

ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS AND WORKPLACES: NEW AND OLD CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Abstract text, In recent years the growth in the use of new technologies, especially the internet, has given birth to new problems that deserve to be evaluated. The use of technologies of Web 2.0 poses new challenges as to the powers of employers in using the information disclosed by the employees. The new web phase in which we live today offered an active role to the user, removing him from the shade of a passive position. This mutation of borders created new interaction paradigms insofar as the notion of time and space was altered, which could lead to serious consequences as far as the utilization of online social networks is concerned as well as its impact on the employment relationship. The boundary between what may or may not be published by the employee on online social networks like facebook, twitter or blogs is not always clear. But, the employee's privacy concerning information available in online social networks which can be used by the employer within the employment relationship, also deserves protection. In this article, we intend to analyze the characterization of online social network on the web 2.0 in order to better understand, at a second stage, the effects of its use in the working relationship.

Keywords: Online Social Networks, Web 2.0, employer power, privacy

Introduction

The study of human relations in workplace is a continuous challenge that could benefit from the new technologies of communication. In fact, internet has become a fundamental support of contemporary culture, causing changes in the economy, society, culture and in the way human beings relate to each other. It is beyond doubt that, in the last decade, our society has been strongly influenced by the internet with all the ensuing consequences for man and society. And, invariably, this has results in one of the most

important dimensions of human life, ie, working life. Indeed, the entire context in which the person-employee moves has been undergoing progressive changes related to the use of new information and communication technologies in the workplace. In the context of this new reality, we are faced with problems as to the processing of data belonging to the employee's private life and that, by integrating the sphere of privacy, should somehow be the subject of protection.

The new frontiers of Web 2.0

The present problems grew alongside with the growth of the Web 2.0 applications. We are talking about the second generation of the World Wide Web, where there is an area for collaboration, interaction and information sharing. The simplicity of publication and the quick storage of information in online social networks, enabling each individual to create a space where each person filters and controls the information, are seen as the strong points of the Web 2.0.

The idea is that the user no longer has a passive attitude towards information but has also become its producer underlies the new paradigm. The term Web 2.0 is, in fact, used to describe the progress on the Internet where the user produces, manages, organizes and publishes information. The web 2.0 applications, which allow the user to post and exchange information online include blogs, wikis, RSS, podcastings and online social networks (Grabner-Kräuter 2009, 505). With the aforementioned applications it is possible to customize the contents that each user publishes enabling the information considered to be relevant, to be filtered on each personal page.

“The essential difference between Web 2.0 and the traditional Web is that the content is user-generated, and there is considerably more collaboration amongst Internet users. The most interesting Web 2.0 application in recent years in the emergence of online social networks or virtual communities which have opened up possibilities for rich, online human-to-human interaction unprecedented in the history of Internet communication.” (Grabner-Kräuter 2009, 505-506)

As it is mentioned by Fumero (Fumero and Roca 2007, 13), Web 2.0 is characterized for being the web of people as opposed to the web of data, in which the social and the technological interact, producing changes on one another. Indeed, the use of these new technologies of web 2.0 has sparked three major changes: on one hand the critical capacity of users, who now have new tools to communicate with the world, was enhanced; on the other hand the facility in the publishing of information led to the creation of communities around common interests, which in turn led to the strengthening of interpersonal relationships of a community; ultimately, the

validation of content is more reliable, due to the greater number of individuals involved in the production of information (Simão 2006, 14-15).

The user's initiative in disclosing information

As we have seen, nowadays user is not limited to adopting a passive attitude of consulting information but he is its producer, building its contents. Thus, the words of McLuhan, 1967, are extremely up to date “we shape our tools and they in turn shape us” (McLuhan 1967, 294), stressing that man cannot be limited to a passive attitude but must build and share knowledge.

But in fact, nowadays, the stronghold of privacy is an increasingly expanded concept, given the amount of information available online pertaining to the private life of each individual. The most curious thing to note is that much of the information made available on online social networks was placed by the user who thereby gives his/her consent to the disclosure of personal data. Moreover, as Grabner-Kräuter wrote the common profile of the online social network user discloses information about address, pet name, surname, which school is he/she attending and other details of family life that are often fundamental data to, for example, retrieve a password (Grabner-Kräuter 2009, 505). In fact, that is “the kind of information used for security or ‘lost password’ questions for online banking and other confidential services” (Grabner-Kräuter 2009, 505).

To that extent, when it is the user who voluntarily enters the information, updates the data, creates profiles and interest groups, various issues have risen as to the access and use of the aforementioned information.

The problem in question gains an even greater relevance if we think that the user / employee is extremely exposed when allowing "friends of friends ..." to have access to personal information available on online social networks when a study shows that as far as the average user is concerned, 55% of the friends are colleagues, 16% hierarchical superiors, 13% clients, 11% suppliers and 5% others (Ray 2011, 128).

Personal information available on online social networks in the employment context

Online social networks have placed new challenges in the context of employment relationships that go beyond productivity problems due to improper use of these tools during working hours. The new problems include, for instance, negative comments about the employer or colleagues or questions on the use that the employer can make of such data.

Registration in online social networks is often associated with reference to the company or institution where one works. This information although seemingly harmless, could have serious consequences on the employment relationship. In outlining that relationship between a person and

a given company, voluntarily or not, a bond between the image of the organization and the contents disclosed by the employee is created. On other occasions, the publication of images or comments regarding the individual's private life can not only affect the corporate image which the employer intends to protect but also the employment relationship.

Another relevant aspect in this context concerns the publication of information relating to internal and confidential matters of the company that may lead to causing damage and sever the trust established in the employment contract.

It appears then to be clear that the use of online social networks by employees is a source of conflict. However, nowadays, we cannot limit this question to the misuse that the employee can make of this tool once the employer may, as well, misuse the contents available therein.

This latter hypothesis concerns cases where, in the recruitment process, the employer decides to investigate the candidate's profile on online social networks. Thus, though, for example, facebook or twitter he can have access to very personal information that is in no way related to the skills required for the job but may have a lot of weight at the time of the selection process.

“The use of new technologies of the Web 2.0, and most of all the use of online social networks led to the user to have a positive and active attitude interacting with others, abolishing the notions of time and space, and changed the Labour landscape. The internet and the e-mail, the use of online social networks like Facebook or Twitter, Orkut, Friendster, or Linkedin, the blogs, the forums, turned the control of the employer to a more and more present and intrusive one, affecting the workers' privacy.” (Moreira 2013, 76)

We are hence before a double problem once the misuse of online social networks can be seen both on the employees as well as on the employers side, which only highlights the fact of this being an issue with an enormous study potential.

On one hand, with regard to the use of online social networks by the employee there should be a greater awareness of the impact of their respective conduct. This due to the fact that employees must refrain from posting messages that could affect the company's image, always taking into account the criteria of proportionality and reasonableness. Ideally, the internal regulations of a company should alert for this type of cases without forgetting the entire regulatory framework, including constitutional, applicable to it.

On the other hand, regarding the use of social networks by the employer to find out information about the private life of the employee, the solution will depend on the scope of the privacy concept to be adopted. In

this case the ratio of the intensity of privacy proposed by Moreira should be adopted. If the user's profile (employee or applicant) is a private one, and in case of private online social networks there is a legitimate expectation of respect for his/her privacy (Moreira 2013, 79). In the case of the privacy settings being configured to allow other users to access the employee's profile his/her expectation of privacy will be reduced but, even in that case, the employer may not use such information if it is not directly related to one's suitability for the job.

In analyzing these issues, one should also take into account the type of online social networks: in case of a private online social network, the employer won't gain access to the information but may limit its use in the workplace; in case of a free access professional online social network or a network whose access was supplied by the employer, the employee can access the information therein offered (Moreira 2013, 78).

Future perspective: the point of no return

In terms of future perspectives, it could be said that the use of online social networks introduced by Web 2.0 has dramatically altered the way in which people relate to each other, and this requires new solutions for a new process of interaction that will not stop growing. Despite all this, the answer to the various questions that the use of online social networks brings to the employment relationship should not be the same.

The availability of online contents seriously interferes with the privacy of every individual and therefore it also interferes with the employee's privacy before the power of the employer. In face of this scenario one must be careful with the fact that "in our own day scientific and technological advances have raised the spectre of new and frightening invasions of privacy." (Bloustein 1964, 963).

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