant messaging is characterized by the immediate receipt of messages, enabling effective and efficient communication between interlocutors. Although social networking tools are arousing the interest of organizations, IM use in the workplace remains controversial, with significant concerns raised about the extent to which the technology interrupts work and so decreases productivity (Isaacs et al., 2002; Nardi et al., 2000), though a recent study (Garrett and Danziger, 2007) suggests that IM users are no more interrupted than non-users.

We argue that IM, as a popular communication tool increasingly widely used outside the workplace, is particularly valuable because it can facilitate near-transparent communication among interaction partners. This characteristic is as true in social settings as it is at work. Further, the design of IM tools addresses an inherent deficiency of other communication tools: the limited opportunities for employees to indicate both their online status and their willingness to communicate with, each other, thereby developing mutual trust and social networks. By appropriately leveraging IM tools, so interlocutors can span communication gaps and potentially enhance the quality of their shared work.

### **Research Context**

Over the last four years, we have been studying IM use in two Chinese professional services firms (Von Nordenflycht, 2010), each of which has major offices in Beijing and Shanghai. The two firms (Eastwei - [www.eastwei.com](http://www.eastwei.com) and RuderFinn - [www.ruderfinnasia.com](http://www.ruderfinnasia.com)) are both in the public relations (PR) business. Each firm employs 100-200 'consultants' and their clients are typically large multinational corporations with a need to maintain ongoing PR efforts in China. PR consultants need to interact with journalists to make arrangements for the writing of stories covering client product and press releases; follow-up on the reception of

recent product and press releases; update their knowledge continuously about the professional needs and expectations of journalists – and vicariously of the reading public; and build and maintain strong business connections.

### **IM Tools and PR Work**

The focus of our research has been the knowledge sharing that all consultants engage in and the role that informal IT applications, such as social media in general and IM in particular, play in enhancing the communicative effectiveness and efficiency of PR work practices. Theoretically, our work has been premised on the work of Barnes' social network theory (1954), as well as Wegner's (1987) transactive memory theory.

IM tools are deeply embedded into work practices in Eastwei and RuderFinn. The IM is the communication tool of choice for almost all consultants from the CEO downwards. MSN and QQ<sup>1</sup> are the two tools most frequently encountered, with an individual consultant maintaining as many as 20 parallel and simultaneous 'chats' with a variety of interlocutors. These IM-based communications leverage interactions between consultants and their colleagues in the same office, their colleagues in remote offices, and non-colleagues such as friends, former colleagues and work-related external contacts. Each consultant maintains a personal directory of contacts that may number in the hundreds – clearly far more people than actually work for either of the two firms. This directory is generally structured so as to enable quick identification of contacts with such categories as: subject experts in specific areas (including colleagues and non-colleagues), journalists, media workers, publishers, editors, event organisers/coordinators, professional business writers, etc. – quite apart from any friends or family members. From a simple text analysis of IM content (obtained with permission from one frequent IM user), we estimate that 80% of IM use is work-related.

### **IM and Privacy**

We interviewed a large number of IM users (i.e. consultants) at Eastwei and Ruder Finn in the context of our investigations into knowledge sharing practices. A key area of research interest has been the way IM tools are used. As we explored this area, we recognised that each consultant takes the privacy aspects of the personal data (i.e. contact information) very seriously. Most consultants consider their contact lists to be personal resources that should not be shared indiscriminately with others. Such an approach to contact management corresponds to the theoretical notion of 'loss of knowledge power' (Kankanhalli et al., 2005), i.e. the idea that one's personal power and value to the employer is explicitly associated with the knowledge that one exclusively possesses.

Nevertheless, consultants do share information with selected others on a regular basis, as well as with colleagues and contacts beyond the boundary of the firm. This information may include personal details of individual people on occasion (e.g. IM names, phone numbers, addresses, email addresses, etc.). However, in general consultants are protective of their contacts and networks. The suggestion (from a senior manager) that all contacts should be collated centrally in an organisationally managed repository would not be appreciated! From a privacy perspective, this rejection of a centrally-organised contact management system may seem to be good news, since private data is generally well protected – at least through informal mechanisms. However, the motivation to protect the data is not compliance with any legal mandate (legal protection for individual privacy in China is in any case not very strong) but rather the purely selfish need to protect one's own assets – and contact information is seen as such an asset.

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<sup>1</sup> MSN is the commonly used abbreviation for Microsoft's Net Messenger and Windows Live Messenger IM tools. QQ is also an IM tool developed by Tencent, a Chinese technology company.

## **Discussion**

In China, social networks such as those described above are synonymous with *guanxi*: “the existence of direct particularistic ties between two or more individuals” (Tsui and Farh, 1997). Key to *guanxi* are the personal and interpersonal relationships based on social networks, favour, reciprocity and long-term benefit (Xin and Pearce, 1996). *Guanxi* is recognised as playing a crucial role in Chinese business management generally (Fu et al., 2006; Xin and Pearce, 1996) and in information systems in particular (Martinsons, 2008; Shin et al., 2007). *Guanxi* is a fundamental element in interpersonal interaction: people who share information also seek to develop *guanxi* with each other, in a mutually collaborative support system (Ou et al., 2010).

In the work context, people who share strong *guanxi* are often referred to as belonging to an ‘in-group’ (Chow et al., 2000). In-groups are an important phenomenon for the purpose of the current paper because in-group members often do share information readily. A request for help from one in-group member to another is most unlikely to be ignored – and so will precipitate the transfer of information. Levels of trust between in-group members tend to be high. This enables in-group members to enact what can be characterised as collaborative privacy practices as they manage their shared information assets. However, even as in-group members share assets with one another, so they also maintain some exclusivity of those assets: individual asset items may be transferred, but the entire contact directory is not transferred. Also, one individual person may belong to a (large) number of in-groups, complicating the picture further. Thus, when in-group member A asks member B for information, if B does not know, s/he may ask a member of a different in-group (to which B belongs but A does not), who may in turn ask a still more remote person. When A finally gets the answer, it can be very hard to know the original source of the information – and if this information involves personal private data, then the person so described will have very little idea that his/her data has been shared in this way.

## **Further Reflections**

In the above paragraphs, we have described the important role played by IM tools in interpersonal communication in Chinese firms, as well as the way in which potentially private data is both shared and protected. From our observations, protection of data occurs primarily out of self-interest – a desire to protect the exclusivity of information assets – and has little to do with any appreciation of the right of a data subject to privacy. In the absence of both legislation to enforce such privacy rights and an ethical climate that would support the non-economic value of private information, it is hard to see how the situation will change. Indeed, the PR industry is premised on *public* communications. If PR consultants were not free to share and use certain types of private data concerning the people with whom they work, one could argue that they could not perform their work at all effectively.

Social media are valuable because of their openness and immediacy. They enable remote individuals to interact in as near a lifelike manner as is possible with technology. Nevertheless, the dark side of social media, which includes the violation of individual privacy, is a legitimate cause for concern. Indeed, we have seen that social media such as IM are routinely used to share confidential or proprietary information owned by the employer or other data subjects. Given the ubiquity of the technology and its prevalence in business life, the development and enforcement of privacy laws appears to be indispensable. Nowhere is this a more pressing challenge than in China, which has become a major player in the global knowledge economy and a leading provider of outsourcing services.

However, legal solutions alone will not suffice. They need to be accompanied by programmes of ethical development that raise awareness of the potential for serious negative

consequences that can ensue when privacy is not protected. Corporate initiatives are more likely to succeed here, with action-oriented research driving organisational change.

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