

## Chapter Two: Communication Privacy Management Theory: Take Two

By Sara Bialkowski

### Introduction

**Communication Privacy Management Theory**, or CPMT for short, is a theory designed by researcher Sandra Petronio (Griffin et al., 2019). CPMT focuses on gaining a better understanding of how we decide to **conceal** or **reveal private information**, and what happens when others become aware of that information. Whereas Social Penetration Theory by Altman and Taylor focuses on how self-disclosing can facilitate openness and create intimacy in a forming relationship, Petronio understands the disclosure of personal information as deeper than that—people have a variety of reasons for revealing private information to specific individuals.

This theory is part of the **socio-cultural tradition** and leans toward being an **interpretive theory** (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 145). The **socio-cultural tradition** is based on the idea that people produce and reproduce culture when they speak (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 41). The **cybernetic tradition** understands communication as a system of information processing that focuses on feedback and control, such as “a computer system, a family system, or a media system” (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 38).

Petronio discusses how we create **privacy boundaries**, a metaphorical means of understanding how people **disclose** their private and public information (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 145). [Herman](#)

[and Tenzek](#) (2017) use Petronio's description of a “**dialectical tension**” existing between the choice to reveal or not reveal personal information. Revealing any personal information ultimately reduces our privacy. Petronio believes that the disclosure of this information can cause distress in a relationship, depending on the nature of the information and who it's expressed to. When deciding to reveal private information, we go through a **privacy management system** where we designate **co-owners** of our information and **negotiate privacy rules** for sharing our information (Griffin et al., 2019). There are three main categories that govern CPMT: **privacy ownership, privacy control, and privacy turbulence.**

#### **CPMT's Five Main Principles:**

1. People believe they **own** and have a **right to control** their private information.
2. People control their private information through the use of **personal privacy rules.**
3. When others are told or discover a person's private information, they become **co-owners** of that information.
4. Co-owners of private information need to **negotiate mutually agreeable privacy rules** about telling others.
5. When co-owners of private information don't effectively negotiate and follow mutually held privacy rules, **boundary turbulence** occurs.

(Griffin et al., 2019, p. 146)

As an example, around three years ago, there was a death in my family. To this day, I have trouble deciding who it's okay to share this with, or if there are people in my life who should know, such as coworkers or classmates. I struggle with telling because I know it may be

depressing to hear for someone who didn't know about it when it happened. Will hearing that I went through a loss change how people think of me? Will it disrupt the “good things” we already have going? I am still constructing my **privacy boundaries** and my **personal privacy rules** for this matter, but as of now, they seem stable yet fairly permeable.

## Privacy Ownership

The first principle of CPMT is **privacy ownership**. This principle is fairly self-explanatory—we own and have a right to control our private information—but can be elaborated on. Without this premise, the rest of the theory wouldn't hold up. Social Penetration Theory uses the phrase “**self-disclosure**” to describe how we decide to reveal private information to others. However, Petronio rejects the use of this phrase as it is heavily dependent on fostering closeness in a new relationship. CPMT believes that we disclose personal information for a **variety of reasons**, not just for increasing intimacy levels—we may want to relieve a burden, make an impression, prevent a wrong, or “simply enjoy self-expression” (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 146). To put this into perspective, lesbian, gay, and queer college professors may struggle to decide if they should disclose their sexual orientation to their students for a variety of reasons. There's the stigmatization around non-heterosexual orientations, a general desire for privacy, or understanding that self-disclosure creates a student–teacher relational dynamic that benefits the overall learning environment ([McKenna-Buchanan et al., 2015, p. 2](#)).

Another reason Petronio rejects the phrase “self-disclosure” is because we may accidentally share private information that isn't ours to begin with. Sometimes without thinking, we may spill someone's private information we **co-own**. When you become a **co-owner**, Petronio urges that

you should act as the information's guardian to prevent it from spreading to people it shouldn't (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 150).

## **Personal Privacy Rules**

The second principle of CPMT is that we create our own **privacy rules** for managing our private information. Some individuals or groups of people may exhibit patterns of **disclosure**—they may have similar explanations or internalized rules that guide their decisions to conceal or reveal.

Thus, the basis of CPMT is that it is a **rule-based theory**: people's actions can be understood by looking at the rules system set in place to “interpret and manage their lives” (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 147).

### **Five Main Factors of Developing Personal Privacy Rules:**

1. Different **cultures** have different attitudes and values toward concealment and disclosure of something private, influencing how likely someone is to share that piece of information.
2. Studies on **gender** and privacy management have revealed that people of all sexes and genders find it easier to disclose private information to a woman than a man (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 148).
3. Attraction and liking can be **motivation** to relax privacy boundaries in interpersonal relationships. It's important to discuss **reciprocity**—when someone feels that the other person may feel the same way or has had a similar experience, it becomes easier to disclose private information.
4. **Context** can best be described from a study conducted by Petronio among children and adolescents who reported they were victims of sexual abuse. The children had an easier

time disclosing information about their abuse when they and their confidant were performing mundane, everyday activities that required minimal social rules (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 148).

5. **Risk-benefit ratios** are when we weigh the pros and cons of performing an action before doing it. In this case, revealing or not revealing private information to someone. Petronio also found in the aforementioned study that children sometimes used **partial disclosure** before disclosing the full piece of private information. The children hint at what they want to say to determine if they can fully trust the receiver (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 149).



"flirting" by [anutkak43](#) is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#) (modified by Sara Bialkowski, licensed under [CC BY 4.0](#))

The image above depicts an example I want to use. When I go out with friends, sometimes I make conversation with an attractive person. When this happens, I'll ask myself, "Why not tell them something absurdly personal right now?" With this, I mean personal information that is more comedic rather than traumatic. This thought I typically have is shown in the image above, where the man tells the woman he likes her, and instead, she **discloses** absurdly **personal information**. Her response isn't a typical response, especially since different people have different **privacy rules** regarding human bodily functions. I think the choice of disclosing

personal information is rooted in both the **context** and **risk-benefit ratio** factors of CPMT. The setting of being out, socializing, and having a good time makes it easier to share personal information, even if it is to somebody I just met. I also find myself unconsciously reasoning that there's an advantage to revealing this information because I know it'll elicit a positive reaction, such as a laugh.

### **Coordination of Mutual Privacy Boundaries**

The fourth principle of CPMT states that **co-owners** of private information need to **coordinate and negotiate mutual privacy boundaries** with rules. In this boundary, all who are “in-the-know” are responsible for the shared information. This is important because people place different boundaries around their personal information, and communicating mutual privacy boundaries is key to ensure that everyone is on the same page.

Petronio urges people to **collaboratively** create congruent privacy boundaries. However, not all **boundary ownership** is equally shared. Who decides? This raises the question of how the private information was received by the co-owner, who we now may call a **confidant**. Some confidants deliberately seek out private information, but some don't want to hear that information—like being captive to another plane passenger's non-stop ramblings. So, the relationship between the owner and co-owner, as well as their status as a confidant (**deliberate** or **reluctant**), may determine “how the shots are called” regarding setting the rules for sharing the disclosed private information (Griffin et al., 2019). Once the piece of personal information is shared, this creates a **boundary linkage** that refers to the process of the co-owner(s) being **linked** to the discloser's privacy boundary. Further negotiation should follow, especially if the **confidant** wants to tell a third party. This then leads to **boundary permeability**: the degree to

which a negotiated boundary allows private information to flow out to third parties (Griffin et al., 2019).

Privacy boundaries can be strict and impermeable, while others can be loose and permeable. If there is a miscommunication or no communication about how a piece of information should be handled, you'll have a **“fuzzy boundary”** on your hands. This will most likely lead to **boundary turbulence** in the relationship, especially if the specific piece of information is sensitive and personal. **Boundary turbulence** is a disruption that can leave the owner of the private information, unhappy, embarrassed, or shamed (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 154). One form of boundary breaching is **intentional**, which can be both positive and negative. You may break a privacy boundary to bad-mouth your student-government opponent to win the race, or you may break a privacy boundary to save someone's life. Another type of boundary breach is an **absent-minded mistake**. We're humans after all, and we slip up sometimes.

### **Disclosing Personal Information Over the Internet**

Since there is the option to remain anonymous, many people turn to the Internet to **disclose personal information**. The Internet is a less-threatening environment where people can communicate about their personal problems, such as severe or mildly concerning mental or physical health issues ([Herman & Tenzek, 2017, p. 2](#)). In their study on privacy management and eating disorders in an online community, Herman and Tenzek (2017) found that the most common strategy for concealing information was **deception**. People living with eating disorders (ED) will often turn to pro-ana (encouraging or advocating anorexia) communities through feelings of self-isolation. These places act as safe havens where people can get support from people who know their struggle. People in these communities would post about lying to friends

and family, saying “I’m not hungry”, “I already ate”, or that the food was “too spicy” (Herman & Tenzek, 2017, p. 4–5). The study revealed that when people with eating disorders decided to disclose their ED to friends or family online, the act was not always met with support. This caused a reinforcement of the **original privacy boundaries** to guard and protect the secret that had already been shared (Herman & Tenzek, 2017, p. 5–6). The Internet opens many possibilities for people to disclose their private information and has the power to help or harm the individual involved.

## References

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**About the Author**

My name is Sara Bialkowski, and I am a junior Communication Studies major with a minor in Art History at the State University of New York at Fredonia. I enjoyed contributing to the class open-access textbook because we got to frame these theories in a way that we understood them with the goal of helping other students. Constructing a chapter about a specific theory was also an extremely useful study tool. It was great practice to not only help myself understand the material, but future students as well.