

PRIVACY PROTECTION ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES – RESEARCH RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

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Abstract: *The popularity of social networking sites is constantly growing but their users continue to attach little importance to the protection of their own privacy and willingly share their personal data in the Internet. The issues concerning own privacy protection, ways of using the web and social networking sites, with particular focus on Facebook, became the subject of studies conducted on a group of Polish and American respondents. The paper shows the way of using the Internet and social media in Poland and the USA, and to formulate the crucial conclusions in this respect.*

1. Introduction

The internet has changed human everyday life. For the majority of the population web surfing is a daily activity. Social networking sites are an integral part of life for many people, who can spend several hours a day visiting them. Sharing a vast amount of information, not only by adding own content, but also by «liking» pages or links, provides other users as well as entities a lot of information about us, our preferences, lifestyles and problems. The aim of using the net is not, however, to avoid leaving any «traces» because it is very difficult and impossible for the average user, but it is to try to leave them consciously – being aware of the risks and consequences arising from particular activities.

2. Previous research

Previous studies¹ on the use of the internet conducted in Poland and in the United States raised a number of important issues, for example sharing with others own login data, «virtual harming» or using false data or data belonging to another person.

These research results cannot be considered fully satisfactory, however, since not all the issues taken in the Polish studies were examined by American researchers, and multiple issues included in the American results were not raised by the Polish research teams. In addition, often the subjective scope of the research was limited to only a specific group of respondents, for example children and teens, making it impossible to compare specific phenomena and behaviours between for example urban and rural population, adults and children, and various practitioners. Making a comprehensive comparative analysis between the Polish and American results was not so entirely possible.

Direct prerequisite for the implementation of this research was the fact that in earlier studies there were numerous cases of respondents showing lack of knowledge on the basic functions of social networks which would allow better protection of their privacy, lack of knowledge of the privacy policy or ignorance of risks, and inability to predict the effects of own actions, especially by children and young people, who often have a feeling

¹ Incl. Teens and the internet (study conducted in Warsaw in 2014 by the Pedagogium WSNS), Perception of the issues related to data and privacy protection by children and adolescents (study conducted in Warsaw in 2012 by the GIODO and Panoptykon), Teens, social media and privacy (study conducted in the USA in 2013 by the Pew Research Center and The Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University).

of illusory anonymity. This research on how the internet and social networking sites are used was part of the Diamond Grant devoted to the issue of the right to individual privacy on the internet with particular emphasis on the protection of personal data.

2.1. Methodology and aim of research

The research was carried out between 1 December 2016 and 14 December 2016 in parallel in Poland and in the United States. Academic centres that supported the research and whose staff and students got engaged in it are the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Franklin University in Columbus (Ohio) and Urbana University in Urbana (Ohio).

The study was conducted in electronic² and paper form, on a group of 160 people (80 people from each country) at the age of 13 and older. The upper age limit was not determined. The respondents were divided into seven age cohorts:

- 13 – 18 (10 people – 50% female 50% male)
- 19 – 25 (20 people – 50% female 50% male)
- 26 – 35 (10 people – 50% female 50% male)
- 36 – 45 (10 people – 50% female 50% male)
- 46 – 55 (10 people – 50% female 50% male)
- 56 – 65 (10 people – 50% female 50% male)
- 66+ (10 people – 50% female 50% male).

The purpose of this was to enable the research to include all respondents who can use social networking sites, especially the most popular of them, which is Facebook³. In accordance with para. 4 point 5 of the Regulations, «the use of Facebook by persons under 13 years of age is prohibited»,⁴ that is why younger people were not taken into account.

Due to the difficulties encountered in connection with carrying out tests on American respondents under 18 years of age, the youngest group in the US study only included people who were 18 years old. These difficulties were related to the issue of obtaining parental consent to child's participation in the study and resulted from the provisions of the Code of Federal Regulations (Title 45 Part 46 Subpart D, point c⁵), according to which, written permission from a parent (or parents – depending on the state) was required for a child to participate in the study. This increased the potential costs associated with conducting research and created the risk of non-completion in a given period of time. Thus, after the consultation with the researchers from the Franklin University, the above-mentioned solution was adopted.

The questionnaire included 29 questions divided into three parts. In the first part, the questions referred to gender, age, type of job contract, occupation and place of residence. The second part referred to the use of the internet. The respondents answered whether, and if so, by what devices they connect to the internet, how often they use it, and how long their various activities last, such as browsing social networking sites, using email, watching films, or using forums and discussion groups. The third group were the questions relating to the use of social networking sites with the particular consideration of Facebook. Respondents determined how frequently they use the portal, number of hours a day they devote to use it, relation to the privacy policy, approach to changes in privacy settings, experience related to the use of the portal and the tendency to share personal information or image.

² <https://www.ankieta.pl/ankieta/251706/how-do-americans-use-the-internet-and-social-networks.html> (all Internet sources last accessed on 8 January 2017).

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>.

⁴ Statement concerning the rights and obligations, <https://www.facebook.com/legal/terms>.

⁵ <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/sites/default/files/ohrp/policy/ohrpregulations.pdf>.

The aim of the study was to identify the basic problems associated with the use of the internet and social networks, compare the awareness level regarding privacy and data protection not only among different age groups, on the grounds of place of residence or education level, or between men and women, but also between the American and Polish respondents. It was also expected to characterise the individual «behaviour portraits» associated with the use of the internet portals, willingness to share own data and restrict access to the content published by the respondents.

2.2. Research results

This paper summarises the main conclusions and most interesting relationships that emerged in the course of the questionnaire research, based on the analysis of pooled results from both countries.

The frequency of using the internet averages at «once a month». Studies of the Polish respondents» answers showed that in each age group (except for those aged 66+), the respondents use the internet at least once a week. However, there are visible disparities between the use of the internet and the use of social networking sites, especially in the eldest age cohorts in Poland and in the USA. Similar to Poland, in the USA people aged 66+ are the least likely to use the network, but the very percentage of the net users at this age is much higher and amounts to 80%. Among respondents aged 66+ as many as 87.5% of them use the internet several times a week and more often, out of which 37.5% of the respondents use it every day.

Studies showed that the education level does not have a significant impact on the frequency of using the internet. Both among people with primary education as well as among people with a master or bachelor degree, the vast majority of the respondents use the internet every day. However, discrepancies appear not in the frequency but in the way the net is used. In examining the impact of the education level on the use of the internet by the Poles, it can be seen that the higher education level the larger the percentage of people using the internet. The research showed that only 50% of people with primary or incomplete primary education use the internet. People who do use it are lower secondary students who have completed primary school. People not using the internet are those aged 66+. Among those who completed lower secondary school and are continuing their education all the respondents use the internet. On the other hand, from among the people with secondary education (vocational, general secondary or post-secondary/college). 69.44% use the net. Among those with a master or bachelor degree, 97.27% of the respondents use the internet. In the USA this trend does not occur. There the most active in using the network are the people with primary, incomplete primary and lower secondary education as well as those with the doctoral, assistant professor and full professor titles.

Similarly, place of residence shows impact on the use of the net. Both in Poland and in the USA urban residents use the internet more often than those in rural areas. In Poland, the internet is used by 66.67% of rural population and 90.57% of urban residents. Both in urban and rural areas the vast majority of Poles use the network every day – they are online all the time, or several times a day (respectively, 91.66% in urban areas and 72.22% in rural areas). In the USA, the relationship between a place of residence and the internet use is similar to that occurring in Poland. The percentage of people using the internet and living in rural areas is 87.5%, while the studies show that among the urban population there are no people who do not use the net. The frequency of internet use is similar – most respondents use it every day (they are online all the time) or several times a day (respectively, 85.94% in urban areas and 62.5% in rural areas). Both Polish and American respondents, depending on the place of residence, showed a tendency on the frequency of the internet use during the day. Most often they chose the two highest frequencies, i.e. «every day – I am online all the time» and «several times a day.» In both countries, the rural residents often point out that they use the internet «several times a day» while urban residents tended to select a higher frequency.

American respondents	Indicate how often you use the Internet:							
Indicate age group which contains your year of birth:	Daily – I am still online	A few times a day	Once a day	A few times a week	Once a week	Several times a month	Once a month	Less often than once a month
18	40%	60%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
19–25	45%	50%	0%	5%	0%	0%	0%	0%
26–35	80%	20%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
36–45	30%	50%	20%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
46–55	60%	20%	10%	0%	10%	0%	0%	0%
56–66	30%	40%	0%	30%	0%	0%	0%	0%
66 and older	12,5%	25%	0%	50%	0%	0%	0%	12,5%

Table 1: The frequency of using the Internet in the USA

Polish respondents	Indicate how often you use the Internet:							
Indicate age group which contains your year of birth:	Daily – I am still online	A few times a day	Once a day	A few times a week	Once a week	Several times a month	Once a month	Less often than once a month
13 – 18	40%	60%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
19 – 25	45%	50%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
26 – 35	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
36 – 45	60%	30%	0%	10%	0%	0%	0%	0%
46 – 55	10%	40%	10%	10%	30%	0%	0%	0%
56 – 66	33,33%	33,33%	0%	33,33%	0%	0%	0%	0%
66 and older	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%

Table 2: The frequency of using the Internet in Poland

Among Polish respondents 67.5% of the total use Facebook. On the other hand, considering only the people using the internet, 80.6% of them are also Facebook users. The most active age group on the portal are people aged 13–25, as all these respondents declared they have an account and actively use it. On the other hand, respondents aged 66+ do not use this portal at all. The question about frequency of the portal use showed that the overwhelming majority of Poles (both men and women) use Facebook every day – they are online all the time, or several times a day. American respondents are much more active in using the portal. As many as 80.77% of the internet users use this website (they account for 78.75% of all respondents). Studies showed that among the people aged 18–45 up to 90% have a Facebook account and use it. By studying the frequency of using the portal by American respondents, disparities can be seen in the frequency of Facebook use. They result mainly from the fact that in the USA considerably more elderly people use the internet and, as the research showed, they exhibit less activity and less frequent use of social media.

The question regarding the knowledge of Poles of the Facebook privacy policy showed significant differences in the responses, indicating a very high percentage of people has never read it – as many as 24.53% of them.

Only 3.77% check it regularly and 7.55% read it only after creating an account. The vast majority of internet users read it only once when creating an account (39.62%). On average, every fourth user (24.53%) checks it regularly. The internet users were also asked to determine their attitude to the privacy policy. On the basis of the answers it can be said that internet users are divided on the question whether the policy answers all their questions. Most of them, however, note that it is too general (30.19%) and too long (45.28%). As a positive side it was indicated that the policy does not contain unknown and incomprehensible words, and that its layout (background and font) is legible.

The research carried out on the American respondents showed that 38.1% of them have never read the privacy policy. The vast majority of respondents (47.62%) indicated that they read the policy only once when setting up the account. On average, one out of ten of the tested respondents checks it regularly. As in Poland, the Americans are divided over whether the policy contains incomprehensible or unknown words or not (with a slight predominance of the first group). A large group of respondents (31.75%) indicated, however, that the privacy policy does not contain the answers to all their questions, and that it is too long (46.03%). Good sides of this policy are primarily a readable font and clear background.

Answer	American respondents	Polish respondents
Never	38,10%	24,53%
Once, when setting up the account	47,62%	39,62%
Once, but only after setting up the account	1,59%	7,55%
Every time when informed about the change of the privacy policy	11,11%	24,53%
I check it regularly	1,59%	3,77%

Table 3: Have you read Facebook’s privacy policy?

Polish internet users are happy to share a variety of content which they make available on their Facebook page. As many as 88.68% of them are willing to share their photo, as well as their first and last name, respectively, 96.23% and 88.68%. About half of the internet users would share a film with their own participation (50.94%), and they are willing to share their email address and phone number (respectively, 37.74% and 15.09% of the respondents). For many internet users it is not a problem to inform about their age, date of birth, place of work or place of residence; 81.13% indicated that they would share such information on Facebook. Almost every third internet user (30.19%) would upload a picture of another person without asking their permission. Much fewer would decide to upload a film featuring someone else without their permission – 16.98%. Interestingly, the internet users see the need to restrict access to their photos (81.13%), films (64.15%), links to websites (64.15%), place of residence (64.15%), and events of life (64.15%). Only a third of them limit the access to their first and last name, and a half of them to the information about their age, school they (have) attended or workplace.

Similarly to the Polish subjects, American respondents are also willing to share their photos (88.89%) and films (59.68%). In terms of the first and last name, 87.30% and 77.78% of the respondents, respectively, are willing to share this data online. However, Americans are less likely than Polish citizens to share personal data. Four in ten respondents are willing to share their email address, and every fourth respondent – a phone number. More than half of those surveyed would provide date of birth, and 63.49% their age. The desire to share the place of residence and workplace or school is declared by about seven out of ten respondents. What is disturbing is the data on sharing photos and films with the participation of someone else without asking that person’s permission. Nearly one in two respondents would share such a picture (49.21%) and 38.10% of the respondents would share a film. Americans do not show such a large tendency to restrict access to the content they publish. 65.08% restrict the access to their photos and, on average, every second person (49.21%) to their films. As in Poland, on average every third respondent restricts access to their first name and last name

(similarly to the workplace and school), and four out of ten see the need to restrict access to their age, place of residence and the events of life.

Answer	American respondents	Polish respondents
Photos	65,08%	81,13%
Movies	49,21%	64,15%
Links to websites	28,57%	64,15%
Your first name	30,16%	33,96%
Your last name/Surname	31,75%	33,96%
Your age	42,86%	52,83%
Your place of residence	42,86%	62,26%
Your life events (e.g. wedding)	41,27%	64,15%
School you attended	28,57%	50,94%
Your workplace	31,75%	47,17%

Table 4: The percentage of people who have changed privacy settings to limit the number of people who can access their uploads

In the context of the data, which indicate that as many as 22.64% of the respondents have a public profile, the above attitude to limit the content can raise a lot of concerns and doubts about data security and privacy.

Every second Polish internet user (50.94%) deleted or decided not to publish some content in fear of the reactions of family and friends, and a third (33.96%) feared the consequences at school or at work. Very disturbing trend refers to the data on concerns about own life or health (7.22%), as well as own safety or the safety of a family member (22.64%). Almost every fifth respondent (18.87%) deleted or decided not to publish some content because they stated it violated the privacy of another user or might be inappropriate or offensive, or because another user asked them to do so (22.64%).

According to the research, as many as 35.85% of the respondents declared that among their friends there are people who they have never met in person. Internet users also take action to protect their own privacy, for instance, by removing tags referring to themselves in the photos uploaded by another user (64.15%), asking another user of a social networking site to remove the content related to them (47.17%), and posted on a social networking false information concerning themselves to protect their own privacy (16.98%)

American respondents also removed or decided not to publish some content in fear of the reactions of family and friends (61.90%), and 46.03% feared the consequences at school or at work. Also in the USA there were people who declared the removal of their data from the fear of their own life or health (12.70%), or safety of themselves or of a family member (15.87%). This shows that this problem does not exist solely in Poland and it should not be marginalised. Almost every tenth respondent (9.68%) deleted or decided not to publish some content because they realised it violated the privacy of other users; 16.13% believed that the content might be inappropriate or offensive, and every fourth was asked by another user not to publish or remove some content.

A high rate of people – as many as 50.9% of the respondents – declared having among their Facebook friends people who they do not know personally, which is alarming. On the other hand, only one in ten respondents indicated that their profile is public, which shows an active approach to the protection of published content. This active approach is also reflected in the removal of own tags from a photo uploaded by another user (52.38%), asking another user of the social networking site to remove content related to them (34.92%), and posting on a social networking site false information referring to themselves in order to protect their own privacy (23.51%). There was an alarmingly high rate of people sharing on their own profile or sending in a private message containing a scan of a document confirming identity, for example an ID or passport; every fourth American declared they did that.

Both among Polish and American respondents appeared an affirmative answer to the question about regretting sharing some content on Facebook; they were, respectively, 22.64% and 30.16%.

The surveys carried out on Polish and American respondents showed many similarities but also highlighted the differences in the approach to data and privacy protection on the internet and on social networks.

One of the main problems to be pointed out is that the knowledge of the privacy policy is not treated too seriously by the internet users. In Poland, only one in four (24.53%) and in the USA one in ten (11.11%) users check the privacy policy after being informed of the change. Although seemingly Poles show a higher awareness of the value of the protection of personal data and privacy, which was manifested, among others, by a lower rate of sharing of individual data about themselves in comparison to the American results or a higher propensity for limiting access, these were Poles who more often declared that they had a public profile (22.64%).

What is also worrying is the number of respondents who have invited people they do not know personally to become their friends. The studies showed that every second respondent in the USA (50.79%) and every third in Poland (35.85%) added such a person to their friends, providing in this way same content and data inaccessible to people outside these circles.

Respondents know and use different mechanisms to restrict access to the content or privacy, such as the removal of own tags from someone else’s photos, or blocking another user. On the other hand, the very fact of taking such action indicates the amount of threats to privacy and the need for their active stance to protect it. A large part of the respondents personally experienced a situation that made them regret providing the content on the social networking site. The respondents also pointed out that the consequences of their actions on the net were, for example, problems at work or at school. A relatively large percentage of the respondents pointed to the problem of abusive comments that touched them or their friends – in the USA almost one in two people (46.03%) confirmed that this was the case against them or their friends, while in Poland it was pointed out by 37.74% of the respondents.

The frequency of internet users both in Poland and in the USA being the victims of internet hate can be potentially dangerous:

Phenomenon	Poland	USA
Posting an embarrassing photo on the portal	20.75%	22.22%
Posting an incriminating video on the portal	16.98%	11.11%
Posting on the portal false information that put you or another person in a bad light	28.30%	12.70%
Impersonating you or another person	26.42%	7.94%
Corresponding with you or another person pretending to be someone else	18.87%	11.11%

Table 5: The frequency of being victim of internet hate

Also the attitude to share contact details, such as email address or phone number, forces us to reflect; 16.98% of Polish respondents believe that it is not dangerous and the vast majority is inclined to answer that «sometimes yes» (46.17 %). American respondents are in this respect much more cautious and only 1.59% of the respondents felt that it was not dangerous and as many as 60.32% believed that it was dangerous.

Internet users were not aware how much time it takes to remove from the server the photos removed by them from Facebook. The majority of Polish respondents believed that content will never be removed (84.91%). Among the American respondents there is also such a belief (58.73%).

3. Summary

The results showed that the example of the most active network user is a woman younger than 35 years old with a higher education who lives in the city. The least active network user is a man older than 66 years who has primary or incomplete primary education and lives in rural areas. Poles are more likely than Americans to read the privacy policy (at least once). Research showed that among Polish citizens was a higher percentage of people who have public profile. However, taking into account the percentage of people who do not know their profile type it could mean that those, who chose that answer did not change the Facebook default settings and have a public profile. Particularly alarming are the results concerning the universality of negative incidents in the social media. It seems desirable to undertake further research in this area in order to better identify the scale, the circumstances and possible causes of these phenomena.

The studies showed the many challenges facing public institutions, teachers, and parents in terms of informing about the risks and explaining why personal information should be protected. Past experiences of the respondents show that these are not just theoretical examples but real situations faced by users of social networking sites. Especially the younger generation, which showed a very high degree of use of various social networking sites, especially when compared to other age groups, should be first and foremost educated in this respect. This will not only help control better the information we share but also help avoid unpleasant or dangerous situations that could in the future influence our good name, career and security.