

Analysis of the Ethical Lapses in Journalism When Using Chat Records for Reporting

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Abstract: In the current era, news stories that utilize private chat records from social media as source material have attracted a substantial audience. However, there has been public debate regarding whether this practice breaches individual privacy management primarily and crosses the boundaries of journalistic ethics. This paper investigates the phenomenon of using private chat records from social media as news material, and its impact on personal privacy management and the boundaries of journalistic ethics. Specifically, the study focuses on how this practice disrupts the privacy management of chat record subjects, particularly in terms of boundary linkage, boundary permeability, and boundary ownership, thereby leading to issues of journalistic ethical lapses. The aim of the research is to propose methods for regulating journalistic practices and promoting the establishment of a "right to be forgotten" for social media users, in order to standardize journalistic boundaries, achieve boundary coordination, and reshape journalistic ethics. The main methodology of this paper is case analysis, complemented by literature review. The article employs Communication Privacy Management Theory as its theoretical framework and analyzes relevant journalistic cases. This paper finds that by standardizing the way journalists use news materials and promoting the establishment of the "Right to be Forgotten" for social media users, it is possible to regulate their news boundaries, achieve boundary coordination, and reshape their journalistic ethics.

Keywords: Communication Privacy Management Theory, News Boundaries, Journalistic Ethics, Privacy Management

1. Introduction

With the growth of social media platforms and the widespread adoption of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant portion of interpersonal communication activities in people's lives and work has shifted online. Concurrently, due to the easy storage, dissemination, and infinite replicability of social media, coupled with the convenience of screenshot technology, people's utterances in interpersonal communications are easily recorded and spread through chat record screenshots, screen recordings, etc. Among these, numerous private chat records' screenshots or recordings have become journalistic materials. Chat records involve personal privacy, hence whether such messages should be disclosed to the public has become a contentious point in news reporting. This situation has sparked a societal debate on whether using chat records as news material leads to a lapse in professional ethics and further questions how chat records should be reported. In response

to this, the present paper intends to use Communication Privacy Management Theory as the theoretical framework to discuss the boundary turbulence caused by the loss of control over privacy management and how to re-coordinate privacy boundaries, thereby providing ethical and moral guidelines for journalists in the process of news reporting.

2. The Loss of Control in Privacy Management

Sandra Petronio, in her book Communication Privacy Management Theory, focuses on the dialectical relationship between personal privacy and privacy disclosure. Petronio posits that the core of privacy management lies in coordinating privacy boundaries. She further proposes three rules for managing privacy boundaries: controlling boundary linkage, mastering boundary permeability, and clarifying boundary ownership. These correspond to the questions of "to whom," "what to say," and "how to control," respectively [1]. However, in the context of news reporting, the prevalent use of chat records as news material pushes these three rules towards a state of loss of control.

2.1. Boundary Linkage Breach

Private chats on social media are a form of interpersonal communication. However, when these private conversations are captured through screenshots or recordings and disseminated as news, the screenshot images, as records of the chat, transform into tools of mass communication. Thus, what was originally interpersonal communication on social media became public communication. For instance, when an ordinary person speaks in a private group chat or one-on-one conversation, their expected audience might only be one or a few hundred people within that circle. However, when their chat is turned into a news item, the potential audience theoretically becomes limitless, and the speaker's control over boundary linkage is completely lost.

Statements made in a private setting, usually among acquaintances, often carry subjectivity and casualness and may be biased, even if not intentionally so. But when utterances generated in specific contexts are placed in the public media, the speaker's words are assumed to be public information, and the speaker is perceived as a public figure who must be accountable for their statements. For example, in November 2022, a person revealed to their brother in a private WeChat conversation that their childhood friend, who worked in a hospital, observed cases of white lung, indicating a novel infectious virus. This private chat screenshot was then used as news material and widely circulated on various media platforms, causing panic. Subsequently, after verification, this message was found to be a rumor, and the media then released news to debunk it. In the comments section of the news, many accused the speaker of maliciously spreading rumors, and some even resorted to cyberbullying and verbal abuse against the speaker.

In everyday interpersonal interactions, speech is primarily accountable to close relational networks, and the purpose of communication is often to convey emotions rather than just information. Therefore, speakers apply a more lenient ethical standard when evaluating their own utterances. However, when boundary linkage is breached, and one's private speech becomes subject to public judgment as news, the public tends to assess the speaker and their statements in the chat records against the ethical standards of public discourse. The demands for authenticity and moral standards are significantly heightened, and speakers often face unreasonable criticism for their subjective remarks. Yet, the media, as the disseminators of these private utterances, rarely face such scrutiny.

In the aforementioned example, the speaker's intended audience was their brother, and there wasn't much concern for careful wording. When mentioning the "white lung" phenomenon, the primary subjective intent was to caution their brother for better self-protection. However, when the public views this chat record in the news, they focus more on the objective information conveyed by the speaker, namely the occurrence of "white lung," and assume that this message is intended for the

public. Consequently, when this information is revealed to be false, the public feels deceived and labels the speaker as a rumor-monger, subjecting them to harsh criticism, while overlooking the role of the media that turned the "rumor" into news and disseminated it. In contrast, when questioned, the media that verify the truth and subsequently publish debunking news often receive positive feedback.

2.2. Boundary Permeability's Reverse Extension

"Boundary permeability" refers to the ability of the privacy owner to decide the extent to which the boundaries of their privacy should be open or closed, that is, to what extent they reveal their personal information to the outside world [1]. In the age of big data, once the privacy boundary is breached, the owner of the privacy content completely loses control over the management of their private information. When chat records appear on the internet, the identity of the chat record subject inevitably attracts public attention. With even the slightest hint of identity information, the identity of the speaker in the chat records can be easily exposed. Furthermore, their family members, addresses of study and work, and other private information may also be revealed to the public. Conversely, when the strong relational network around the speaker of the chat record sees such news, they can identify the speaker through profile pictures, WeChat names, and other information. However, when one's privacy is suddenly exposed to the public, and laid bare for scrutiny, the person whose privacy is violated faces immense psychological pressure. Additionally, their close relational network also undergoes significant turmoil. Even if the speaker's identity is not revealed, they are acutely aware that they are the subject of public scrutiny, bearing the pressure of judgment, and the worry and fear of their identity being revealed.

In May 2022, the dean of a certain college at Zhengzhou University of Light Industry mistakenly sent an inappropriate message to a work group chat. Unable to retract it in time, it was screenshot and spread on the internet, sparking public discussion. As the controversy continued to ferment on Weibo, generating over 180 million views, the name, photo, and workplace of the speaker of the inappropriate message in the screenshot were dug up and criticized on social media. The university later suspended the dean for investigation. This case shows that the incident severely affected the real life of the individual under investigation.

2.3. Collapse of Boundary Ownership

"Boundary ownership" addresses the issue of who has the right to use private data. Social networks have expanded the ownership of privacy boundaries, leading to the question of "where the boundary lies" [2]. Information and news inherently possess a 'seen equals owned' characteristic. Once the public sees a chat record, stores it on their phone, or simply forms a memory of it, they possess that piece of information and can choose to continue passing it on or keeping it. Although the original owner of the information remains its sole owner, how people who are aware of this information manage it varies from person to person.

Therefore, when journalists expose chat records on the internet, these records shift from personal privacy to public information and gossip. Both the exposed individuals and the transmitters in the information chain lose control over the dissemination of the message, and they cannot control whether the messengers add or distort information to the original event. Hence, for chat content that does not involve illegal crimes or harmful social behavior, should not be reported without the permission of the information's original owner. Such actions severely infringe upon individual privacy rights and break the moral and ethical baseline.

On October 12, 2020, a WeChat public account article titled "I Infiltrated the Shanghai Ladies' Circle: Half a Month as an Observer" caused a stir on various media platforms and was widely shared. The author infiltrated a WeChat group chat named "Shanghai Ladies' Circle" to gather news material.

Later, by exposing screenshots of the chat, the author revealed the group's girls renting luxury goods for photoshoots through group purchases and added false information in the article to stigmatize women and attack such groups.

This act of the author violated the information ownership rights of the group chat members, using the information to satisfy public voyeurism and add dramatic hype. The approach of exposing chat records carries a revealing implication, which is completely unnecessary to be applied to ordinary people. The so-called "ladies" group purchase behavior did not cause substantial harm to society, so there was no necessity for exposure. Moreover, unlike public figures, ordinary people are not required to surrender any privacy rights and should not be subjected to public judgment.

3. The Causes of the Loss of Control in Privacy Management and the Means to Reshape Its Journalistic Ethics

3.1. Boundary Linkage

The chat features on social media platforms, characterized by their ease of storage, dissemination, and infinite replicability, render the privacy boundaries of such chats extremely fragile and easily beyond the control of the information subject, thereby diminishing the public's awareness of privacy concerning others' chat records. For instance, chats on the WeChat platform are mostly text-based, requiring almost no memory storage and are easily retained, leading users not to delete chat records deliberately. Moreover, WeChat provides users with the option to merge and forward chat records, enabling the easy transfer of chats from group chats and private conversations to another group or individual chat. Coupled with the convenience of screenshot technology, chat records on the WeChat platform can be re-recorded as images and infinitely copied and disseminated across platforms. In the process of forwarding, chat records flow from the sender's close relational network to a weaker network and, once edited into news and published on media platforms, become public information in mass communication, available for public discussion and judgment.

Due to the reasons mentioned above, boundaries on social platforms are particularly fragile and prone to distortion; therefore, it is crucial to grasp the ethical boundaries of reporting chat records in journalism. News reports should clearly inform readers of the limitations of these contents and verify or supplement information from social media through interviews via other channels [3]. Journalists need to be responsible for the authenticity of the news, rather than shifting this responsibility onto the subject of the chat records. Hence, it is necessary for journalists to remind readers that the information conveyed in chat records is based on the speaker's personal level of understanding and that their statements are not accountable to the public. Additionally, journalists should exercise their professional skills to verify the news from multiple sources to restore the original context of the event as much as possible.

Journalists should not edit or selectively report chat records and need to explain the context of the conversation to readers. Chat records are records of moments in time and space; once removed from their context and the background of the conversation at the time, the conveyed meaning can change completely. News based on such material can become contrived, straying from the realm of journalistic activity.

3.2. Boundary Permeability

The anonymity on social media platforms divides internet users into two distinct identities: their online and real-life identities. A significant reason for the existence of anonymous online identities is to conceal real-life identities, making real-life identity information a scarce resource on internet media. This scarcity significantly heightens the public's curiosity about others' real identities. Moreover, due to the anonymity of the online world, when audiences see chat records in the news, the persuasive

effect of statements made by unknown individuals is not as significant as that of known individuals. Therefore, even though journalists may not actively reveal the speaker's real information, there will always be someone in the broad audience who delves deep into the personal information of the speaker in the chat records to "verify" the authenticity of the news. Additionally, the rapid development of "human flesh search" technology has reduced the technical and time costs of digging up personal information, further exacerbating this phenomenon.

Due to the above reasons, once the speakers in chat records become part of the news, their privacy boundaries are completely broken, and boundary permeability irreversibly extends indefinitely. Therefore, it is even more crucial to clarify the ethical boundaries of privacy protection in reporting.

When editing news, it is necessary to desensitize the information of the speakers in the chat records, while de-emphasizing individuals and focusing on the event. Sacrificing privacy to satisfy the public's curiosity does not align with positive value orientations and ethical standards. Hence, when reporting news about "ordinary people," journalists should focus on narrating the event, minimizing the inclusion of personal information to avoid unnecessary disturbances to these individuals. Journalists can replace screenshots of chat records with textual descriptions to reduce the exposure of sensitive information.

3.3. Boundary Ownership

In today's information-saturated society, individual privacy seems insignificant amid the torrent of public opinion. News publishers who use such content as news material are not condemned or punished; instead, they often gain significant readership and traffic by satisfying the public's demand for entertainment. In this context, such news becomes more prevalent. Moreover, when personal chat records are discussed online, the absence of privacy owners leads the public to unconsciously overlook issues of privacy infringement, rarely realizing that such news involves privacy violations.

Due to these reasons, the chaotic loss of control over boundary ownership can lead to the loss of privacy rights and even damage to reputation. Therefore, it is essential to clarify the limits of boundary ownership.

One way to address this issue is to promote the establishment of the "right to be forgotten." The definition of this right is: "The data subject has the right to ensure that their personal information is not illegally collected and processed, and enjoys the right to actively delete it." [4]. Data subjects need to have full control over their information and retain the right to retract and delete it even after it is published as news. To promote this ideal state, we need to strengthen news review and limit the transformation of private content into public information. At the same time, it is necessary to regulate users' behavior in forwarding others' private information to avoid further privacy leakage.

A survey covering public relations professionals in the United States and Canada revealed that more than half of the respondents faced ethical challenges in the past year, with nearly one-third reporting repeated encounters with such issues during the same period [5]. This finding highlights the prevalence of ethical dilemmas faced by the public relations sector. As journalists who directly serve the public interest and stand on the frontline of public communication, there is a heightened need for the cultivation of journalistic ethics and moral values. This can be achieved through targeted training to enhance awareness of privacy protection. By setting clear industry standards, leveraging case studies, and engaging in practical discussions to deepen the understanding of ethical decision-making, the establishment of industry norms can be promoted. Ensuring reporting respects individual privacy while encouraging self-regulation mechanisms, strengthening journalistic review to avoid privacy infringement. Adopting these measures not only enhances the quality of news reporting but also maintains public trust, fostering the sustainable and healthy development of the journalism industry.

4. Conclusion

This paper primarily explores the phenomenon of using private chat records from social media as news material and how this practice impacts personal privacy management and journalistic ethics. In summary, using chat records as news material leads to a complete loss of control over boundary linkage, boundary permeability, and boundary ownership in personal privacy management, thereby confronting the challenge of lapses in journalistic ethics. Through an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon, we can understand how to repair the boundaries of news reporting. Furthermore, by standardizing journalists' news gathering and writing behaviors and protecting the rights of data subjects, we can reconstruct ethical standards in journalistic practice, thereby safeguarding individual privacy. Due to objective constraints, this paper mainly relies on theoretical analysis and existing cases, without delving into empirical research methods, such as surveys or in-depth interviews, to collect more specific data and audience feedback. Future research could explore differences in personal privacy perceptions and journalistic ethics across different cultural backgrounds and examine the varied reactions and approaches to this phenomenon in different social and cultural environments.

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