A New Access Control Scheme for Facebook-style Social Networks

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Abstract—The popularity of online social networks (OSNs) makes the protection of users' private information an important but scientifically challenging problem. In the literature, relationship-based access control schemes have been proposed to address this problem. However, with the dynamic developments of OSNs, we identify new access control requirements which cannot be fully captured by the current schemes. In this paper, we focus on public information in OSNs and treat it as a new dimension which users can use to regulate access to their resources. We define a new OSN model containing users and their relationships as well as public information. Based on this model, we introduce a variant of hybrid logic for formulating access control policies. A type of category relations among public information are exploited to further improve our logic for its usage in practice. In addition, we propose a few solutions to address the problem of information reliability in OSNs.

I. INTRODUCTION

Online social networks (OSNs) are among the most popular web services during the past five years and have attracted a huge amount of users all over the world. For example, Facebook, the leading OSN service, has more than one billion active users. OSNs are playing a great role in our daily life by providing a platform for users to present themselves, articulate their social circles, interact with each other etc.

With the large amount of data maintained in OSN websites, privacy concerning users' personal information inevitably becomes an important but scientifically challenging problem. Access control schemes (e.g., see [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8]) are naturally introduced to protect users' privacy in OSNs. They can be used to guarantee that resources are accessible by the intended users, but not by other (possibly malicious) users. Typically, users can control the access to their own information or resources with access control schemes supplied by OSNs. The existing schemes, including the ones proposed by the research community, are mainly *relationship-based*, i.e., whether a user is able to access the information depends on the relationship between him and the owner, e.g., 'friends' or 'friends of friends'.

Due to their own nature and the development of information and communications technology, OSNs admit quick and dynamic evolutions. Many new services and methods for user interaction have emerged. For instance, users can play online games with friends or find people who share similar interests. More recently, with the increased popularity of GPS-enabled

mobile devices, OSNs have evolved into geo-social networks – users can then tag posts and photos with their geographical locations, find nearby friends and post check-in of some places to share their comments. OSNs are also emerging as important social media – people use OSNs to publish news, organize events or even seek for emergent help. For example, Facebook and Twitter play an extremely important role during the rescue process for the "April 2011 Fukushima earthquake". (In Sect. III, we will take Facebook as a typical example and discuss its developments in the past few years.)

With these evolutions, more information and activities of users are made available in OSNs. As a result, new access control schemes are needed to capture these new developments. Let us illustrate this need by a few scenarios in OSNs.

- Someone broke the window of Alice's expensive car and took her purse when she parked the car in the area of Montparnasse in Paris. Alice publishes a status in the OSN to see if anyone can provide her some clue to find the purse back. She doesn't want everyone to know that she has an expensive car, and people who live in other areas or cities won't be able to give her any useful information. Therefore, she intends to choose people who live in the Montparnasse area as audiences of her status.
- Bob wants to organize a fundraising party for children's rare diseases. He doesn't want to make this event public as certain sensitive information of the participants can be leaked, e.g., it is possible that some participants' family members may suffer from the disease. Instead, Bob only wants people who are linked with a certain number of charities (through donations, volunteering, etc) like him to attend the party.
- Charlie has some friends who work at the rival company
 of his own employer. These friends invited Charlie to
 attend the party organized by their company. Charlie
 publishes a photo taken at the party. Apparently, it is not
 a good idea for his colleagues and boss to see this photo.
 Thus Charlie wants no one but his friends who work at
 this rival company to see it.

In relationship-based schemes, a resource owner cannot exploit any other information but user relationships between him and the requester when defining access control policies. Therefore, the above requirements cannot be fully and precisely formulated in the current schemes proposed in the literature.

¹http://newsroom.fb.com/

Contributions and Outline. In order to solve the identified problems, we propose a new access control scheme for OSNs. We focus on public information existing, e.g., in Facebook (Sect. III), and show that it can be used to group users based on their attributes, common interests and activities. Public information can thus be considered as a new dimension for users to regulate access to their resources. As a consequence, we propose a new OSN model containing both a user graph and a public information graph (Sect. IV). We then develop a hybrid logic to express this type of access control policies (Sect. V). The expressiveness of our scheme is extensively discussed through a number of real-life scenarios (Sect. VI). We identify a special semantic relation, i.e., category relation, among public information, which allows us to express a certain type of policies in a concise way (Sect. VII). To address the problem of information reliability in OSNs, we propose to add endorsement and trust into our policy formulas (Sect. VIII). After the introduction, we give a brief overview of related work in Sect. II. We discuss several issues related to our scheme in Sect. IX. Sect. X compares our access control scheme with existing schemes in the literature. We conclude our paper with some future work in Sect. XI.

II. RELATED WORK

Relationship-based access control, driven by OSNs, was first advocated in [9] and defined as an access control paradigm based on interpersonal relationships. Carminati et al. proposed the first relationship-based access control model in [10], where the relationships between the qualified requester and the owner are interpreted into three aspects, i.e., relationship type, depth and trust level. In [11], the authors used semantic web technology including OWL and SWRL to extend the model of [10]. They also proposed administrative and filtering policies which can be used for collaborative and supervising access control, respectively. Fong et al. proposed an access control scheme for Facebook-style social networks [12], in which they model the access control procedure as two stages. In the first stage, the requester has to find the owner of the target resource; then in the second one, the owner decides whether the authorization is granted or not. Their access control policies are mainly based on the relationships between the requester and the owner. Moreover, they proposed several meaningful access control policies based on the graph structure of OSNs, such as ncommon friends and clique. In [13], Fong introduced a modal logic to define access control policies for OSNs. Later Fong and Siahaan [14] improved the previously proposed logic to further support policies like n-common friends and clique. In [15], the authors adopted a hybrid logic to describe policies which eliminates an exponential penalty in expressing complex relationships such as n-common friends. A visualization tool for evaluating the effect of access control configurations is designed in [16], with which a user can check what other users within a certain distance to him can view his resources. Cheng et al. proposed a rich OSN model in [17]. In their work, not only users but also resources are treated as entities and actions performed by users are considered as relationships in OSNs.

As more information are incorporated in their model, many new access control policies can be expressed (more details can be found in Sect. X). Their model supports administrative and filtering policies as proposed in [11]. Besides models, several security protocols based on cryptographic techniques are proposed to enforce relationship-based access control policies, e.g., see [18], [19], [20], [21], [22], [23], [24].

As a shared platform, resources in OSNs may be co-owned by a number of users. Thus, collaborative access control also plays an essential role in protecting privacy. A game theoretical method based on the Clarke-Tax mechanism for collective privacy management was proposed by Siquicciarini et al. [25]. Sun et al. proposed a different approach by combining trust relations in OSNs and preferential voting schemes [26]. Ahn et al. introduced a multiparty access control model in [27]. In addition, they developed a policy specification scheme and a voting based conflict resolution mechanism. Photo tagging is the most common service relevant to collaborative access control. The authors of [28], [29] have investigated users' privacy concerns about this service and proposed principles for designing better collaborative access control schemes. Besides interaction, users' private information can be leaked through third party applications. A privacy-by-proxy design for social network APIs was developed by Felt and Evans [30]. Singh et al. [31] proposed a privacy-preserved application platform, i.e., xBook, which integrates information flow model to control what applications can do with users' information. An access control scheme for third party applications was developed [32], where applications are required to adapt users' specifications on their own data.

III. MOTIVATION

An OSN provides users with some typical services, such as users can build their profiles and establish social relationships with each other. Moreover, an OSN also provides a platform for users to socialize and interact with each other. In the following, we first give a brief overview of the developments of Facebook – one of the most popular OSN services in the world. After that, we discuss public information in Facebook and its potential usage in access control.

Facebook. In Facebook, each user is affiliated with a personal profile that contains his basic information (e.g., age and gender), work and education background, living places and so on. His hobbies are articulated in 'Likes'; places he has been to are marked in 'Map'. A user can establish friend relations with others. Moreover, he can organize his friends into different groups, or named friend list.

Facebook is not only a website storing users' personal information and social relations, but also a platform for users to interact with each other. A user can directly communicate with his friends by messaging or 'poking'; he can tag his friends in photos and posts. Two friends can interact through Facebook applications such as games. All activities performed by a user are organized chronologically in his 'Timeline' through which other users as well as the user himself can check his past activities conveniently. A user receives his friends'

news on 'Newsfeed'. When he finds something interesting, he can further perform actions, such as 'like', 'share' and 'comment', on it. Most recently, in January 2013, Facebook publishes a new product called Graph Search, a search engine based on users' data. ² Through Graph Search, a user can directly acquire information from his friends' data without visiting their personal pages. For example, if a user types in "photos by my friends", he will get a page containing all photos uploaded by his friends. For the same query, different users will get different results.

A Facebook user regulates other users' access to his resources through an audience selector, which supports five different modes, i.e., 'public', 'friends', 'friends except acquaintances', 'only me' and 'custom'. In the last mode, a user can choose the eligible requester to be a single user or a specific group (through friend list).

Public information and access control. Besides users, Facebook imports knowledge of external sources, e.g., Wikipedia and Bing map, into its system to formalize another type of entities. We name them *public information*. A lot of entities in the real world are modeled as public information, e.g., countries, history events or public figures. Public information are mainly used as common reference points of users' information, through which a user can find other users in Facebook with similar background, hobbies, experiences, etc. For example, a user can find his schoolmates through the public information of the college that he has attended.

Each public information is affiliated with a content that is normally extracted from external sources. Similar to users, public information are also connected with each other and links among them are based on their contents. For example, if Wikipedia articles of two charities are connected, then their public information in Facebook are connected as well. There exist many different links between users and public information. Some of these connections are based on user profiles, e.g., if a user specifies his employer in his profile, then he is linked with this employer's public information. Others are computed by Facebook through mining users' data. For example, if a user posts a status labeled with a location, then the user is connected with the location's public information.

In addition to facilitate users' interaction, it is possible to use public information in expressing access control requirements. For example, in the first scenario as discussed in Sect. I, the requester has to be linked to the location where the car was parked; in the second one, the requester needs to be linked with the owner through some charity organizations; in the third one, the requester is asked to be connected with the owner through not only a friendship but also their employers' connection. Here, the location, charities as well as companies can all be modeled as public information in OSNs.

All the above access control requirements are meaningful and in line with the recent developments of OSNs. However, the current access control in Facebook as well as schemes proposed in the literature mainly focus on relationships among users, public information are not taken into account. Therefore, in this paper, we propose a new access control scheme, in which policies can be expressed based on both users and public information, and their relationships.

IV. A MODEL OF ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

Our OSN model contains information of (1) users and their social relationships, (2) public information and their connections, and (3) links between users and public information. Public information and users are essentially two different concepts – public information are imported from external databases, and they cannot perform actions and establish relationships with each other as users; relationships among public information are also extracted from external sources. Therefore, we treat public information and users separately. We model an OSN as a tuple $(\mathcal{UG}, \mathcal{PG}, \rho, \varrho)$. A user graph is denoted by \mathcal{UG} , and it depicts users and their relationships. A public information graph is denoted by \mathcal{PG} , which represents all public information and connections among them. Two maps, i.e., ρ and ϱ , store links between users and public information.

User graph. The set \mathcal{U} contains all users in an OSN. Each user is affiliated with some basic information which are treated as attributes of the user. We use $\mathcal{UR} = \{\alpha_1, \ldots, \alpha_m\}$ to denote a (finite) set of relationship types supported in the OSN. The semantics of each relationship type can be defined as $\alpha_i \subseteq \mathcal{U} \times \mathcal{U}$. If user u_a is in a α_i relationship with user u_b , then we write $(u_a, u_b) \in \alpha_i$. For each relationship type $\alpha_i \in \mathcal{UR}$, there exists its reverse relationship type, e.g., if α_i stands for husbandof, then its reverse is wifeof. We use $\alpha_i^{-1} \in \mathcal{UR}$ to denote the reverse of α_i . Moreover, if $\alpha_i = \alpha_i^{-1}$, then α_i is a $symmetric\ relationship$, e.g., friend is a typical symmetric relationship. User graph \mathcal{UG} is a directed graph denoted as $(\mathcal{U}, \mathcal{UE})$, where every user in the OSN is a node and the set of edges, i.e., \mathcal{UE} , is defined as $\{(u_a, u_b, \alpha_i) \mid u_a, u_b \in \mathcal{U}$ and $(u_a, u_b) \in \alpha_i\}$.

Public information graph. Similarly, we can define public information graph. We use the set \mathcal{P} to denote all public information that are extracted from external databases, such as Wikipedia and some geography databases. Each public information f_c has its own attributes. We use $\mathcal{PR} = \{\beta_1, \beta_2, \ldots, \beta_\ell\}$ to denote a (finite) set of relationship types on public information. Each relationship type β_j can be semantically defined as $\beta_j \subseteq \mathcal{P} \times \mathcal{P}$. If β_j 's reverse relationship type exists, it is denoted by β_j^{-1} . Public information graph is formally denoted as $\mathcal{PG} = (\mathcal{P}, \mathcal{PE})$, where \mathcal{P} is the set of nodes and \mathcal{PE} is defined as $\{(f_c, f_d, \beta_j) \mid f_c, f_d \in \mathcal{P}$ and $(f_c, f_d) \in \beta_j\}$.

Links between \mathcal{UG} **and** \mathcal{PG} . There are a lot of links between users and public information. As the OSN is modeled as \mathcal{UG} and \mathcal{PG} , we define two maps, i.e., ρ and ϱ , between them to describe their connections:

$$\rho: \mathcal{U} \rightarrow 2^{\mathcal{P}} \quad \text{and} \quad \rho: \mathcal{P} \rightarrow 2^{\mathcal{U}}.$$

For a user $u_a \in \mathcal{U}$, $\rho(u_a)$ is a subset of the nodes in \mathcal{PG} that are related to u_a . The map $\rho(u_a)$ may contain a lot of different

²https://www.facebook.com/about/graphsearch

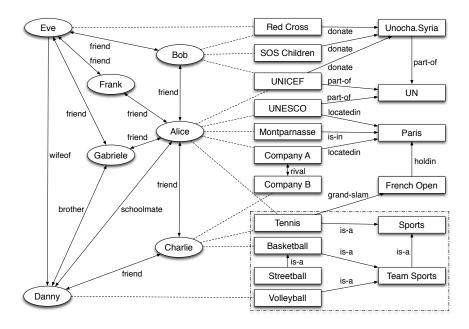


Fig. 1. A sample OSN model.

types of public information, such as museums, universities, pop stars, etc, which are computed by the OSN with the information that u_a provides. For a public information $f_c \in \mathcal{P}$, $\varrho(f_c)$ gives all the users in \mathcal{UG} who have been involved in activities or have information related to f_c . How to compute ρ and ϱ is not the focus of this paper, we assume that ρ and ϱ always give us the right results.

An example. A sample OSN model is shown in Fig. 1, whose left side is a \mathcal{UG} and right side is a \mathcal{PG} . Edges in the graph with double arrows imply that the relationships are symmetric. For example, Alice and Bob are friends; Company A and Company B are rivals. The dash lines between users and public information reflect the links between \mathcal{UG} and \mathcal{PG} , which are formally captured by the two maps ρ and ϱ .

V. A HYBRID LOGIC

In [15], a hybrid logic is used to define access control policies for OSNs. We adopt their logic and additionally introduce a new type of formulas ψ . With such formulas, we can define policies based on information in \mathcal{PG} . Moreover, two new logic operators, i.e., \triangleright and \blacktriangleright , are introduced to connect formulas on \mathcal{UG} and \mathcal{PG} , respectively. In this way, we can combine resources and their relations from both \mathcal{UG} and \mathcal{PG} to specify new and expressive access control policies (see examples in Sect. VI).

Syntax. The syntax of our hybrid logic is given below.

$$\begin{array}{llll} s & ::= m \mid x \\ t & ::= n \mid y \\ \phi & ::= s \mid p \mid \neg \phi \mid \phi_1 \wedge \phi_2 \mid \langle \alpha_i \rangle \phi \mid \bigcirc_s \phi \mid \nabla_x \phi \mid \rhd \psi \\ \psi & ::= t \mid q \mid \neg \psi \mid \psi_1 \wedge \psi_2 \mid \langle \beta_j \rangle \psi \mid \bullet_t \psi \mid \blacktriangledown_y \psi \mid \blacktriangleright \phi \end{array}$$

In our logic, there are mainly two types of formulas: the user formulas ϕ manipulate information on the user graph \mathcal{UG} ,

while the public information formulas ψ are defined on \mathcal{PG} . Three kinds of atoms are supported in our logic, i.e., nominals (m and n), variables (x and y) and proposition symbols (p and n)and q). Nominal m represents the name of a user in \mathcal{UG} , while n represents the name of a public information in \mathcal{PG} . Propositional symbol p is used for specifying the attributes of users in \mathcal{U} and similarly q is used for public information in \mathcal{P} . For example, p (i.e., IsMale) can specify users who are male and q (i.e., IsPublicFigure) can specify those publication information which are a public figure. Atoms m, x and p are used in user formulas ϕ , while n, y and q are used in public information formulas ψ . Negation \neg and conjunction \wedge have their usual meanings and can be used to define disjunction \vee . Therefore, we also use \vee in both ϕ and ψ . $\langle \alpha_i \rangle$ and $\langle \beta_i \rangle$ are two modal logic operators. As described in Sect. IV, symbols α_i and β_i represent the relationship types in \mathcal{UG} and \mathcal{PG} , respectively. Hybrid logic operator \bigcirc can be used either with a nominal or variable, while ∇ can only operate on variables. The same holds for \bullet and \blacktriangledown . Two new logic operators, i.e., \triangleright and \triangleright , are used to connect the two types of formulas ϕ and ψ together.

Semantics. Our model for evaluating access control policy formulas contains six parts, i.e., Γ , Δ , ρ , ϱ , cur_n , τ , where $\Gamma = (\mathcal{UG}, V_U)$ and $\Delta = (\mathcal{PG}, V_P)$. V_U is a map between atoms (either m or p) and users in \mathcal{UG} , $V_U(m)$ is a set that contains only one user in \mathcal{UG} whose name is m and $V_U(p)$ is a set of users that have the attribute as specified by p. Similarly, we can define $V_P(n)$ and $V_P(q)$. As introduced in Sect. IV, ρ and ϱ maintained by the OSN connect users and public information. Node cur_n refers to either a user u_a in \mathcal{UG} or a public information f_c in \mathcal{PG} . Valuation τ stores all the maps from variables in the policy formula to vertices in either \mathcal{UG} or \mathcal{PG} . When there is a new map from x to u_a (y to f_c) added

to τ , we write $\tau[x \mapsto u_a]$ $(\tau[y \mapsto f_c])$.

We use satisfaction relation $\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash \phi$ to describe the meaning of user formula ϕ .

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\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash x
                                                              iff u_a = \tau(x)
\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash m
                                                             iff V_U(m) = \{u_a\}
                                                              iff u_a \in V_U(p)
\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash p
\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash \neg \phi
                                                              iff \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \nvDash \phi
\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash \phi_1 \land \phi_2 \text{ iff } \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash \phi_1
                                                                      and \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash \phi_2
\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash \langle \alpha_i \rangle \phi
                                                              iff \exists u_b \in \mathcal{U}s.t.(u_a, u_b) \in \alpha_i
                                                                      and \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_b, \tau \vDash \phi
\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash \bigcirc_m \phi
                                                              iff \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_b, \tau \vDash \phi
                                                                      where V_U(m) = \{u_b\}
\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash \bigcirc_x \phi
                                                              iff \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, \tau(x), \tau \vDash \phi
                                                              iff \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau[x \mapsto u_a] \vDash \phi
\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash \nabla_x \phi
\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash \triangleright \psi
                                                              iff \exists f_c \in \rho(u_a)
                                                                     s.t.\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \rho, f_c, \tau \vDash \psi
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The first three relations express the meaning of atoms. When ϕ is a single variable x, it holds if and only if when τ contains a map from x to u_a . If ϕ is a single nominal or propositional symbol, it is true if and only if when u_a is in the set defined by V_U . When several modal logic operators $(\langle \alpha_i \rangle)$ are aligned sequentially in a formula, they can represent a *relationship path*, e.g., user can define a policy to regulate that only 'friends of friends' can access his resource.

The hybrid logic operator $\bigcirc_s \phi$ jumps to the node that s refers to in \mathcal{UG} , and $\nabla_x \phi$ adds a map from x to u_a into τ . The new operator, i.e., $\triangleright \psi$, links a user formula ϕ with a public information formula ψ – it maps the current node u_a in \mathcal{UG} to a set of public information in \mathcal{PG} that are related to this user. If there is one public information in $\rho(u_a)$ satisfying ψ , then the formula $\triangleright \psi$ holds.

In the following, we give the meaning of public information formulas ψ .

$$\begin{split} &\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau \vDash y & \text{iff } f_c = \tau(y) \\ &\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau \vDash n & \text{iff } V_P(n) = \{f_c\} \\ &\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau \vDash q & \text{iff } f_c \in V_P(q) \\ &\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau \vDash \neg \psi & \text{iff } \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau \nvDash \psi \\ &\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau \vDash \psi_1 \land \psi_2 & \text{iff } \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau \vDash \psi_1 \\ & & \text{and } \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau \vDash \psi_2 \\ &\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau \vDash \langle \beta_j \rangle \psi & \text{iff } \exists f_d \in \mathcal{P} \text{s.t.}(f_c, f_d) \in \beta_j \\ & & \text{and } \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_d, \tau \vDash \psi \\ &\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau \vDash \bullet_n \psi & \text{iff } \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_d, \tau \vDash \psi \\ &\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau \vDash \bullet_y \psi & \text{iff } \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau [\psi \mapsto f_c] \vDash \psi \\ &\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau \vDash \blacktriangledown_y \psi & \text{iff } \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau [\psi \mapsto f_c] \vDash \psi \\ &\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau \vDash \blacktriangleright \phi & \text{iff } \exists u_a \in \varrho(f_c) \\ & & \text{s.t.} \Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash \phi \end{split}$$

It is easy to find that the semantics of public information formulas resembles the user formulas. Therefore, information in \mathcal{PG} can be used in access control policies in a same way as in \mathcal{UG} . When the evaluation process encounters the operator $\blacktriangleright \phi$, the public information node f_c is mapped to users that

are related to it in \mathcal{UG} . If ϕ holds at one of these users, then the formula $\blacktriangleright \phi$ is true.

Note that, by combing the user formula $\triangleright \psi$ with propositions, we can link a user to a more specific set of public information. We write $\triangleright_q \psi$ for $\triangleright (q \land \psi)$ and its meaning can be reinterpreted as:

$$\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \vDash \rhd_q \psi \text{ iff } \exists f_c \in \rho(u_a) \cap V_P(q)$$

s.t. $\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \rho, f_c, \tau \vDash \psi$

Similarly, we can define $\triangleright_p \phi$ as $\triangleright(p \land \phi)$ and formulate its semantics.

Expressing policies. In general, there are four elements in an access control scenario, i.e., a requester, a target, an action and access control policies. More precisely, the requester tries to perform an action on the target, whether he succeeds or not depends on the access control policies defined for the target. We use variable reg to represent the requester. With multiple services supported by the OSN, a target can be a user or a resource. For the sake of simplicity, we assume that the target can only be a resource owned by some user. Normally, a user can define an access control policy for the resources that he owns. But in some cases, the access of a resource is decided by several users – this is the subject of collaborative access control management, e.g., see [17], [25], [26], [27], and is out of the scope of our paper. We assume that a resource is attached with only one access control policy that is defined by its owner represented by the variable own. The only action we consider is 'view', other actions, such as 'comment', 'tag' and 'share', are affiliated with it, i.e., when a user is able to view a resource published by another user, he can comment or share it as well.³ Thus, we ignore actions in the access control policy. In OSNs, both the requester and the owner are users. We restrict that an access control formula has to start with either an owner or a requester, i.e., policy formulas are in the form either $\bigcirc_{\sf own} \phi$ or $\bigcirc_{\sf reg} \phi$.

Model checking. Given an OSN model $(\mathcal{UG}, \mathcal{PG}, \rho, \varrho)$ and an access control policy expressed in our hybrid logic as a formula ϕ , the satisfaction of $\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau \models \phi$ with $\tau[\mathsf{own} \mapsto u_a, \mathsf{req} \mapsto u_b], \ \Gamma = (\mathcal{UG}, V_U) \ \text{and} \ \Delta = (\mathcal{PG}, V_P)$ is formulated as a local model checking problem by Bruns et al. [15]. Except for the user graph \mathcal{UG} , our OSN model captures public information and their relationships. Moreover, our logic essentially extends the one of [15] with public information formulas ψ defined on \mathcal{PG} and two new operators □ and
 □ connecting user formulas and public information formulas. In principle, we can reuse the model checking algorithm of Bruns et al. [15]. As formulas of the form $\triangleright \psi'$ or $\blacktriangleright \phi'$ explore the links between \mathcal{UG} and \mathcal{PG} , we need to treat them differently. A formula $\triangleright \psi'$ maps the current node (cur_n) in \mathcal{UG} to a set of public information in \mathcal{PG} . As long as there is one public information in $\rho(cur_n)$ satisfying ψ , then ϕ holds. The formula $\triangleright \phi'$ is defined similarly. To check them, we can develop a sub-routine similar to MCmay of Bruns et al. [15], which first computes the set of all public information

³This is supported by Facebook.

(users) related to a specific user (public information) and then iterate through the set until one of them makes the connected formula ψ' (ϕ') hold on \mathcal{PG} (\mathcal{UG}). For formulas $\rhd(q \land \psi')$ and $\blacktriangleright(p \land \phi')$ as discussed in Sect. V, we can further reduce the size of the computed set by using propositions p and q to improve the efficiency in model checking.

VI. EXAMPLE POLICIES

In order to show the expressiveness of our new scheme based on the OSN model, we design several real-life scenarios and give their corresponding formulas in our logic. We use the OSN model depicted in Fig. 1, and we assume that valuation g contains two maps own $\mapsto u_o$ and req $\mapsto u_r$, where $u_o, u_r \in \mathcal{U}$ are the owner and the requester, respectively.

Scenario 0. We first show how to express the policy related to user relationships. Suppose that Eve defines a policy on a certain resource to regulate that the qualified requesters can only be her friends or friends of friends. The policy formula can be written as follows:

$$\bigcirc_{\mathsf{own}}(\langle \mathit{friend} \rangle \mathsf{req} \vee \langle \mathit{friend} \rangle \langle \mathit{friend} \rangle \mathsf{req}).$$

The hybrid logic operator $\bigcirc_{\sf own}$ drives the formula to start at Eve. The requirement "friends of friends" is achieved by aligning $\langle friend \rangle$ twice which forms a relationship path of length two. In Fig. 1, Bob, Frank and Gabriele can view the resource because they are friends of Eve, Alice is also eligible since she is one of Eve's friends of friends.

Next, we illustrate the function of public information by defining access control policies for the three scenarios mentioned in Sect. I. In the first scenario, public information are used to describe an attribute of the qualified requester. While in the second and third scenarios, the owner and the requester are linked through public information. In addition, the third scenario needs the owner and the requester to be connected through the user relationship as well.

Scenario 1. Let us recall the first access control scenario discussed in Sect. I, which exploits the information in \mathcal{PG} . Alice publishes a status to find a witness who lives in or visited the area where her car was broken into, i.e., Montparnasse in Fig. 1. The policy is formulated as

$$\bigcirc_{\mathsf{reg}} \triangleright \mathsf{Montparnasse}.$$

The operator \triangleright links \mathcal{UG} with \mathcal{PG} , as introduced in Sect. V, we can use $\triangleright_{IsLocation}$ to make the map more precisely. Montparnasse in the formula is a nominal, $V_P(\mathsf{Montparnasse})$ is the node that represents Montparnasse in \mathcal{PG} . Here, the requester's connection with Montparnasse can be treated as one of his attributes.

In order to get more information, Alice may enlarge the searching area to the whole city, i.e., Paris in Fig. 1. We assume that a user can only be linked to a place's public information, but not to a city's public information. For example, a user's photo can be labeled with any street or square of a city, but not the city itself. The policy can then be written as

$$\bigcirc_{\mathsf{reg}} \triangleright_{\mathit{IsLocation}} \langle \mathit{is-in} \rangle \mathsf{Paris}.$$

Here, $\langle is\text{-}in \rangle$ represents a 1-depth relationship path in \mathcal{PG} . Depending on the policy, the length of the path can be arbitrary. Note that the requester's connection with Paris can be also formalized as an attribute. However, in this way, each user will be affiliated with a huge number of attributes in the model which may not be an ideal solution.

Scenario 2. In this scenario, Bob wants to use the OSN to organize a fundraising party for children's rare diseases. He intends to let people who are affiliated with at least a certain number, such as three, of different charities as himself to access the event page. The policy is defined as follows.

$$\bigcirc_{\mathsf{own}} \rhd_{IsCharity} \blacktriangledown_{y_1} \blacktriangleright (\mathsf{req} \land \\ \bigcirc_{\mathsf{own}} \rhd_{IsCharity} \blacktriangledown_{y_2} (\neg y_1 \land \blacktriangleright (\mathsf{req} \land \\ \bigcirc_{\mathsf{own}} \rhd_{IsCharity} \blacktriangledown_{y_3} (\neg y_1 \land \neg y_2 \land \blacktriangleright \mathsf{req}))))$$

The left part of Fig. 2 depicts an example of three charities ('UNICEF', 'Red Cross' and 'SOS Children's Villages') in \mathcal{PG} needed between a qualified requester and Bob. It can be thought as a public information version of '3-common friends' policy in \mathcal{UG} . Three variables, i.e., y_1 , y_2 and y_3 , mark three charities that Bob is linked with; the conjunction of their negative forms, i.e., $\neg y_1$ and $\neg y_1 \wedge \neg y_2$, in the formula makes sure that these three charities are different.

With our logic, more complicated policies can be achieved based on the information of \mathcal{PG} . Suppose that Bob wants to organize another fundraising party for homeless children in Syria during its current civil war. For security and privacy reasons, he believes that the qualified requesters to attend this event should be people who are linked with at least two charities as he is, such as 'UNICEF' and 'Red Cross', that are involved in the humanity aid in Syria organized by the United Nations, i.e., 'Unocha.Syria' in \mathcal{PG} ,⁴. The policy is defined as

$$\bigcirc_{\mathsf{own}} \rhd \blacktriangledown_{y_1} \langle \mathit{donate} \rangle \blacktriangledown_{y_5} (\mathsf{Unocha.Syria} \land \\ \langle \mathit{donate}^{-1} \rangle \blacktriangledown_{y_3} \blacktriangleright (\mathsf{req} \land \\ \bigcirc_{\mathsf{own}} \rhd \blacktriangledown_{y_2} (\neg y_1 \land \langle \mathit{donate} \rangle (y_5 \land \\ \langle \mathit{donate}^{-1} \rangle \blacktriangledown_{y_4} (\neg y_3 \land \blacktriangleright \mathsf{req} \)))))$$

The connections between the requester and Bob are shown in the right part of Fig. 2. Variables y_1 and y_2 mark two different charities; so do y_3 and y_4 for the requester. We notice that the charities that Bob is related to need not to be different from the ones of the requester. Variable y_5 guarantees that all these organizations have contributions to 'Unocha.Syria'.

Since the public information and their relationships are extracted from external sources, complicated relationship paths in \mathcal{PG} as shown in this example give rise to more meaningful and expressive access control policies.

Scenario 3. In the third scenario in Sect.I, Charlie only allows his friends who work in the rival company of his employer to view his photo. The policy is formally defined as below:

$$\bigcirc_{\mathsf{own}}(\langle friend \rangle \mathsf{req} \land (\triangleright \langle rival \rangle \blacktriangleright \mathsf{req})).$$

Different from policies in the previous scenarios, this one requires that the owner and the requester are linked through

⁴http://syria.unocha.org/

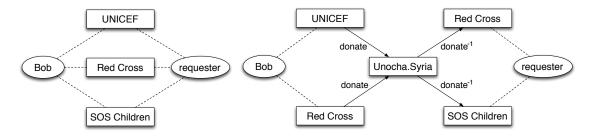


Fig. 2. Connections between Bob and qualified requesters.

information in both \mathcal{UG} and \mathcal{PG} . More precisely, the subformula $\triangleright \langle rival \rangle \blacktriangleright$ regulates that the qualified requester need to work for Company B's rival, i.e., Company A; and the subformula $\langle friend \rangle$ filters out the requester who is not a friend of Charlie. We use a conjunction symbol to combine these two parts. In Fig. 1, only Alice is qualified as she is a friend of Charlie and she works for Company A.

VII. USING CATEGORY RELATION IN ACCESS CONTROL

The category relation in \mathcal{PG} . Let us first consider another scenario. In the model depicted in Fig. 1, Charlie is linked with several kinds of sports including Basketball and Tennis. Alice is also a sport fan and her favorite one is Tennis, while Danny likes Volleyball. Charlie has a photo depicting him playing tennis. He only wants his friends who are linked with Tennis to view it. The policy can be defined as

$$\bigcirc_{\mathsf{own}} \langle \mathit{friend} \rangle (\mathsf{req} \land (\rhd \mathsf{Tennis})).$$

Since Alice likes Tennis, she can view the photo. Now, Charlie decides to relax the restriction such that the qualified requester should be his friend who likes any kinds of sports. He modifies his policy as follows:

$$\bigcirc_{\mathsf{own}} \langle \mathit{friend} \rangle (\mathsf{reg} \land \triangleright (\langle \mathit{is-a} \rangle \mathsf{Sports})).$$

Relationship path $\langle is-a \rangle$ in the formula marks all the public information that are in an is-a relation with Sports in \mathcal{PG} , e.g., Tennis. However, this policy cannot achieve Charlie's goal. For example, Danny is not able to view this photo even he is supposed to be. This is because Volleyball is not linked with Sports but Team Sports in is-a relationship as shown in Fig. 1. In order to grant access to Danny, Charlie again modifies the policy as follows:

$$\bigcirc_{\mathsf{own}} \langle \mathit{friend} \rangle (\mathsf{req} \land \rhd (\langle \mathit{is-a} \rangle \mathsf{Sports} \lor \langle \mathit{is-a} \rangle \langle \mathit{is-a} \rangle \mathsf{Sports})).$$

However, there exists many public information related to Sports in the OSN and defining a policy by enumerating all possible lengths is not an acceptable solution. In Wikipedia, articles are organized by means of categories. An article is under (at least) one category, some article can be the main article of a category. For example, article basketball is under the category team sports, it is also the main article of the category basketball. An article under a category is linked with the category's main article. Actually, this is the is-a relationship among public information in \mathcal{PG} , we call it

category relation. Since all categories of Wikipedia form an acyclic group (category graph), public information together with *is-a* relationships among them compose an acyclic graph as well. For example, the subgraph in the dashed box in Fig. 1 is a tree. Next, we integrate the category relation into our logic formula to express above policies in a concise way.

Logic with the category relation. In the model depicted in Fig. 1, Charlie is linked with several kinds of sports including Basketball and Tennis. Alice is also a sport fan and her favorite one is Tennis, while Danny likes Volleyball. Charlie has a photo that he wants to share with all his friends who like sports. As depicted in the dash box of Fig. 1, these kind of public information are organized by categories. Instead of defining a policy to specify all the sports that are linked to users, we can directly use these category information to define policies.

To make use of the category relations among public information, We first introduce a function on \mathcal{PG} and a new symbol in our logic. The function ef is formally defined as

$$cf(\{f_c\}) = \begin{cases} & \{f_c\} & \nexists f_d \text{s.t.}(f_d, f_c) \in \textit{is-a} \\ & \bigcup cf(\{f_d\}) & \forall f_d \text{ such that } (f_d, f_c) \in \textit{is-a} \end{cases}$$

The result of $cf(\{f_c\})$ contains f_c and all its descendants in an acyclic graph based on is-a relationships in \mathcal{PG} .

In our hybrid logic, nominal n can represent name of any public information in \mathcal{PG} . In order to refer to the node named n as well as all its descendants in the formula, we add a category nominal $\lfloor n \rfloor$ into our logic. The syntax of formulas ψ is extended as follows:

$$\psi ::= t \mid \lfloor n \rfloor \mid q \mid \neg \psi \mid \psi_1 \wedge \psi_2 \mid \langle j \rangle \psi \mid \bullet_t \psi \mid \blacktriangledown_y \psi \mid \blacktriangleright \phi.$$

The semantics of $\lfloor n \rfloor$ is

$$\Gamma, \Delta, \rho, \varrho, f_c, \tau \vDash |n| \text{ iff } f_c \in cf(V_P(n)) \bigcup V_P(n).$$

With the category nominal, Charlie can easily redefine his policy in the previous example as

$$\bigcirc_{\mathsf{own}} \langle friend \rangle (\mathsf{req} \land \rhd | \mathsf{Sports} |).$$

Now, all friends of Charlie who are related to any kind of sport activities, such as Alice and Danny, can access the photo.

Similar to the ones with their contents from Wikipedia, public information from geography databases, i.e., places, together with *is-in* relationships among them also naturally compose an acyclic graph. Therefore, we are able to define

policies to qualify the requester, such as "only my friends who have ever been to Europe", in a concise way without listing different length of is-in relationship paths in \mathcal{PG} . Other types of hierarchical relationships on public information can also be investigated for the same purpose.

VIII. INFORMATION RELIABILITY

Owners define policies to control access to their resources. However, in some cases, if the information in OSNs are not reliable, malicious users can still gain access to some resources that they are not supposed to under certain policies. For example, in Scenario 0 of Sect. VI, If an adversary is able to become friends with three friends of Eve, then he is able to gain the access. Similarly in Scenario 3 of Sect. VI, a colleague of Charlie, who is also his friend, can maliciously specify that he works for the rival company in the OSN to access Charlie's sensitive photo. As introduced in Sect. IV, our OSN model contains three parts, i.e., \mathcal{UG} , \mathcal{PG} and two maps ρ and ρ . We discuss about their reliability one by one. **Reliability of** \mathcal{UG} . Information contained in \mathcal{UG} are mainly users and their relationships. Since a user can describe who he is in the OSN, we only focus on users relationships. To increase user relationships' reliability, we explore trust. In contrast to the real life, trust between users in OSNs can be quantified, i.e., it has a value. We first add trust values into \mathcal{UG} . When u_a establishes an α_i relationship with u_b , u_a will assign a trust value $t_{ab}^{\alpha_i}$ to this relationship. The edge from u_a to u_b is then defined as $(u_a, u_b, \alpha_i, t_{ab}^{\alpha_i})$. Similarly, the edge from u_b to u_a is $(u_b, u_a, \alpha_i^{-1}, t_{ba}^{\alpha_i^{-1}})$. Note that $t_{ab}^{\alpha_i}$ is only known to u_a and $t_{ba}^{\alpha_i^{-1}}$ is only known to u_b , and these two values can be different. We regulate that every trust value is in the interval [0, 1], the bigger the value is, more trust it represents. We additionally introduce two new operators $\langle \alpha_i \rangle^{\to t} \phi$ and $\langle \alpha_i \rangle^{\leftarrow t} \phi$ into the user formula ϕ and their semantics are defined as follows.

$$\begin{split} \varGamma, \varDelta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau &\vDash \langle \alpha_i \rangle^{\to t} \phi \text{ iff } \\ &\exists \ u_b \in \mathcal{U} \text{ s.t. } (u_a, u_b) \in \alpha_i, t_{ab}^{\alpha_i} \geq t \quad \text{and } \\ &\varGamma, \varDelta, \rho, \varrho, u_b, \tau \vDash \phi \\ \varGamma, \varDelta, \rho, \varrho, u_a, \tau &\vDash \langle \alpha_i \rangle^{\leftarrow t} \phi \text{ iff } \\ &\exists \ u_b \in \mathcal{U} \text{ s.t. } (u_b, u_a) \in \alpha_i^{-1}, t_{ba}^{\alpha_i^{-1}} \geq t \quad \text{and } \\ &\varGamma, \varDelta, \rho, \varrho, u_b, \tau \vDash \phi \end{split}$$

When the requester is regulated to be linked with the owner through user relationships, trust can be put into the formula. Now for the policy of Scenario 0, Eve can specify the formula as below

$$\bigcirc_{\mathsf{own}} \langle friend \rangle_3^{\rightarrow 0.8} \mathsf{req}.$$

To get an illegal access with the above formula, a malicious user needs to become friends with three users that Eve trusts $(t \geq 0.8)$. Note that the way we integrate trust value into the user formula is simple. There exist other methods, such as trust value can be evaluated on a whole relationship path. How to extend our logic to support complicated trust requirements is part of our future work.

Reliability of \mathcal{PG} . Different from users' information, public information are imported from external databases and they are

not operated by real users. For example, Paris's information in Facebook is taken from Wikipedia and the fact that it is in France can be extracted from public geography database. Therefore, reliability of public information are guaranteed by these external sources – for instance, the reliability of Wikipedia pages and their connections can be ensured by a community effort and users' reputation [33].

Reliability of ρ and ϱ . Some public information result in user relationships, for example, users who went to the same school are 'schoolmates' or work in the same company are 'colleagues'. If the link between the qualified requester and this kind of public information are exploited by a policy, then the owner who defines this policy can add the connection originated by the public information between the qualified requester and other users into the formula as well. In this way, these other users can be treated as endorsing the connection between the requester and the public information. In Scenario 3 of Sect. VI, besides working in the rival company, Charlie regulates that the qualified requester should have a certain number, e.g., 3, of colleagues who work in this rival company. Moreover, he can also add trust to the formula. The policy is defined as follows.

$$\bigcirc_{\mathsf{own}} (\langle \mathit{friend} \rangle^{\to 0.8} \mathsf{req} \\ \wedge (\rhd \langle \mathit{rival} \rangle \blacktriangledown_y \blacktriangleright (\mathsf{req} \wedge \langle \mathit{colleague} \rangle_3^{\leftarrow 0.7} \rhd y))).$$

Now, in order to gain the access, the malicious user has to be trusted by Charlie ($t \ge 0.8$) and be colleagues with three other users who work in that company. Also, these three colleagues' trust value on the requester have to be at least 0.7. Clearly, it is much harder for the adversary to succeed.

For policies exploiting public information that cannot result in user relationships, endorsement (as well as trust) cannot be applied. For example, in Scenario 1 of Sect. VI, the qualified requester needs to be linked to a location, while in Scenario 2 Bob and the requester are connected through charities. Similar to public information, the reliability of the links between some of these public information and users also depends on external services. For example, in Facebook, a user is treated as having been to one location if he used to publish a status or photo labeled with that location. This location label is provided by ISP (Internet Service Provider) or GPS services. A user's connection to a charity can be certified by the charity, as the user normally gets tax benefit for his donations. Again, we do not focus on the reliability of external services.

IX. DISCUSSION

We have shown that our scheme can express fine-grained access control policies related to users and public information. We have also shown how to deal with the problem of information reliability in OSNs by incorporating endorsement and trust into our policy formulas. There are still two other issues to discuss.

The first question is about the *usability* of our scheme, especially for the non-experienced users – whether a user can easily express a policy of his intention. On one hand, relationship-based policies (e.g., friends, friends of friends)

can be easily expressed in our scheme like the current access control schemes adopted by OSNs. On the other hand, a group of qualified requesters under a sophisticated policy can be computed by OSNs, e.g., a Facebook user can directly get a list of his friends who have been worked in a company through Graph Search. Therefore, we believe that our scheme can be supported as well. Moreover, users can use visualization tools (e.g., see [34]) to learn whether their policies have been properly enforced.

The second is related to the *availability* of user information in OSNs. As privacy raises serious concerns in OSNs, users might not be willing to share too much information. As a consequence, some eligible users can be filtered out by a policy due to the lack of their information in the OSN. However, one purpose of OSNs is for people to express themselves – more information a user shares, more benefits he will gain from the OSN. In another way, a user keeps more privacy if he shares less information. There is always a balance between information sharing and privacy. What we focus in this paper is to explore the information shared by users in OSNs to express fine-grained access control policies. Availability of user information in OSNs is thus orthogonal to our proposal.

X. COMPARISON

In this section, we compare our scheme with relationship-based access control schemes in the literature [15], [11], [17] (see Table I).

The model of OSNs in [15] is the same as our user graph \mathcal{UG} , but public information are not treated as entities in the model. As a consequence, access control policies only make use of users' social representations. On the other hand, it seems possible to express connections between users and public information through propositions in [15]. For example, a proposition *IsinParis* can be used to express the connection between a user and Paris. However, as mentioned in Sect. VI, each user will be affiliated with a large amount of attributes which is neither ideal or practical. Moreover, policies that explore relationships between public information (see examples in Sect. VI), cannot be captured by propositions.

The work proposed in [11] does not explicitly take into account public information and their relationships. However, this work has two interesting features. First, in the OSN model, users' resources are treated as independent entities. Relationships between users and resources are not restricted only to ownership, e.g., the relationship between a user and a photo that he is tagged in is modeled as 'photoOf' in their language. Thus, collaborative access control is possible in their model. Second, due to the fact that OSNs are modeled with semantic web technologies, hierarchy information among users' relationships are naturally supported as well as actions and resources, which make policy propagation possible. For example, if a user defines a policy to regulate the qualified requester to be his friends, then users who are in a closer relationship, such as 'good friend', with him are also qualified. In our work, we have used semantic relations among the public information in Sect. VII to facilitate users to express their policies concisely.

Similarly, the scheme in [17] does not take into account public information neither. In this model, attributes of users are not represented. Moreover, their policy language seems weaker than ours - negation symbol only works with relationship paths, but not on nodes. Hence, policies such as "all my friends but Alice can view my photo" cannot be expressed. On the other hand, this work has some features that our model cannot support. First, the OSN model treats resources as nodes which is similar to the one in [11], and actions that users performed on their resources are recognized as relationships. For example, a user can regulate that only users who used to comment on a same photo as he did is able to poke him. Second, the authors propose a simple solution through administrative policies for collaborative access control. To achieve this in our model, we need to add a decision module in the model checking algorithm.

We notice that the two schemes [11], [17] can potentially treat public information as users' resources, i.e., modeled as nodes in their OSN model. However, as we explained in Sect. IV, public information are extracted from external databases, and relationships among them are different from the ones between users. In our work, we apply the *separation of concerns* principle to model public information and their relationships separately from users and their social links.

XI. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

In this paper, we have first identified a new type of access control policies that are meaningful but have never been addressed in the literature. Namely, users in OSNs can express access control requirements not only based on their social relations but also on their connections through public information. Then we defined an OSN model containing users and public information, based on which we proposed a hybrid logic to define access control policies. We gave a number of policies based on public information and formulated them formally and precisely in our proposed logic. We further used category relations among public information to extend our logic and make it more practical. In addition, we also showed how to extend our model and logic to deal with unreliable information in OSNs.

We plan to extend our work in several directions. First, we want to improve the expressiveness of our model by integrating user resources [11], [17]. As resources are different from users, modeling resources explicitly may address more expressive policies. Second, policy propagations can be supported in our model by defining hierarchies among users' relationships. Third, it is interesting to develop privacy-preserving protocols for access control enforcement in our scheme.

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TABLE I
COMPARISON OF ACCESS CONTROL SCHEMES FOR OSNS.

	Fong et al. [15]	Carminati et al. [11]	Cheng et al. [17]	This paper
Multi-relationship type	√	✓	✓	√
User attributes	✓	✓		✓
Public information				✓
Trust		✓		✓
User-resource relation			✓	
Relationship depth	√	√	√	√
Topology-based policy	√			✓
Policy propagation		✓		Partially

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