Abstract

Secret is an electronic medium that allows users to post secrets anonymously within their circle of friends and associates. Inherent to Secret is an emphasis on controlled anonymity within a community that is already somewhat connected in real life, in order to encourage people to give their honest and sincere opinions about things under the cover of anonymity. As a text-based Computer-Mediation Communication system, Secret is very different from Speech, which enables new ways of communication and expression while limiting certain aspects of speech-enabled communication at the same time.

Based on the seven features introduced by Crystal(2006), as a Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) system, Secret displays the following characteristics: It is loosely structured and socially interactive like speech, and space bounded, contrived, visually decontextualized, repeatedly revisable and graphically rich like text. Hence overall, Secret is a largely text-like medium of communication., and this has made the idea of anonymity possible, affecting the way people interact with each other.

The first and most important feature of Secret is its focus on anonymity of its users. Similar to other similar anonymous-posting websites or applications like 4chan, Whisper and PostSecret, Secret is free and allows users to post secrets, which are essentially images with several lines of text, completely anonymously. However, Secret's anonymity is slightly different from these other anonymous CMC systems as it is controlled.

There are no profiles, usernames or accounts in Secret and users cannot "friend" or "add" other Secret users from within the application. Instead, a user can only read posts which come from their circle of friends and associates. These "friends" are obtained from the user's iPhone or Facebook account after installation of the Secret application, and links the user to friends that also have Secret installed in their phones.

When somebody likes a secret, that secret is delivered at a random time to their friends, who can read, like or comment on that secret, and so on(Byttow, 2014). However, once a secret travels beyond two degrees of the original poster, it will be marked by the author's general location. Furthermore, people beyond two degrees will only be able to like the post. They cannot comment on the post. This helps to control the type of comments made in Secret, as discussed later in the essay.

There are two streams in Secret, as shown in Figure 1. The first is the "Friend" stream, which includes posts from the user's Friends or Friends of Friends. The Explore stream, on the other hand, includes posts by other Secret users that are near the reader, and are 3 or more degrees removed from this reader, as well as featured posts selected by Secret. In the Explore stream, the distance or general location of the poster, depending on how many degrees the poster and reader are removed from each other is shown. The Explore stream makes use of the phone's Global Positioning System (GPS) to look for and allow the user to see posts that are near them, and this is a unique feature of CMC that face-to-face speech

does not have. Face-to-face conversations are only possible within the speaker's immediate hearing vicinity, whereas the GPS allows users to respond to conversations as if they are in a virtual community(Fox & Roberts, 1999), despite being too far away for face-to-face speech. This allows people that have never met before to communicate easily and freely.

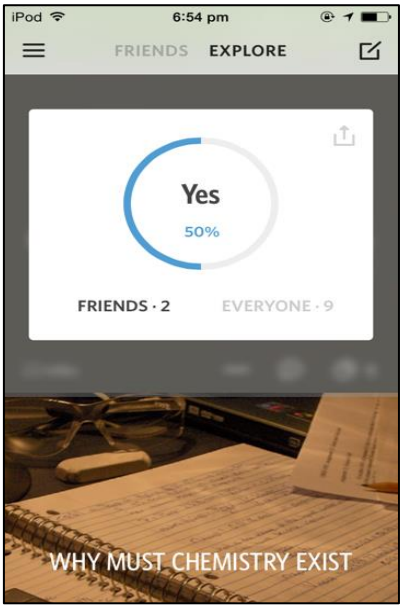

Figure 1 - Screenshot 1 of Secret

One feature of Secret that is central to its appeal to users is the opportunity to speak freely without consequences. – Anonymity. Firstly, there are many platforms on the internet that allows people to connect with others through their real identities (E.g. Facebook), manufactured ones (Twitter), or just anonymously (4chan). The difference between the first kind of identity and the last two kinds, is that the first one allows the user to connect with people that they – in theory, at least – know in real life, whereas the other two usually only allow the user to communicate with strangers on the internet. Secret, though, is like a marriage between Facebook and complete anonymity. In Secret, people can communicate with people that they already are connected with, just like Facebook, except anonymously.

Past research has also shown that when presented with an opportunity to speak freely without consequences (anonymity), people are more forthright and tend to post more offensive comments(Donath, 1999). In addition, public computer-mediated discourse has also been shown to be less polite than private computer-mediated discourse(Herring, 2002). Hence, by controlling who is able to read and comment on a post, the privacy of Secret is increased, and the prevalence of offensive comments due to anonymity are expected to

decrease. This is in line with Secret's goal to encourage people to express themselves, endorse and spread ideas that they like, and connect with others freely(Secret, 2014b).

As mean comments are still an unavoidable side-effect of anonymity that is impossible to eliminate, the developers of Secret have also improved the application's name detection technology, to determine if the subject of the post is a person, and is actively blocking posts with the names of individuals when it can(Etherington, 2014).Furthermore, mean comments or posts Secret are moderated by users who can help flag or report such comments or posts if they find them overly offensive to the subject of the post or comment. This is something that is not possible in speech, since whatever a person says cannot be checked for defamatory content, and then prevented from being spoken.

Furthermore, as Secret is text-based computer-mediated communication system, it is repeatedly revisable in the sense that if the poster is not happy with their post, they can simply delete it and repost another one in its place(Byttow, 2014), and since posts are not sent out to other users immediately after posting, the poster can prevent a post from being posted on Secret if they delete it fast enough. This is different from speech, where the minute one says something, whatever has been said cannot be retrieved and 'edited' by the producer of this speech. There is also another downside to the anonymity that Secret offers – the truth-value of its posts. While anonymity does encourage people to be more brutally honest about their opinions, it also causes an opposite effect. Anonymity means anything can be posted, regardless of whether they are true or not. In face-to-face speech, if somebody tells a lie, and is exposed, they would be very embarrassed. However, on a medium like Secret where nobody knows who the author of the post is, it is easy to post something untrue, and not take responsibility for it(Suler, 2004). Although anonymity might decrease the feeling of closeness among online users, as suggested by Sato and Yoshida(2008), Secret resolves it by telling the user if the Secret comes from a Friend, a Friend of Friend, or is from a nearby user. Such small revelations of how each poster is related to the reader, allows one to feel a special sense of familiarity, especially with posts that come from their Friends. Furthermore, the mystery of the posters' identities is also part of what keeps people hooked on Secret. In fact, based on a blog post by Secret(2014a) "5% of people with more than 5 friends come back every day. Furthermore, 90% of users that engage in a conversation come back within the week, often several times per day."

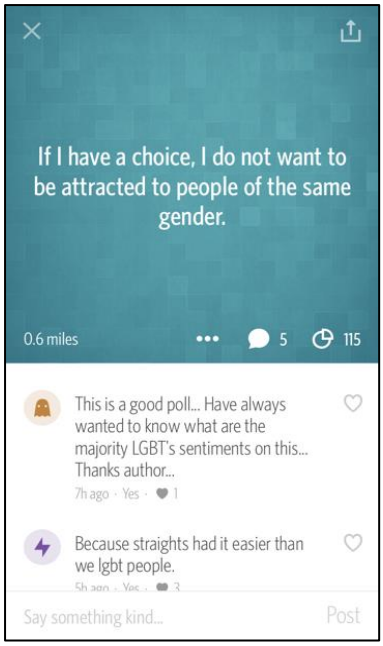

Figure 2 - Screenshot 2 of Secret

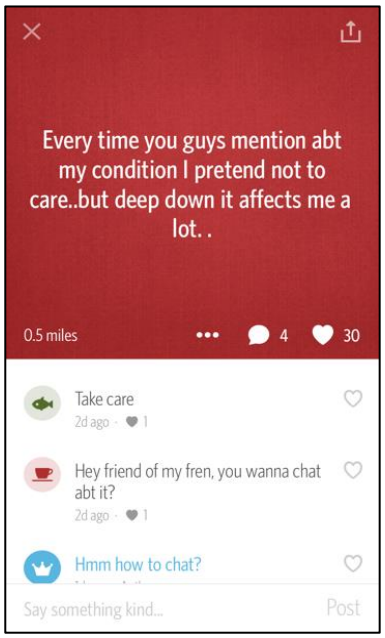

Figure 3 - Screenshot 3 of Secret

In addition, due to its promise of anonymity, Secret, seems to have attracted a large number of people from the gay community in Singapore. There are no official statistics about the people using this application, and one person's experience is not representative of the entire Singapore society, but most of the posts I get have been posted by members of the gay community in Singapore. This might be because homosexuals are not readily accepted in conservative Singapore society(Goh, 2008; Lim, 2002). Secret offers a platform for these people to be open about their preferences without fear of being judged, as seen in Figure 2. Being text-based, Secret offers something that face-to-face speech cannot – a cloak of anonymity for interlocutors to hide behind, and this attracts people that are not able to speak freely in face-to-face conversations with people that they know, for fear of being judged. This results in the usage of certain Singapore-only terms. For example, a term that is often seen on Secret is "AJ", which is Singaporean slang for referring to gays.

This leads to the next point about the posters' perceived audience of their posts. Although it is impossible for the posters to see who and where their readers come from, many posters simply assume that their readers are Singaporeans, based on their "Friends" list, and would be able to understand certain terms that they mention in their posts, like AJ for example. Also, the language that is used is very informal, almost like a short text message to a friend. In addition, some posts are typed in such a way that the author sounds like they are speaking to the person that they are writing about directly, as seen in Figure 3, but the

object of their discussion most probably will not see it or think that it is about them. It is vague enough that friends of this author will not be able to identify the original poster.

Another unique feature of Secret is that secrets are not shown in a chronological order to users. This is different from most Computer-mediated communication systems, like Twitter, where the newest posts are added at the top of the Timeline. For example, if Person A talks about an event and posts it on Secret, this post is not immediately released to other users. The application first runs a test to see who is able to receive the post, and then send the posts to each user randomly at different times. Hence, a post can appear at the top of a user's list a month after it was originally posted. This is part of the numerous measures placed by Secret's developers to prevent posters' identities from being easily exposed(Byttow, 2014). As a result, most secrets are not dependent on the time that they were posted, unlike Twitter, where most tweets refer to events that are happening at the same time(Sankaranarayanan, Samet, Teitler, Lieberman, & Sperling, 2009).

This non-chronological order of posts on Secret also has implications on the way that conversations are held in a particular post comment thread. Unlike speech, which is synchronous and transient, Secret as a text-based CMC, is asynchronous, which means that users do not need to be on Secret, reading the same post, at the same time, in order to send and receive the messages in the post(Herring, 2007). In fact, communication on Secret is a one-way transmission(Cherny, 1999) in which people can only comment on a post when it appears in their stream, and do not know if someone is in the midst of responding to their comment or post until the other party has sent the message.

Unlike face-to-face conversations, Secret is visually decontextualized as it is a text-based CMC, and with the absence of usernames, there needs to be another way of differentiating each commenter in a post without compromising their identities. Secret resolves this with iconic avatars. When a user receives a secret from his or her (extended) circle of friends, a random unique token is created for that user for that particular comment thread, as seen in Figure 2, where the first commenter is represented by a yellow ghost avatar. In addition, if this yellow-ghost-avatar user comments on another post, they will be given another random unique token for that other post. Hence, the author of the post, or other commenters, is able to respond to the different comments in the thread without causing confusion. This

highlights one of the ways in which Secret differs from face-to-face speech. In face-to-face conversation, it is easy to indicate who is being spoken or responded to by facing them or calling their names. However, in Secret, where the faces and names of people involved in a comment thread are unknown, there needs to be a way of referring to a specific commenter in a thread. Therefore, this gives rise to the unique way of referring to other users on a comment thread in Secret – Descriptions of the iconic avatars assigned to each user, as seen in Figure 2. This also means that personally identifiable data is unnecessary in Secret.

Users are also able to attach images from Flickr as the background of their posts. As Secret is a visually-based medium of communication, it has enabled ways of presenting and emphasising one's ideas or feelings that is impossible to do so in speech(Suler, 2008). For example, if someone is talking candies, they can put candies as the background of their post, as a way of emphasising the subject of the post that is candies. Also, as Secret is pretty much text-based, words can be typed in a away similar to concrete poetry so as to emphasise the point made by the author, or are simply there for aesthetic purposes only.

Secret has also recently added a new function for users to convert their posts into polls for readers. This has resulted in Secret slowly moving away from a Twitter-like style of posting, to asking yes or no questions, making it much more interactive, as users can now choose to approve or not approve of a certain idea, and see what others think, as shown in Figures 1 and 2, which only appears after the user has voted yes or no for a particular post. It hard to discuss such sensitive issues in face-to-face speech, but the anonymity that Secret offers allows such discussion to take place, and for people to honestly state their opinions without fearing the judgement of others. This is supported in 4chan(Bernstein et al., 2011) where anonymity seems to encourage intimate and open conversations. Hence, controversial or sensitive topics can be more easily discussed under the cover of anonymity.

In conclusion, Secret is very different from speech because it is mainly a text-based CMC. This has opened the doors to many ways of expressing oneself and communicating with others, but it is also limited because of certain characteristics of speech that it lacks, such as being prosodically rich and having immediate (synchronous) responses. I think the line between the public and private lines of people are becoming blurred, and nothing is truly a secret anymore if it is posted on the internet, albeit anonymously.

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