Editorial overview: Tales of two motives: disclosure and concealment

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We have organized this issue into three sections: disclosure, concealment, and privacy. This organization reflects our perspective that the desire to disclose personal information and the desire to conceal it are related yet distinct psychological motives. Their independence has implications for the care and control of our personal data — that is, information privacy. These implications are discussed in the third portion of this issue, on privacy.

Two motives: the desire to disclose and the desire to conceal

People often wish to conceal information, such as embarrassing aspects of the self. Yet people also seek to reveal information, such as a laudable achievement. These motives often go hand in hand. When asked by a prospective employer to disclose stigmatizing information, a person is likely to have both a low desire to disclose that information as well as a high desire to conceal it. However, sometimes people experience both desires simultaneously. For example, a newly pregnant woman may feel the urge to reveal the news, yet may also want to conceal it until the risk of miscarriage has subsided. Likewise, proud to have achieved a performance-based bonus, a person may want to reveal that accomplishment to her colleagues, yet, she may also want to conceal it, lest she incite jealousy.

People engage in seemingly paradoxical disclosure behavior, particularly on occasions where these desires conflict. For example, while most would agree that sexting (texting photos of one's genitals) is generally a terrible idea, many have engaged in this behavior; 77% of people, according to one estimate. Sexting is a situation in which both desires are plausibly active. People have a strong desire to conceal their most intimate body parts, even to those they are close to. Yet, people also have a strong desire to build intimacy with others, and self-disclosure, especially of sensitive information, is one way that people go about doing this. We suspect it is no coincidence that perplexing, seemingly self-destructive disclosure behavior can go hand in hand with the simultaneous activation of the desires to reveal and to conceal.

The notion that people can simultaneously feel both of these desires raises a number of interesting and important issues, which this compendium speaks to. For one, it implies the complexity of articulating normative benchmarks — of ascertaining the wisdom or error of a given disclosure decision. If you keep a secret, do the benefits of honoring your desire to conceal outweigh the drawbacks of denying your desire to reveal? Quantifying, let alone enumerating, these consequences is a challenge unto itself. Several contributors to this compendium provide insights into this issue, delineating effects of disclosure (Luo and Hancock) and concealment (Baum and Critcher) on wellbeing.

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Not only does the independence of these motives raise issues of normative benchmarking, it also raises the question of descriptive validity: (especially) when the desires conflict, what predicts whether people disclose? Weighting the value of sharing against that of concealing might feel like a comparison between apples and oranges. Scholz, Jovanova, Baek & Falk address this issue at a neuroscientific level: research suggests that the brain is capable of integrating the relative risks versus rewards of honoring versus suppressing each desire in a given situation within a common currency — a domain-general value signal that predicts disclosure behavior. A number of articles address this question from a different angle, speaking to the pivotal role of contextual factors in dictating whether people will disclose, keep mum, or actively conceal in a given situation. For example, while people often carefully consider in whom to confide a secret, context can ignite a confession to a bar patron without second thought of the consequences (Cowan).

Interestingly, this implies that contextual factors may exert their strongest influence on disclosure behavior both in the most fraught, as well as in the least fraught, disclosure decisions. This is because in both cases, the desires to reveal and to conceal are in conflict: in the case of the most fraught, a person feels both a strong desire to disclose as well as a strong desire to conceal; in the case of the least fraught, a person feels both a low desire to disclose as well as a low desire to conceal. Notably, this observation seems incompatible with the standard economic endeavor of inferring preferences from observed choices — in the domain of privacy decision-making, inferring how much people value their information privacy based on their disclosure behavior. If context can dictate behavior in both the most, as well as in the least, fraught decisions, then how can such preferences be inferred from disclosure behavior alone?

If nothing else, these ideas speak to the incredible complexity of disclosure decisions. Given such complexity, cognitive and judgmental errors in disclosure decisions are all but inevitable. Indeed, a number of articles in this issue articulate such mistakes, such as forecasting errors, when one incorrectly predicts the impact of a decision to disclose. As Levine, Roberts & Cohen elucidate, people overestimate the negative reaction they will get when they tell someone a harsh truth — a piece of information that they know will be helpful in the long run, despite being hurtful in the short run. Relatedly, people who keep secrets may fail to appreciate the toll that doing so takes on their psyche (Baum and Critcher; Afif and Afifi).

With these thoughts as a backdrop, below we offer a brief summary of each of the sections of this special issue.

Disclosure

What motivates people to disclose information? This issue features a compelling answer at the proximal level of analysis: sharing has value. People value opportunities to share so much that they are willing to pay money to share information, and doing so activates neural regions associated with reward. Several articles in this issue speak to how this value is shaped by what is shared, to whom it is shared, and who is doing the sharing. Social contexts exert their influence on disclosure decisions by modulating the value of disclosure. Interestingly, as Vijayakumar and Pfeifer note, this value remains high across adolescence and into adulthood, though each stage of human development brings with it changes in the value of sharing different types of information to different targets.

We can also account for the motive to disclose by its social consequences. Sharing is an intrinsically social act. As such, disclosure has the potential to fulfill fundamental needs for social connection and increase wellbeing (Luo and Hancock). However, the consequences of sharing are not always so straightforward. For example, sharing about traumatic experiences can increase wellbeing, but it can also reactivate negative emotions, and prolong suffering (Rime, Bouchat, Paquot, & Giglio). Factors that shape the value of disclosure — the content, target, and context of disclosure — likewise shape the consequences of disclosure. However, with so many factors influencing the consequences of disclosure, it is not always clear when disclosure might hurt, instead of help. Several papers in this issue take on the charge of bringing order to this literature, by offering frameworks that predict when sharing will promote positive or negative outcomes for both personal and interpersonal wellbeing (Cooney, Mastroianni, Abi-Esber, & Brooks; Barasch).

The psychology and neuroscience of disclosure were originally developed to better understand the causes and consequences of social interactions. However, disclosure is increasingly taking place through online social media. Do insights from offline disclosure translate online? This issue addresses this question by exploring how media might change the content that people choose to share as well as the consequences of doing so (Schlosser; Lieberman & Schroeder).

Concealment
Whereas the desire to conceal might, on the surface, seem to be the inverse of the desire to disclose, the present articles illustrate how a lack of disclosure does not imply a desire to conceal. And, whereas concealment is often harmful for wellbeing, and disclosure can be beneficial, the articles in this issue present important nuance to these relationships.

Concealment (negatively) predicts wellbeing more reliably than disclosure (positively) predicts it (Camacho, Reinka, & Quinn; Uysal). While concealment can be a strategy for avoiding discrimination and negative judgment, it also precludes people from receiving support from others, which has its own harms that extend beyond the taxing effects of active concealment (Baum and Critcher). For example, merely having to think about a secret can be socially isolating and evoke feelings of reduced control and authenticity (Afif and Afifi; Uysal). And if one's partner suspects one is concealing something, increased conflict and relationship breakdown may follow (Willems, Finkenauer, & Kerkhof).

Whereas secrecy is reliably harmful through these processes, disclosure's benefit is arguably more dependent on the confidant's response. If a confidant responds poorly, or reinforces a discloser's unhealthy view, for example, it can make matters worse (Afif and Afifi). If a confidant provides advice, support, or helps to reappraise the event, it can improve wellbeing, helping the discloser to cope (Willems, Finkenauer, & Kerkhof). Nonetheless, the consequences of secrecy are, like the consequences of sharing, capable of varying substantially by context (Frijns, Keijsers, & Finkenauer).

Privacy
The independence of the motives to reveal versus conceal poses a challenge for how individuals manage the care and control of their personal data — that is, their information privacy. The articles in this section delineate some of these challenges (e.g., Krämer and Schäwel). For example, Waldman delineates some of the ways that firms play off people's cognitive biases in disclosure decisions to improve commercial outcomes, independent from, or even potentially at the expense of consumer wellbeing. Fortunately, some of the contributions to this issue also provide insights into the types of interventions that may be more versus less successful in helping people navigate these issues.

First, the articles in this issue suggest limitations in simply urging restraint in personal information sharing. Such an unqualified admonition would be misguided at the individual level, for quelling self-disclosure would preclude the benefits that come along with fulfilling this desire (as discussed in the Disclosure subsection). Even quelling data transfer that is initiated by firms, as opposed to individuals, may prevent individuals from realizing positive outcomes. Indeed, although people tend to have negative 'knee-jerk' reactions to firms that surveil employees, White, Ravid, & Behrend outline how employees can benefit from such surveillance. And, Matz, Appel & Kosinski note that psychologically targeted messaging (which is powered by access to personal data) can increase engagement in healthy behaviors.

The articles in this issue also provide guidance as to the types of interventions that are poised to help people manage their information privacy. Petronio & Child note that interventions ought to be sensitive to the 'privacy rules' — that is, the context-dependent norms — that people have surrounding the management of their information privacy. Both Harari and Matz, Appel & Kosinski speak to issues of consent, and how current conceptualizations are outdated. Together, they argue that consent should not be treated as static, but rather, as a process, continuously revisited, sensitive not only to the content of the data (i.e., what is disclosed) but also to the conditions under which it was disclosed (e.g., a person's expectations about how it will be used). Finally, Brough & Martin call for understanding how privacy literacy may relate to individuals' disclosure behavior. Such an understanding would seem crucial in devising effective interventions for helping people manage their information privacy,

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speaking to whether efforts to improve people's privacy knowledge will be helpful and if so, what form they should take.

Taken together, the articles in this section have implications for devising legislation that regulates how firms treat consumers' personal information (Slepchuk and Milne). Legislation that reflects the holistic and nuanced view of privacy presented in this special issue has real potential to help consumers and firms alike realize the benefits of the availability of personal information, while mitigating its pitfalls.