

# **Blending Contextual Integrity and Social Exchange Theory: Assessing Norm Building Under Conditions of “Informational Inequality”**

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## **Introduction**

With this position paper we aim to begin a discussion around a particular aspect of contextual integrity theory (CI), namely norm construction within a specific domain: online information exchanges between institutions and individuals under conditions of “informational inequality”. [1, 2] These are conditions of information exchange under which “entities, such as governments and financial institutions, wield significant power over the fates of individual citizens and clients”. “Allowing these institutions free reign in collecting and using information,” Nissenbaum notes, “further tips the balance of power in their favor”. [1]

We argue that such conditions of inequality are pervasive in today’s online information-sharing environment. And while CI broaches this matter, it does not explain how “appropriate” norms—a key concept in the theory—may be disproportionately affected by structures of informational inequality. We propose that social exchange theory (SET), with its focus on power as a constitutive element of social norms, can complement CI’s explanatory value in understanding information privacy.

Our position is that we need to pay special attention to how power imbalances, especially in the context of online information flows, may have actually shaped the very norms that we then utilize as the basis from which to evaluate the fairness of our online experience. A SET approach helps clarify, in other words, the ways in which power asymmetries may significantly influence the construction of norms.

In this position paper we ask: how are ‘appropriate’ norms determined in the context of what Nissenbaum describes as ‘informational inequality’? What kinds of social processes constructed these norms in the first place? We suggest that social exchange theory (SET) can offer a complementary approach to contextual integrity, one that allows us to closely interrogate the processes of norm-building under conditions of significant power inequality.