

# Privacy Controls and Disclosure Behavior: A Natural Experiment on Facebook

*Emergent Research Forum papers*

**Huseyin Cavusoglu**

The University of Texas at Dallas  
huseyin@utdallas.edu

**Tuan Q. Phan**

National University of Singapore  
tphan@comp.nus.edu.sg

**Hasan Cavusoglu**

The University of British Columbia  
cavusoglu@sauder.ubc.ca

**Edoardo Airoidi**

Harvard University  
airoidi@fas.harvard.edu

## Abstract

In this study, we examine the relationship between privacy controls and content-sharing activities and the resulting disclosure patterns of users in the context of Facebook. Our study is based on the exogenous policy change in the platform in December 2009 that introduced more granular privacy controls. Our results show that Facebook users, on average, started sharing more content *publicly* and less content *privately* after the policy change. Specifically, in response to the change, the average user increased the use of wall posts and decreased the use of private messages. Furthermore, the sharing patterns of users have changed to reflect the *increased openness* (or *decreased secrecy*) in disclosure. These behavioral changes not only occurred immediately but also lasted over time. Overall, giving users more control over the reach of wall posts has resulted in more open disclosure of peer-produced content.

## Keywords

Online social networks, privacy, privacy controls, content sharing and disclosure, natural experiment