

Simmel on Secrecy. A Legacy and Inheritance for the Sociology of Information

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Introduction

Using Simmel's article "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies" as a point of departure (Simmel 1906: 441-498), this chapter examines selected aspects of the social scientific field of secrecy. As Simmel conceptualized it, the secret is a central means for information control in contemporary society. A brief survey of Simmel's writing on secrecy leads to a first conclusion that Simmel's impact was rather diffuse at best. As is consistent with his approach, Simmel offers sensitizing principles, which a contemporary researcher might take as groundwork for future research. Here as elsewhere (Marx & Muschert 2007: 375-395), we argue that what is needed is a sociology of information framework for the study of information flows, restrictions and blockages in contemporary society. We outline the framework and some related concepts connected to secrecy: including, publicity, privacy, secrecy, the paradoxes of information, and the value of information. We conclude with a suggestion about how Simmel's writing on secrecy might be usefully connected with his more famous piece on money (Simmel 1978 [1900]). By considering information as an object of value subject to principles of exchange, we suggest a number of propositions which might serve future research within a sociology of information framework.

Simmel's secrecy legacy, as perhaps fits the topic, is not as apparent as is his impact in other areas such as the study of conflict, urbanization and money. But there are clues and fragments of an unfinished puzzle whose broad outline can be grasped. The central source is his 1906 article, "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies" published first (perhaps surprisingly) in English in *The American Journal of Sociology* in a challenging translation by Albion Small and later in a more readable version in a translation by Kurt H. Wolff. A fragment on the secret in German appeared the following year in the newspaper, *Der Tag* (Simmel [1907] 1993: 317-323) and a year later the longer article, "Das Geheimnis und die geheime Gesellschaft" appeared as the fifth chapter in *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (Simmel 1908: 247-336).

Fundamental to Simmel's writings on secrecy was an exploration of the role of information in social interactions. Simmel pointed out that it is clearly necessary for an individual to know something about the other parties in an interaction, and he noted this as a precondition to interaction. However, this knowledge of the other always exists somewhere between full knowledge (which is unattainable) and complete ignorance. When faced with a

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lack of information about another, an individual may compensate by supplying what is imagined to be true. Thus, all social interactions occur as a reciprocal process in which the actual knowledge of another believed to be correct is supplemented by the assumed facts about the other. Incomplete knowledge of others may require some form of confidence. In fact, the incomplete aspect of information in social relations necessitates trust, considered by some sociologists (e.g., Emile Durkheim) to be a central element of society. Thus, confidence serves as the intermediary between complete knowledge and complete ignorance of others. This modernization process has expanded greatly in the recent decades – encouraged by societal changes such as increased interaction with strangers or highly circumscribed contact with those we hardly know and the increased significance of distance-mediated interactions across cultures and time.

In some ways, there is more control over information (and more information to be controlled) and more space for keeping information from others in modern societies. Rules about revelation and concealment are also more developed.

True to form, Simmel left a legacy in bits and pieces, and such a legacy is often difficult to track, as it is found in scraps examining some basic forms of social life.¹ While Sim-

1 Simmel on secrecy has received minimal attention in English reference materials. The entry in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (Seligman 1935) on Simmel does not mention his work on secrecy. In the same volume, a piece on secret societies does reference Simmel's chapter of 1908, but unlike several other scholars, does not specifically refer to his ideas in the body of the text. Secret society does appear almost 50 years ago in *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (Gould & Kolb 1964), however Simmel receives no mention, and there is no entry on Simmel. The *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Sills 1968) article on Simmel refers to the secret society as an example of a structural principle defining a type of group, but offers no consideration of its substance or social processes. Contemporary reference books offer little on the topic. The subjects of secrecy and secret societies are rarely mentioned. There are no entries for the terms in the *Penguin Dictionary of Sociology* (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1994), *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* (Marshall 1994), and the *Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* (Turner 2006). Although each of the dictionaries contains an entry on Simmel, the topic of secrecy is not mentioned. There are no entries for secrecy or secret societies in the *Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Borgatta & Montgomery 2000), *Encyclopedia of Social Theory* (Ritzer 2005), and *Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists* (Ritzer 2000). Simmel is considered, but the articles make no mention of his work on secrecy. A reference to Simmel on secrecy does appear in the *International Encyclopedia of Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Smelser & Baltes 2001: 13780-3): "Secrecy, Anthropology of." There are various dictionaries and encyclopedias of secret societies, conspiracies, or fraternal orders (e.g., Steiger & Steiger 2006; Axelrod 1997), but none of these mention Simmel. Similarly, there are scant references to secrecy in the sections on Simmel in most current undergraduate and graduate-level social theory texts. Even Coser, whose sociological theory is closely associated with Simmelian thought, does not discuss secrecy in his textbook (Coser 1977). An exception is a textbook by Ritzer & Goodman which examines Simmel's writing on secrecy, which they characterize as a "characteristic type of Simmelian scholarship" (Ritzer & Goodman 2004: 176). A key point in contemporary texts is that secrecy as a social form is linked to the scale of a society, such that a social organization with a highly-differentiated division of labor will result in relatively more secrecy in social relations than in a homogeneous society (ibid.:177). Searching academic databases can help us see the career of a work over decades. Because Simmel's essay on secrecy appeared in several iterations in a variety of languages and is sprinkled throughout his articles on other topics, it is difficult precisely to track its impact. The *Social Sciences Citation Index* only extends back to 1965, thus excluding Simmel's publications on secrecy. In the database *Sociological Index*, Simmel's (1906) *American Journal of Sociology* article is cited fourteen times, six times in the 2000s, four times in the 1990s, thrice in the 1970s, and once in the 1950s. While underwhelming given references to Weber or Durkheim, references to Simmel's article likely far exceeds the number of contemporary references to any other sociology article published in 1906. The gradual increase in references over the last four decades speaks to his increasing relevance.

mel's intellectual scope and aspirations were grand, our effort here is modest and selective. We consider some of his ideas of contemporary relevance, and we note how Simmel's prescient work is consistent with the need for an expanded sociology of information control.

Linking Simmel on Secrecy with Contemporary Information Studies

Simmel's essay on secrecy is diffuse, covering an array of rather unconnected ideas and topics such as the knowledge individuals have of each other, communication, the lie; the social patterning of concealment as this involves forms such as interest groups, friendship and marriage; the social functions of secrecy and, at a more social psychological level, our "peculiar attraction" to it and its' opposite – betrayal; and finally, the organizational form of the secret society.

Simmel was more interested in secrecy as an idealized form and for what it could tell us about society and human behavior than for its content. Simmel was a humanist operating from a Kantian idealistic background with a strong interest in the cognitive filters that come between our understanding and the external world. But in a unique juxtaposition, he was also an astute empirical observer (if undisciplined and unburdened by the emergence of modern sociological methods) and self-reflector in search of general sociological principles.

Provocative essay writing can be a vital first step for more organized social inquiry. It requires what ought to be the first tool of any scholar – thought, rather than a team to do research or sophisticated methods. After a brief review, rather than a critique, we offer an elaboration and extension of his pioneering work. The conception of information Simmel offered was expansive, involving both personal and public life. Understanding the contours and social functions and dysfunctions for various groups of sharing and withholding, and

Table 1, in the appendix at the end of this article, presents the results of subject searches for "secrecy" and "secret societies" in three other databases, Sociological Abstracts, Legal Collection, and Mass Media & Communication Complete, by decade.

Of the three disciplines searched, sociology has been the most active in examining both secrecy and secret societies, while legal and communications research has been conducted on the rules and processes of secrecy, but not secret societies. In contrast, historians and anthropologists have been active in studying secret societies in the past and in non-Western cultures. The subject headings for the library databases mirror many of Simmel's concerns: Secrecy; Children's Secrets; Confidential Communications; Family Secrets; Hiding Places; Official Secrets; Privacy; Trade Secrets; Defense Information, Classified; and Secrecy Law and Legislation. Much of the writing on secrecy can be found within four topical groups: **1)** studies of the interpersonal processes and qualities of secrecy, including conversational analyses (e.g. Parker 1986), and secrecy as a dynamic in small group interactions, including peer groups, families and intimate partners (e.g. Bok 1982; Cottle 1980; Inness 1992; Lochrie 1999); **2)** studies of secrecy and openness in government organizations (e.g. Bok 1982; Coser 1963; Galnoor 1977; Ku 1998; Roberts 2006; Robertson 1982; Scheppele 1988; Tefft 1980) and undercover policing (e.g. Marx 1988; Westley 1956) but also trade secrets and business strategies (e.g. Bok 1982; Genua 1992; Tefft 1980) and access to information by citizens (e.g., Scheppele, 1988; Theoharis, 1998) or professional groups (e.g. Chamberlin & Scheppele, 1991); **3)** studies of space, including spatial concealment and secret passages and rooms (e.g. Errand 1974; Lloyd & O'Brien 2000); **4)** studies of secret societies (e.g. Daraul 1983; Ericson 1981; Hawthorn 1956; Hazelrigg 1969; Roberts 1972; Steiger & Steiger 2006).

seeking and avoiding, information should be a central task for students of society. In focusing on fundamental social forms Simmel provides us with “sensitizing linkages across diverse substantive fields [that] highlight underlying processes at work through which interaction is accomplished” (Plummer 2000: 199).

Simmel contrasts types of society in noting the changing forms and role of information. He points out that in pre-modern societies with geographic predictability and a less-developed division of labor, individuals had greater knowledge of those they were dealing with. In modern urban life, interaction increasingly relied on assumptions regarding the truth about others. He evoked the term “credit society” (Simmel 1906: 446), as a way of understanding the reliability of others’ behaviors. A century ago, he noted the probabilistic nature of so much of modern social interaction, a trend which has greatly intensified. With ever increasing divisions of labor, specialization and complexity, social life becomes more standardized, controlled and segmented or compartmentalized. This alters the conditions and meaning of trust as we have less complete knowledge of many of those we encounter in large scale, differentiated, mobile society. This also leads to the creation of new discovery and analysis mechanisms.

In some ways there are now fewer secrets and we see the increased standardization of information. But on the other hand, there are also greater chances for encryption and logistical barriers may be enhanced due to the volume of information available. Using Simmel’s rubric, can we predict the trends in secrecy in individual, organizational, and mass social life? Coser’s explanation of Simmel’s thought stems from the idea that forms of social interaction may attain a permanency and autonomy, and may confront the individual as an exterior force (Coser 1977). Although Coser does not discuss Simmel on secrecy, this assumption may be extended to the concept of secrecy, as we are aware that secrets are a human construct emerging from the withholding of information in interactions, however at times the social relations of secrecy may appear particularly persistent and autonomous from the individuals holding them as reflection of culture and setting. Accordingly, secrecy is an appropriate focus for the study of social relations, as it emerges in interaction as its existence relies on the deliberate withholding of information in social interactions. The human creation of information, and withholding the same, is a relational prerequisite to secrecy in social relations. However the form of the secret also depends upon the social context, as Simmel argued the character of modern society brought distinct changes. In pre-modern society, the social circle encompassed the totality of a person’s existence, while modern humans find their interaction and identity within a much larger number of social circles. Thus, the existence and the function of secrets changes along with the character of social relations.

The ability of the new technologies to pierce previously impenetrable physical borders and create new borders offers a rich field for studying the emergence of new prescriptive and proscriptive information norms and the ability to enforce and undermine these. The same is true of new means to communicate. The topic has particular relevance to contemporary society which has seen an acceleration in the distance mediated interactions of those who are strangers (at least in the conventional sense of face-to-face interaction and direct histories together). With the vast increase in knowledge and means of saving information, there is so very much more information that can be known about individuals and groups

(apart from whether those to whom it pertains have the information and hence are in a position to reveal or conceal it). As noted, in an increasing number of contexts there is less information available about individuals in any broad or deep sense. This involves a turn to the credit society model of basing decisions on profiles or averages. Of this, we offer more later, however at present we turn to a presentation of a developing analytical framework with conceptual linkages to Simmel's work.

A Sociology of Information Framework

The study of secrecy needs to be systematically linked to other aspects of information control. That is, secrecy involves efforts to manage information, whether withholding or revealing, and reciprocally discovering or resisting discovery. Merging some of Simmel's insights with developments over the last century, we argue that there is need for a broader field of *the sociology of information*² with a particular emphasis on the structures, processes and consequences of several types of information control in various substantive contexts and structural settings. Central here is to study forms that vary in degree of symmetry with respect to the goals and resources of the interacting parties and the distribution of expectations regarding information.

Simmel is most helpful and original in noting the emergent, fluid and creative quality of the interpretations and exchanges of interaction, and he also noted how these were channeled by cultural forms. He was less attentive to, and less taken with, the external constraining power of norms as fixed entities than someone like Durkheim. Yet his discussion of sociological forms can be read as implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) involving the idea of norms. An emphasis on the rules about information in general should constitute an important part of a broader field of the sociology of information.

The approach involves specifying the norms governing information, including the specification of the role expectations surrounding information handling. These issues cut across varying social situations, including formal institutional settings and less formal interpersonal interactions. At times, interactions might be legally defined, and at others determined by common folkways. The more the means of producing, processing, and storing information change, the more these norms become problematic. As in Simmel's day, contemporary developments of information technology open vast opportunities for social scientists to study changes in normative structures and behavior. Table 2 outlines elements of the sociology of information approach.

2 See Marx & Muschert (Marx & Muschert 2007: 375-395).

Table 2: Elements of a Sociology of Information

1. Operationally defines and keeps distinct (yet notes relations among) a family of concepts encompassing personal, group and organizational information – e.g., privacy and publicity, public and private, personal and impersonal data, surveillance and surveillance neutralization, secrecy, confidentiality, anonymity, pseudo-anonymity, identifiability, and confessions
2. Identifies the characteristics of the data gathering/blocking and communication techniques – both those inherent and socially determined by policy and practices
3. Identifies the stated goals and latent consequences
4. Identifies role relationships and other social structural aspects including types of borders and directional flows and content of information and information accessibility (reciprocity and symmetry)
5. Identifies spatial and locational aspects
6. Identifies the type of information involved
7. Identifies the form of the data
8. Identifies cultural themes and symbols which provide meaning and direction in telling us how information gathering and communication should be judged and how we should experience it
9. Identifies the social process aspects

Source: Marx & Muschert 2007: 382.

Concepts in Secrecy

To survey is to seek to discover and note information. The discovery of secrets (or at least what is not known) may involve surveillance. Depending on how it is used, active surveillance can affect the presence of privacy and/or publicity. As nouns, the latter can be seen as polar ends of a continuum involving rules about withholding and disclosing, and seeking or not seeking, information. Depending on the context, social roles and culture, individuals or groups may be required, find it optional, or be prohibited from engaging in these activities, whether as subjects or agents of surveillance and communication. When the rules specify that a surveillance agent is not to ask certain questions of (or about) a subject we can speak of privacy norms. Subjects may or may not have discretion to reveal their personal information, apart from the rules applying to agents. For example, a person may be prohibited from revealing that one works for a spy agency or, under court conditions that one is the birth parent of an adopted child.

A sociology of information approach emphasizing norms joins freedom of information and right to know issues with the right to control personal information – a logic reflec-

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ted in some European and Canadian privacy commissions (Flaherty 1989; Bennett & Raab 2006). Simmel touched emerging expectations about acquiring information and the legitimization of surveillance in noting, “In general, men credit themselves with the right to know everything which, without application of external illegal means, through purely psychological observation and reflection, it is possible to ascertain” (Simmel 1906: 455). In this section, we clarify some concepts related to information control.

Privacy and Publicity

We need to differentiate information as a normative phenomena involving moral expectations (whether for protection or revelation and whether based on law, policy or custom) from the actual empirical status of the information as known or unknown. For this we need the related terms private and public – adjectives that can tell us about the status of information. Whether information is known or unknown has an objective quality and can be relatively easily measured. For example the gender and face of persons we see on the street is generally visible and known. The information is “public.” In contrast, the political and religious beliefs of pedestrians are generally invisible and unknown.

Privacy and publicity can be thought of in literal and metaphorical spatial terms involving invisibility-visibility and inaccessibility-accessibility. The privacy offered by a closed door and walls and an encrypted email message share information restriction, even as they differ in many other ways. Internet forums are not geographically localized, but in their accessibility can be usefully thought of as public places, not unlike the traditional public square where exchanges with others are possible. Simmel implies such differences in contrasting the transparency of windows with the solidity of doors (Simmel, 1994 – of course, that was before modern glass doors).

Privacy and Secrecy

Privacy and publicity are inherently social, and the terms would be irrelevant to Robinson Crusoe when he thought he was alone on the island. They necessarily imply an “other” from whom information is withheld or to whom it is communicated and who may, or may not, be under equivalent expectations to reveal and conceal. Confidentiality refers to rules about how discovered information is to be treated. It necessitates at least two parties and calls attention to social interaction and the rules and expectations that enshroud it. All persons keep certain things to themselves or private, but to talk of confidentiality implies that information has already been obtained by a second party. For example once a doctor appropriately has personal information about a patient, the information is no longer “private” from the doctor. This can be viewed as a shared secret, even though the prohibition on revelation (accept under approved conditions) applies only to the surveillance agent (the doctor). The doctor can hardly be accused of invading the privacy of the patient. Yet if patient information is improperly released, the physician could be accused of violating the norms of confidentiality.

The nature and properties of the information suggest an important set of variables. The kind of information withheld or revealed is significant. For example, how does the information reflect on the organization or person to whom it pertains – is it stigmatizing, morally disvalued, disadvantageous; morally and socially neutral; or is it prestige enhancing, morally valued and advantageous?³ Of course like reflections in water, the view is rarely singular and to a degree will depend on who is judging. The organization and dynamics of information control of course will differ depending on the above.

By convention, secrecy is often used to refer to organizational data and privacy to that of individuals. Since organizations do not generally have “rights” in the same sense that individuals do, it may make sense to call what they can withhold, such as patent details and internal records, organizational secrets. What they must reveal can be called mandated organizational reportage. However apart from legal meanings, many of the information control processes are the same regardless of whether we are dealing with organizations or individuals.

What is fundamental is the issue of information control. There is no compelling reason to call the protection of negative information secrecy and its opposite privacy. Whether as noun, adjective or verb the meanings of secret and secrecy overlap those of privacy and private. Norms may require secrecy or the opposite. As with private and public, the empirical status of information may be secret or known, apart from whether this is right or wrong according to the information rules. The broader terms protected and unprotected information can be used to include both privacy and secrecy and their opposites, whether this refers to the rules about the information or its current empirical status.

An Information Paradox

Keeping and discovering secrets need to be considered alongside of their opposites – revealing and resisting the receipt information. Simmel is interesting because he appreciated the richness of social reality which can dampen the simple, directional, natural science law-like statements about the causes and consequences of social behavior.

Consider the paradoxical need to reveal that there *is* a secret in contexts where knowledge about this is a resource for the secret holder, even as the content of the secret needs to be hidden to be of value, while tempting discovery by those who now know there is a secret. Bellman notes that for organizational secrets to endure they must be passed to others, in a sense broadening the base of those in the know with attendant risks that the information will get out (Bellman 1984). We can apply Simmel’s attentiveness to issues of scale here in noting that the more widely held a secret is (and even the knowledge that there is a secret) the less likely it is to remain secret. In close relations, sharing secrets is a valuable resource in which individuals are implicitly saying, “even though there is a risk here, I trust you to treat this sensitive information appropriately and it is only fair that you trust me with secrets as well.” This type of telling others, “I’ve got a secret,” is distinct from the secrecy of deception in which perceptions are manipulated through withholding or outright fabrication. This hidden property of the secret also creates a vast space for deception in pretending

3 Marx notes 10 kinds of information that can be used to characterize persons (Marx 2006: 87-88).

that one has a/the secret when that is not the case. Co-conspirators have a shared interest in maintaining silence, but also face the risk that what binds them together involves a resource for betrayal. At a more psychological level for many secrets there is a tension between withholding and telling. Simmel's writing of the "fascination of secrecy" is apt.

Secrecy and the Value of Information

A further paradoxical element involves the value of information. Simmel's observation that money, in permitting interactions independent of deep (or almost any) knowledge of the other, vastly expands possibilities for interaction (Simmel 1978 [1900]: 431). This also applies to information, which can be a generalized medium for creating networks far beyond those bound by a shared geographical location, social characteristics and extensive mutual knowledge. Its flows are in some ways equivalent to those of money and commodities.

Like money, restricted information can be a stratification resource. The information an individual (or group) has can be viewed as a commodity. Simmel refers to the secret as a form of "inner property," which can be exchanged for money and power. Political and industrial secrets can of course be converted into money by being sold (although a delicate two-step and additional element of secrecy regarding the transaction may be involved here when such sale is morally dubious). To be in possession of secret information can be a source of prestige and may symbolize an individual's importance. Simmel suggests it is like a form of adornment (Simmel 1950: 338-344). Prestige and influence may be accrued by those perceived to be "in the know". Any insightful blackmailer knows the commodity value of information lies in its scarcity and the ability of secret holders to restrict access. A secret that becomes public loses its value to the initial holder.

Interestingly, in other contexts, we see the opposite. Erving Goffman noted that information is the only form of property that need not be diminished in value by being shared (Goffman 1969). In public relations, advertising and propaganda, the more widely known the information, the greater its value to its source. In contrast to the value of secrets, the very scarcity of advertised information decreases its value. Simmel was able to see the positive and negative aspects, (traditionally known as the functions and dysfunctions of secrecy) in different contexts. In adapting this view today's commentators need to indicate which social groups are helped and which are harmed by secrecy and disclosure.

The Value of Information in Social Relations

One of the ways that individuals form groups is through their association with others around knowledge they share. The denial of such knowledge to others creates a border that can heighten in-group solidarity and may even be the *raison d'être* for the group.⁴ This is most clear in the secret society, in contrast to more open and inclusive organizations.

4 Aldous Huxley captures this cohesive social contribution of secrecy more broadly for all groups in noting: "To associate with other like-minded people in small, purposeful groups is for the great majority of men and women a source of profound psychological satisfaction. Exclusiveness will add to the pleasure of being several, but at one; and secrecy will intensify it almost to ecstasy." (Huxley 2000 [1934]: 526).

As with any social resource or tool, telling or not telling can be central to obtaining a group's or individual's goals and yet it can also be highly destructive of social relations. Here, the in-group is dependent on the creation of an out-group, and the hiding of illegal and/or immoral behavior makes a mockery of principles and can protect a malefactor. Yet departing from any Kantian imperatives, Simmel also noted, full disclosure in all settings would make group life impossible. There are a variety of formal and informal mechanisms aimed at reigning in the negative aspects of secrecy and accentuating the positive, and this applies to disclosure. Privacy, or more broadly the ability to control personal information, can be the means for both "community" at varying levels and can also be destructive of it. This is the case for the secret organization (or one with secrets), a community that tolerates strangers, and also in intimate personal relations.

Simmel noted the dualism of social relationships, "concord, harmony, co-efficacy, which are unquestionably held to be socializing forces, must nevertheless be interspersed with distance, competition, repulsion, in order to yield the actual configuration of society" and "relationships being what they are, they also presuppose a certain ignorance and a measure of mutual concealment" (Simmel 1950: 334). Individuals need to guard information about their private lives (whether this involves the solitary person or a family group). Yet friendship, intimacy and trust are premised on significant disclosure and discretion in deciding what information to offer. Closeness in interpersonal relationships exists on a continuum of discretion and disclosure.

Thus, interactions around secrecy and withholding need to be balanced with attention to efforts to communicate information. With current market research and so many new means of communicating, imposing information upon the person is increasingly common, as ever more areas are colonized (whether through sound, images, smells or unwanted messages such as telemarketing and spam). What if Simmel made a visit to a contemporary supermarket and was greeted with his own image on a video monitor, heard advertising on a loudspeaker, provided a discount card to the checkout clerk, and received personalized (or at least "profilized") messages on the sales receipt promising future discounts? One can imagine what clever use he would make of such experiences. Most people are apathetic to such experiences, just as Simmel anticipated resistance in his writing about the metropolis with its overabundance of stimuli and the development of a *blasé* attitude toward others encountered in mass, impersonal contexts. (Simmel 1950: 409). The collection and communication of information may of course be joined as with Orwell's two-way telescreen.

In Simmel's Footsteps: Some Hypotheses

Considering our increasingly credit-driven society, Simmel's assessment of the role of information is prescient. Although Simmel did not further develop this train of thought in relation to secrecy, he laid groundwork. One key notion is that information has value, and that its flow may be analogous to the flow of money or a commodity. In contemporary life, individuals find themselves in a paradoxical relationship regarding information. That is, we live

in a world of information flows, and although we experience these flows as external to ourselves, we nonetheless participate in their communication, both as transmitters and receivers. Information presents itself as an external social fact, and although we may be at a loss to understand the relevance of much of the information we produce and consume, we nonetheless have a sense that part of us is socially constituted in that flow of information. Although we cannot fully assimilate all information in our environments, we nonetheless feel that much of it is relevant to our personal and cultural development.

In his essay, *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel examines money relations as exemplary of many modern social relations (Simmel [1900] 1978). Simmel takes an economic rationale to value, by assuming that those things that have value are those that are relatively difficult to get. Because it had value, and therefore could be exchanged, money made the creation of abstract markets possible. Simmel saw the importance of the individual declining as money became an increasing mode of exchange. He postulated that this would lead to a number of negative effects in individuals' lives, among them, a social cynicism that all things of value were commodities, an increasing social isolation that derived from the impersonalization of economic relations, and the subordination of individual freedom and the reduction of human values to cost and benefits.

Information exchanges might fruitfully be considered as a form of sociation. Advancing a set of hypotheses that may be selected for empirical inquiry in future studies could help to hedge against the common criticism of Simmel's approach to sociology: that he lacked a systematic approach to sociological inquiry, and that his ad hoc, phenomenological character of inquiry impeded the sharing of objective information and the construction of academic knowledge (Abel 1965). Rather than levelling a reciprocal criticism of the positivistic philosophy of science, we adopt Simmel's approach that sociological analysis relies both on the empirical observation of forms of social interaction, and the subjective interpretations of those forms of sociation given by the observers of social life.

"Forms of sociation generally determine opportunities for and limitations upon action" (Münch 1994: 113). The same is true for surveillance and communication behaviors related to secrecy. Such forms "provide an a priori synthesis of historically particular social interactions" (ibid.: 113). In the current situation, information technologies can force a redefinition of norms, and this tends to be toward more formal definitions in law and policy as opposed to informal mechanisms of social control. In relationship to Simmel's writings on money, Münch and Allan relate a number of propositions that might be utilized for empirical testing of relationships related to information and individuality in society (ibid.: 113-115; Allan 2005: 210).⁵

5 Hazelrigg also presents nine propositions related to secret societies (Hazelrigg 1969: 323-330).

Table 3: Exemplary Hypotheses

Hypotheses related to the Effects of Social Life on Information

1. The smaller the group, the greater and deeper knowledge of others in social interactions. The dyad is the extreme case. Conversely, larger groups lead to less and more superficial knowledge of others in social interactions (Münch).
2. The larger the group, the more information becomes independent of single individuals (Münch).
3. The greater the social differentiation of roles, the greater a society's reliance (and value) on analysis of personal information.
4. The greater the level of development and differentiation within a society, the greater the role of probabilistic reasoning in social and economic relations.
5. The more generous the system of exchange (information in return for something desired) the more likely it will be tolerated (Gilliom).

Hypotheses related to the Effects of Information on Social Life

6. The greater the development of information systems, the more behaviors related to information collection, processing, and communication will proceed from folkways and personal morality to mores, conventions, and laws (Münch). In common law systems, this process tends to be crisis driven.
7. The more social interaction comes to rely on impersonal information, the more information becomes an end in itself, displacing longer-standing goals for social life (Allan).
8. The more information becomes a mediator of interaction, the greater the division of labor in information work (Münch).
9. The more information mediates social interactions, the greater the number of people on which each member of society depends (Münch). This is in contrast to the use of local knowledge.
10. The more information mediates interactions, the more intimate ties to individuals are diminished (Allan).
11. The more information mediates interactions, the greater the threat to social trust (Allan).

Sources: Hypotheses are derived or adapted from the work of Allan (Allan 2005), Gilliom (Gilliom 2001) and Münch (Münch 1994), as indicated.

By developing Simmel's exchange principle of money, this logic may be expanded to include information as something of value and as an element of exchange. Much of the social interaction surrounding information is characterized by an exchange relationship. That is, providing information in return for something (e.g. information, money, discounts, bor-

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der crossing, benefits). Hence, information has a value, and other factors being equal, this is related to the difficulty of obtaining it – the more difficult, the greater the value. The social form of the secret may be a way to increase the value of information, at least temporarily. As suggested, information may be a medium of exchange, as it becomes increasingly abstracted and pervasive. Here we see a parallel to Simmel’s ideas on money: the more important information (like money) becomes, the less attention there is to the full person.

The technical changes in surveillance and communications means have brought great challenges to contemporary norms of information control. With the advent of computerization and other information related tools, these fundamental changes are altering norms and related social forms that govern social life. Simmel’s thinking about secrecy as a means of information control can help us understand the new forms of sociation emerging in a rapidly developing information society.

Appendix to footnote 1

Table 1: Use of “Secrecy” and “Secret Societies” as Article Keywords, 1900-Present

Database	Soc. Abstracts		Legal Coll.		Comm. & Mass Media Complete	
	Secrecy	Secret Societies	Secrecy	Secret Societies	Secrecy	Secret Societies
2000s	113	26	40	2	20	-
1990s	54	14	19	3	5	-
1980s	33	25	13	1	9	-
1970s	15	8	5	-	4	-
1960s	6	6	3	1	-	-
1950s	6	6	7	2	1	-
1940s	3	4	4	-	-	-
1930s	-	4	-	-	-	-
1920s	-	8	1	5	-	-
1910s	2	10	-	-	-	-
1900s	1	19	-	-	-	-
Total	232	130	92	14	39	-

Notes: Subject searches of academic databases were limited to refereed journal articles published January 1, 1900 to November 30, 2007.

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