Practices of information and secrecy in a punk rock subculture

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ABSTRACT

By examining the information practices of a punk-rock subculture, we investigate the limits of social media systems, particularly limits exposed by practices of secrecy. Looking at the exchange of information about "underground" shows, we use qualitative interviews to examine uses of social media among fans. This initial analysis centers on understanding the tactical practices of information and technology to avoid police detection, particularly by comparing uses of more traditional online forums, such as message boards, with social network sites, such as Facebook. Understanding the uses and preferences for distinct technologies sheds light on how localized social context drives technological use. These findings are furthermore useful in their implications for design of applications sensitive to granular needs of users for secrecy.

Author Keywords

Information practices, subcultures, secrecy, social network sites.

ACM Classification Keywords

H1.2. User/Machine Systems, Human Factors.

INTRODUCTION

With the prevalent use of a technology comes a widening array of appropriations, adaptations and practices. In some contexts, uses of social network sites (SNS) may deviate from an otherwise mainstream set of technological practices to support a certain subculture and its activities. The research presented in this paper suggests that SNS form one part of a technological system of communication, where different applications are adopted in order to accommodate geographically-bounded (or localized) needs for secrecy within a subculture. In this project, we examine social norms of secrecy in the underground music scene ("the basement scene") in New Brunswick, New Jersey. We focus on the limitations and affordances of two distinct technologies: message boards and Facebook. Because communities engaged in quasi-legal activities have increased concerns of secrecy, understanding preferences for some technologies over others (such as message boards

over SNS) offers insight into how localized needs can drive use of specific technologies even (and in this case, particularly) when those technologies are outdated. Using thick description of information practices within the basement scene, our investigation participates in human computing and interaction (HCI) scholarship that uses ethnography to address and complicate assumptions about the design of SNS [5], particularly in the context of secrecy.

CONTEXT: THE NEW BRUNSWICK MUSIC SCENE

There is a longstanding tradition in New Brunswick of do-it-yourself (DIY) music production. In the basement scene, shows are performed in basements of a DIY network of houses, typically occupied by students from the local university. Shows operate in a quasi-legal capacity on a number of fronts: As residences rather than venues, show houses do not possess licenses to host events that charge money for attendance. Alcohol often circulates at shows, which runs the risk of violating drinking age restrictions. Fans sometimes smoke inside, even when basements are crowded and the walls lined with material like mattresses or padded envelopes to provide sound insulation. All of these activities risk (and often result in) disapproval from neighbors, landlords, fire marshals and police. As a result, avoiding detection of shows from these groups has become a critical feature of the community's information practices. Within this context, SNS have been used both to promote shows and to maintain norms of secrecy. Given these conflicting objectives, the basement scene makes a superb case study for examining the subcultural use of particular technologies in the context of secrecy.

KEY TERMS AND PRIOR WORK

Before proceeding, we first define key concepts used throughout this work. We use the term "information practices" to refer to the ways that information is produced, used and disseminated in particular social settings [13], emphasizing the social and technological components associated with, and sometimes constitutive of, information. The term "technological protocols" [10] refers to practices that develop with the emergence of new technologies. "Social norms" are those rules within the scene related to keeping basement activities undetected by the local authorities. Finally, we use "tactics" to refer to specific practices and protocols used to conform to those norms.

Privacy, secrecy, security

Our engagement with existing literature on privacy and secrecy draws specifically from scholarship that addresses

these concepts in the context of community. In general, studies on privacy have tended towards the technological [1, 3, 7, 12], while studies of secrecy tend towards the psychological or sociological [6, 7, 8, 11].

Regarding privacy, to pick key examples, Ahern et al. [1] investigated factors affecting social media users in applying privacy policies in online photo sharing, revealing how people make decisions about every day privacy. Consolvo et al. [3] examined attitudes toward disclosure of location to one's social group. More broadly, Palin and Dourish [12] considered a number of technological developments (the family intercom, shared calendars, active badges, etc.) to develop a dynamic construction of privacy as shaped by social practice. These studies treat privacy practices as they relate to local norms, an approach that we share here.

Of the sociologically-oriented work on secrecy, Merten's ethnographic work [11] examined the role of secrets in the social worlds of adolescent girls, linking secret-keeping to a kind of social currency. Using qualitative interviews and participant observation, Fine and Holyfield [8] examined norms of trust and secrecy in a leisure organization of mushroom gatherers. Both studies use small, localized communities to identify participants' understandings of and uses for secrecy. Although we share an interest in understanding norms of secrecy in everyday life, this paper focuses on how those norms are operationalized through specific information practices and technological protocols. Along these lines, Barratt and Lenton [2] researched disclosures of drug use on a number of dance music message boards. We note similarities in the politics of discussing illicit activities online, but would add that in the basement community, there are geographic boundaries as well as cultural boundaries of shared (illegal) activities, both of which drive particular norms of secrecy.

Following Merten, [11] we use secrecy to refer to information tied to a group, in contrast to privacy, which refers to information grounded in the personal. Thus secrecy is used to refer to keeping what *we* do secret, whereas privacy refers to keeping what *I* do secret. In thinking about how social norms are constructed, looking at the level of community or subcultures allows for thicker descriptions of how these practices surface in response to particular political, legal and cultural factors [10].

METHODOLOGY
For this work, we conducted semi-structured interviews with ten members of the basement scene, most of them fans, but also band members and show promoters. Interviews, a focus group and dozens of hours of field observation of shows were conducted between the fall of 2009 and the spring of 2011 as part of an investigation into the social context of information in this community. These interviews and observations informed our understanding of the basement scene's history and some of the rules related to information sharing. Starting with contacts made through the course of field observations, we used snowball sampling

to extend our interview pool. Participants were 19-28 years old (average age 23); six were male, four female. We use P1-10 in the discussion below as participant identifiers.

The interviews, conducted in the fall of 2010, were semi-structured and ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. Participants were asked to describe the most recent basement show they had attended, talking specifically about technologies and communication decisions used in the process of learning about and attending the concert. In addition, they were asked to describe how they keep abreast of upcoming shows, how and whom they inform about concerts, and about information practices in the basement scene. Interviews were then transcribed and coded using NVIVO software. Coding was guided by an interest in understanding sharing information in terms of secrecy and information control. At the same time, we allowed themes to emerge in the process of coding using a constant comparison method [4] (p. 73-74).

FINDINGS
In this section, we first outline the norms of secrecy related to information sharing in the basement. We then address the ways in which these norms have been described and observed among fans in the scene. In other words, which technologies are preferred for facilitating information sharing between fans, and why?

Basement Show Norms
The primary articulated driver of secrecy in the basement scene's information practices is avoiding detection of shows by the police. Scene members have developed a variety of tactics to avoid this kind of discovery. For example, some show houses have taken steps to insulate their basements with items like padded envelopes or moving boxes to reduce noise leakage and neighbor complaints. As well, through self-policing fans are asked not to congregate outside, where they might draw police attention. Finally, shows typically start and end early to avoid perturbing neighbors.

In terms of information practices, the most singular methods of avoiding police detection in the scene center on treating house addresses as secret. This custom of occluding addresses surfaced repeatedly in the course of interviews. As P5 described, "the information that's exchanged is basically when, how much, and who's playing. Never a where." Shows are publicized digitally (e.g. Facebook and message boards) as well as through word-of-mouth (e.g. flyers and text messages), but addresses are only exchanged in means deemed safe – face-to-face encounters and text messages being the most common. In the following section, we outline how practices of secrecy play out in online social environments, by comparing use of SNS and message boards.

Social network sites
For people new to the basement scene, SNS were often the initial introduction to subcultural practices of information control. P2 illustrated this mode of secrecy in his

description of moving to New Brunswick: "when I first moved here I would go to Myspace and I would search the New Brunswick zip code to see if there was anything going on, and then there would be a struggle to find an address because I didn't know where anything was. I didn't know anyone really, I just tried to figure it out." This description demonstrates the extent to which social media sites enable outsiders to access some (but not all) of the information required for show attendance. Facebook and Myspace are used to publicize shows on pages for bands and show houses, and Facebook invites are used regularly by promoters, but addresses are never exchanged and communication is largely asymmetrical, from promoters to fans rather than between fans themselves.

Other interviews showed the extent to which social media is used "in suspicion." Many participants feared that the police were using various social media sites to obtain secret show information. As described by P5: "Somebody on the police force made a Myspace page … and they wanted you to send them all the shows that were coming up … kind of like posing as someone in the punk scene." Other participants have had a similar experience, as P7 described: "Cops have definitely contacted me before, trying to figure out where shows are ... If I get an email from someone, I always search their email on Facebook or Myspace." These and similar comments are indicative of the extent to which the (suspected) surveillance from police dominates discussions of SNS use in the basement scene.

Note that we did not witness shows being broken up in the course of research, although participants reported numerous accounts of this taking place, sometimes resulting in shows simply stopping, other times resulting in fines. We by no means dispute that police are a viable threat to the success of shows, however, we note that this threat serves an additional purpose, in that rhetoric surrounding police infiltration of SNS provides a remarkably effective justification for continued practices of secrecy. We hope to address this tension more thoroughly in subsequent work.

Message boards
In the course of interviews, participants referenced two message boards (which we do not name to provide confidentiality), one of which (recently discontinued) had been active for years, and the other having been created in the last year. Both were moderated by longtime scene members, and provided information on local shows. In asking participants to describe how shows are publicized on message boards, it was found that rules against listing show house addresses are maintained. As P1 stated, "I've never seen an address" on a basement-related message board.

Interestingly, although the more recent message board is technologically quite simple and its focus very narrow (New Jersey punk music), since its launch in late 2010, the site claims over 400 members, 2,100 threads and just under 38,000 total posts. The board was not used unanimously by participants, but it was referenced by P1, P2, P4, P5, P7 and

P10, all of whom were longtime scene members. In contrast to concerns that police had infiltrated SNS, P4 expressed a feeling of safety talking about shows on message boards, because "we know that we can trust we're being read by thirty different people and none of them are cops." Thus, the smaller number of users and familiarity with handles allows for increased feeling of security on message boards. In sum, message boards were referenced as an opportunity for sustained discussions of bands, shows and albums in the local music scene, and these boards were furthermore valued by participants because the lower rate of adoption generated a sense of protection from unwanted attention of the authorities.

DISCUSSION
From these accounts, we see several themes related to technological protocols of secrecy: adherence to norms of secrecy as indicative of group membership, the use of SNS for purposes of inclusion as well as exclusion, and affordances of simplistic technologies over advanced ones when they parallel localized needs of secrecy.

The Politics of Technological Protocols
The use of sites like Facebook in subcultural environments exposes tensions of managing group boundaries. We found that SNS are used to test and confirm subcultural group membership. Adherence to various information practices and protocols that developed in the scene – such as verifying identities through Facebook – allowed members to judge inclusion in the basement community. Scene members were willing to undergo degrees of inconvenience, such as extra efforts to locate show addresses outside of Facebook, in order to comply with norms of secrecy. Gaining a sense of belonging through learning social norms is at the crux of membership for any group. In their research on risk in leisure groups, Fine and Holyfield [6] argued that obtaining information was one of the first goals of group membership (p. 28). In the basement scene, this objective could be altered such that fluency in information practices marked one of the first goals of subcultural membership. By adhering to community norms of secrecy, newcomers signal to other scene members their shared values. This cultural savvy often requires newcomers to acquire a base knowledge of acceptable technological protocols. Put simply, there is a highly-developed subcultural etiquette to practices of secrecy that play out across a network of technologies, including text messaging, SNS and message boards.

Community Sleuths and Hyper-secrecy
SNS are used for two seemingly conflicting purposes in the basement scene. On the one hand, SNS are used to bring people to shows, as in the near ubiquitous use of Facebook invites to publicize upcoming shows. At the same time, much of the "detective work" involved with distinguishing outsiders (police) from insiders (punks) took place using SNS. When unfamiliar names surface on message boards, or when e-mails from unknown senders arrive requesting information about shows, multiple participants reported

using SNS to authenticate someone's inquiry. In some instances, participants questioned whether these norms of secrecy were in fact absolutely necessary. For example, P10 commented: "the change in technology has impacted things. I got a sense that with some people they do shows 'cause they feel like they are part of a secret something." As an old timer in the scene, P10 here provides a moment of thoughtful critique on the extent to which practices and protocols of secrecy are meant to avoid the police, versus being used to keep the scene exclusive.

Technology Hinders, Technology Helps
Given that message boards are older (as a technology), with less functionality and less powerful reach, one might ask why they would continue to be used, especially considering that SNS are an integrated part of everyday life for scene participants. Although the limited features and narrow pool of users might typically be viewed as drawbacks, from interviews, we surmise that message boards offer a number of advantages not afforded by SNS: Message boards have a long history in punk culture, whereas SNS are still relatively new; Message boards are created, moderated and used by known scene members, unlike SNS such as Facebook, which is owned by a for-profit company with millions of online users; Message boards are limited in content (in this case, topics of punk culture), while SNS offer an almost unlimited range of subject matter. Thus, even though message boards are far less sophisticated in terms of technology, they offer advantages of accommodating secrecy. For these reasons, longtime scene members continue to engage with each other using message boards because they do a better job of reflecting the punk values, DIY ethics, and localized norms of secrecy.

CONCLUSIONS
In this paper, we have argued that SNS operate as part of a complex web of technologies; even when technologies are ostensibly outdated and narrowly used, they can provide an online enclave appropriate for a subculture invested in maintaining practices of secrecy. We found that when motivated by social pressures (whether real or perceived), subcultures can develop very nuanced information practices that double as signals of inclusion and exclusion. Thus we see a kind of hacked symbiosis engineered by basement scene members in order to meet their localized needs. Further, this paper has offered an ethnographic explanation of the existence of and preference for non-dominant technologies, here brought into relief in the context of secrecy. One implication of these findings is a justification of the development of autonomous online communities, rather than, say, an emphasis on designing applications and add-ons for dominant sites. In the basement scene, Facebook and MySpace offer vital tools for promoting shows, but are insufficient for protecting community secrets, such as house addresses. The role of message boards is one of providing a means for in-depth communications about objects of shared interest, where SNS are viewed as inadequate for these discussions. In subsequent projects, we hope to extend the study of SNS

serving a particular community or subculture towards contributing to designs that can reflect highly localized norms of secrecy and privacy.

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