

ANONYMITY ON THE INTERNET AND ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION

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Abstract. Anonymity is often regarded as a negative feature of online communication because it allows speakers to behave antisocially without being at risk of facing repercussions. Hackers and online activists that use the ability to hide their identities as a means to protest against organizations and businesses are regarded with dread by the press, as they convey a general feeling of vulnerability in front of seemingly untouchable people. However, it is important to regard anonymity through an objective lens and reveal the positive aspects it lends to communication. Among these, one can count the lack of prejudice between communicators and the ability to focus on ideas and information instead of the social status of the speaker, which often leads to biased interpretations of their message. At the same time, the cathartic value of anonymous communication should not be ignored as it reminds us that people are psychologically multifaceted, not simple mirrors reflecting one identity ascribed to them. This article will review research into online communication and anonymity, as well as Kierkegaardian perspectives on anonymity and the trivialization of information. It will also comment on a recent speech by 4chan founder Christopher Poole regarding the limitations imposed on online communication by social networks which object to anonymity.

Key words: anonymity, online, communication, 4chan, information, identity, prejudice

1. Introduction

Since the Internet was opened to the public as a means of communication and following its transition into mainstream use, there have been consistent efforts to make it more and more similar to face-to-face communication. Names and pseudonyms (or handles) were followed by avatars, which could either be photos of the real people or mere representations. Voice and video, instantaneously conveyed between speakers, further added to the realism of remote communication. All of these features allow for a richer and contextualized transmission of messages between communicators by presenting users with tone of voice and body language, which they are deprived of in writing.

At the same time, other Internet users focused on technology not only to preserve the “faceless” aspect of computer mediated communication (or CMC) but to advance the absoluteness of anonymity online. Anonymity can be conceptualized as “the degree to which the identity of a message source is unknown and unspecified; thus, the less knowledge one has about the source and the harder it is

to specify who the source is among possible options, the more anonymity exists” (Scott, 2005, p. 243).

The online use of real names is already relatively rare outside the social networks, but most sites allow and surreptitiously even encourage the revealing of nationality, gender and the use of an avatar, aside from a username. Online anonymity is not a common occurrence, and it is almost never encouraged. Indeed, influential companies in the industry, such as Facebook, argue that pseudonyms and multiple identities show “a lack of integrity” (Kirkpatrick, 2010). The newest and fastest growing social network, Google Plus, considered by many to be a rival of Facebook, currently has a “real names policy”, and users who are found to have signed up using pseudonyms have their account suspended. Google, however, claim this arrangement is temporary, and that it is only used now in order to create a certain atmosphere in the social network. Interestingly enough, they released that statement the day after a speech by Christopher Poole at the 2011 Web 2.0 summit, where the founder of 4chan.org lamented Facebook’s, Google’s and to a certain extent Twitter’s attitudes to anonymity.

2. 4chan

Christopher Poole created 4chan in 2004 as an online discussion board focused on Japanese anime (Sorgatz, 2009). Today it has grown to house roughly sixty boards, each contributing to offer users a wider range of topics such as politics, fashion, news, art and nature. The site is unusual in that it is an image board – that is, its primary purpose is the posting of pictures accompanied by commentary and discussion, although pictures are sometimes used to transmit the message itself, or to augment the written message, or used simply for aesthetic value – where users do not need an account in order to participate. The “name” field for each post is empty by default, and if the user does not act to change it, 4chan assigns the name “Anonymous”. Research that focused on cataloguing activity on 4chan found that 90% of posts are made by fully anonymous users, with a substantial number of non-anonymous posts being made as such by accident or for humour. Furthermore, the site has no memory – instead of archiving conversations like most websites do, threads of discussion and posts are deleted when newer content arrives (Bernstein, Monroy-Hernandez, Harry, Andre, Panovich, & Vargas, 2011).

With over 7 million daily users, 4chan plays an influential role in Internet culture and has since expanded its influence to the “real world”, acting as the engine for several sociopolitical activism movements, helping the efforts of the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street protests by providing information and resources to protesters as well as spreading awareness regarding abuses, and participating in hacktivist group ‘Anonymous’. Anonymous have executed highly visible protests of the Church of Scientology (Coleman, 2011) and Denial of Service attacks against Mastercard and Paypal in support of Wikileaks (Mackey, 2010). Its high number of active users, coupled with the overwhelming use of anonymous posting, makes 4chan uniquely important for communication research where anonymity is concerned.

At the same time, it is important to note that no other group formed online has exhibited such fascinating ideological and philosophical evolution. From an aggregate of website users enjoying unsophisticated entertainment together, Anonymous posters grew to an organized but leaderless and highly democratic group with serious political opinions and social interests, all the while having members of both genders and an eclectic mix of races, nationalities, religions and age groups. The culture of anonymity has stayed with them and is preserved through norms and values, even though their main medium of communication shifted to Internet Relay Chat rooms (IRC), which do require usernames but are far less chaotic than 4chan. The idea of status within the group also remains abandoned. This ensures that decisions regarding the group's next focus of social protests or activism are not taken with regard to someone's reputation, but with regard purely to the value of ones arguments and ideas.

Within the psychological community, the usual conclusions of research on anonymity suggest that communities benefit by revealing participants' names and reputations (Millen & Patterson, 2003), and that anonymity has a negative influence due to the so called "online disinhibition effect" (Suler, 2005), which gives communicators freedom to engage in crude and antisocial behavior (Bernstein et al., 2011). Yet, looking at more recent developments in the online world as well as the international social and political scenery, it becomes hard to condemn groups like 4chan's Anonymous of antisocial behaviour. The default anonymity in their casual communication allowed them to come into contact with the ideas of others unadulterated by prejudices of gender or race. At the same time, being relieved of any identity allowed users to share their thoughts in the most sincere way they can, something which most people might only have the chance to do while participating in psychological research, and even then only on a very narrow topic that the researchers are interested in. This opportunity for communicators has wider implications. The lack of identity and reputation can often serve to reinforce the confidence of communicators, allowing them to experiment with new ideas which they might not be willing to openly express otherwise. The "online disinhibition effect" also plays a part, allowing communicators to give more honest and direct opinions to their anonymous peers.

Although anonymity was classically associated with increases in antisocial or antinormative actions (Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952; Zimbardo, 1969), a meta-analysis of deindividuation studies shows that anonymous individuals display an increased conformity to contextual norms and cues for guiding behavior (Postmes & Spears, 1998). This would therefore contradict the aforementioned preconceptions regarding the inherently anti-social nature of anonymous communication.

3. The Kierkegaardian perspective

The loudest and most salient arguments against online anonymity state that far from being a vehicle for increased objectivity between communicators, it facilitates aggressive and trivial behaviour by removing any semblance of

commitment and responsibility. These are complaints which are firmly founded in reality: anonymity is frequently abused for malicious ends.

Some of the most eloquent discussions on this topic can be found in Soren Kierkegaard's work. His dissatisfaction with the press of his time is mirrored with surprising accuracy by the contemporary critics of online anonymity. His philosophy of the Spheres of life can also be applied to individuals as well as larger groups, given that the organic fundament of transition and initiation into an evolved state is compatible with basically any social entity or construct.

In his essay "The Present Age" (1962), Kierkegaard blamed the press for the inadvertent encouragement of curiosity to the disadvantage of commitment, due to its inability to distinguish between the important and the trivial. The new ease with which information could be sent to a wider audience than before led, he argued, to a subsequent trivialization of information. Reading it today, the argument may feel ill suited to journalism and more suited to online information in general. Within a generation, there is seemingly infinite information available to anyone with a computer and an internet connection, coupled with the incredible ease to find it, consume it at our leisure, find related information via hyperlinks, and above all have all of this for potentially no cost and in constant flow from all directions, as the internet is not limited by paper and ink.

The present wealth of information available has arguably led to its decrease in value: nothing is too trivial, anything will be read by someone, somewhere, everything is more or less equally accessible regardless of importance, and it is in limitless supply. Subsequently, the consumers of this information become unable to distinguish between raw information of no use to them and information of higher value, or at least higher value for them. An inevitable effect of this, predicted Kierkegaard, is a state of ennui and anhedonia, where everything stops being exciting or special. And as there is nothing particular to be moved by, there is a lack of motivation to commit ones self to anything, or at least to anything other than the volume, rather than the value, of information.

In order to evolve from this stagnant state, which reminds one of the Aesthetic Sphere of life in Kierkegaard's "Either/Or" (1992), one must learn to distinguish between the trivial and the important subjectively. Thus, Kierkegaard concludes: "every aesthetic view of life is despair, and everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair whether he knows it or not. But when one knows it . . . a higher form of existence is an imperative requirement."

The second sphere, that of Ethics, can nevertheless not be reached by deciding arbitrarily what is of value and what isn't. For one to reach this second level of intellectual and spiritual evolution, information has to be turned into knowledge, but with purpose and conviction. Therefore, Kierkegaard states that what must precede this transformation of information is commitment, supported by a strong identity.

The Religious Sphere, where one finally focuses knowledge into long-lasting dedication, relies on both identity and conviction to the implications of one's identity, and the conviction to dedicate one's life to a clearly defined ideal.

Because of its lack of responsibility and gratuitous sharing of trivial information, Kierkegaard suggested as motto for the Press: “Here men are demoralized in the shortest possible time on the largest possible scale, at the cheapest possible price.”

It is also cautious to remember that Kierkegaard always had a fairly negative relationship with the press, which tended to criticize and mock him. It nevertheless does not mean that his representation of the influence of the press on the mass of readers did not have a real and demoralizing effect. Indeed, given his description of the trivialization of information as a result of anonymous sharing and anonymous readership is a sharply accurate portrait of online communication, the value of his writings on the topic is not at all decreased.

Regarding the application of Kierkegaardian philosophy to anonymity as a whole, modern events on the sociopolitical scene, namely the protest and activism mentioned earlier in this article, have proven that it is well within the realm of possibility to transform raw, trivial information into knowledge via a firmly constructed identity, and then to apply that conviction with dedication. Hactivist group Anonymous are so far the best example of that, having risen from a website which glorifies trivial information to a group with an identity (expressed through the firm rejection of the importance of identity as a whole) which applied its beliefs and ideals of social economic equality and personal freedoms through protests and demonstrations.

However, there is an important distinction between Kierkegaard’s Press complete with audience, and Anonymous: the latter are a group which communicates and interacts frequently, while the former are not. The communication between the Press and readers is one-sided, even in the modern era when it is possible to leave comments on online articles and blogs. Members of Anonymous talk to each other in chat rooms, and their anonymity is a conscious choice rather than the side-effect of an overwhelming glut of information.

Therefore, it would be fair to assume that in order for communicators to rise above the trivial and use anonymity as the means to a superior end, anonymity has to be absolute and voluntary.

4. Mirrors and Diamonds

Early in this article, Christopher Poole’s 2011 Web 2.0 Summit speech was mentioned. The core of the 10 minute discourse was the issue of identity online. To elaborate, Poole started by describing Google Plus and Facebooks’ approaches to user identity and information sharing, criticizing the internet giants for promoting a style of sharing that was “decontextualised”. The aforementioned social networks allow for users to share certain posts with certain groups or circles of friends, which Poole argued was a misguided approach to context: “It’s not who you share with, it’s who you share as, and your context within that group.”. He clarified by describing a fundamental notion of psychology (which is nevertheless often ignored in communication research), namely that people are multifaceted. Most research does not take duality into consideration, and the anti-anonymity approach

to online communication ignores this basic aspect of human nature completely. Social networks, Poole argued, tend to treat people “like mirrors”, when in fact they resemble “diamonds” – multiple sides to the same entity, and while seeing each side we still look at the same thing, as opposed to reflecting a single side of our personality, as the “mirror” metaphor implies.

The structure of online communication seems to support Poole’s opinion that “who we share as” is a salient part of conversation. The important structural aspect in this case is the power of choice regarding who we communicate with and when. Although it is equally true that all written communication allows for such freedom, nevertheless we need to remember that it is only online that the aspect of choice can be taken to such a grand scale. The audience is potentially huge online, without it detracting very much from the quality of communication. Also, just like 4chan’s thematic boards, there are millions of forums specialized for specific audiences.

People take advantage of the opportunity to use the Internet as a means of coming across a specific audience. This can be a luxury compared to offline communication, if the aspect of themselves that users wish to explore is in some way taboo or not part of the mainstream. Studying the consequences of alternative identities on the internet, McKenna and Bargh (1998) collected samples of people who frequented such communities (homosexual or bisexual thematic discussion forums, or politically stigmatized factions such as neo-Nazi). What they found was that the members of these online communities reported an increased sense of importance to that aspect of their identities, which extended into real life to make the persons more comfortable with themselves.

Although communication on the aforementioned forums was probably at best pseudonymous instead of fully anonymous, the effect of being able to share ones thoughts without fear of judgment is the salient feature here.

McKenna and Bargh’s findings contradict the prejudice that anonymous communication leads to deindividuation. Instead, the identity actually grows in importance. The potential reason why most researchers are quick to presume that online and in particular anonymous conversation leads to deindividuation is that the online identities in question differ from the day-to-day, real life identities and attitudes people subscribe to. The person remains the same whether they talk to someone face to face or anonymously online; what differs is the side of themselves they reveal.

This defense of anonymity and pseudonyms creates a portrait of them as organic features of human psychology and interaction. Anonymity, by being the absence of any feature of both speaker and audience, thus becomes raw potential for identity to be written between the lines of the message. This is not a new identity – it is a newly revealed one, and it is not something arbitrarily assigned to us, such as gender or nationality, appearance or a name. The newly revealed identity is purely intellectual, evident from the speaker’s message, their choice of arguments and words. It is a deliberate emphasis placed on one’s message rather than the stage they’re speaking from.

In an anonymous multicultural conversation on a particular topic, such as American culture, the participants would not have the risk of viewing arguments dif-

ferently if they came from an American or a European communicator – a European’s opinion on US culture might be taken as spiteful if it is negative, or naïve if it is positive, and similarly Americans can be called subjective when analyzing their own culture if it is the only one they’ve experienced. But within a purely anonymous conversation, readers have the benefit of seeing arguments for what they are.

5. Conclusion

As online communication is becoming more popular as technology allows for it to become increasingly life-like, little attention is given to using the online medium for the purpose of participating in almost absolutely anonymous communication, and the little attention this receives is mostly negative. Social networking sites value sincerity when it comes to identity and they, as well as the media, portray the use of pseudonyms as forms of avoiding responsibility for what is said and done while under its protection.

These prejudices have caused research to become biased and be conducted on the hypotheses that anonymous communication leads to antisocial behaviour and deindividuation, making it more similar to crowd behaviour. The hostility towards anonymous sharing of information has existed since long before the internet, Soren Kierkegaard’s essays against the Press and the trivialization of easily accessible information being one of the most eloquent expressions of worries that are as pertinent today as they must have been two centuries ago.

However, the organic development of anonymous groups and their very recent involvement in socially important movements, such as political protests around the world, are beginning to show another side to anonymity, and new advantages to that form of communication. What can be concluded from observing these developments is that in opposition to Kierkegaard’s pessimism, it is possible for the trivialization of online information to be turned into pertinent knowledge and then to be turned into conviction and motivation, as the Occupy movement illustrates. However, such a transformation might require that anonymity is a choice instead of a consequence, and that the anonymous communicators stay in contact as a group. These two features are absent from the Press that Kierkegaard criticized.

At the same time, a deeper delving into the attitudes of anonymous communicators, while observing 4chan founder Christopher Poole’s view of people as multifaceted, reveals that the deindividuation anonymity was accused of causing is only on the surface. What changes is not the value of the identity people ascribe to, but instead they reveal a new identity, all the while remaining the same person.

Although it is true that anonymity is often used with malicious intent, its value in communication should not be overlooked, as online anonymity strips communicators of prejudices such as gender, race and nationality, which allow for a completely new communication where ideas and arguments rely on themselves in order to have value, instead of the reputation of the speaker, and sincerity is relieved of the shackles normally imposed by face-to-face communication.

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