The Virtual Unvirtuous

Anonymous peer-to-peer communication and how the internet abolishes geographic distance

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Abstract: This is a discussion on the effect that geography has on personal interactions in cyberspace, specifically the Internet. Kierkegaard suggests that geographic relevance to a source of insight should be close in its proximity; that is to say the only person who is affected by that insight should be the only person offering a reaction to it. I define anonymity as being geographically removed from any given situation, and offer numerous examples to explore what effect this distance has on human behavior. I'm defining an anonymous interaction as the furthest possible distance from one's subject; there is no closeness with an anonymous interaction even if that person is geographically nearby.

Shirley Phelps, daughter of Pastor Fred Phelps, and prominent co-leader of the Westboro Baptist Church, is picketing a play about an American soldier, Matt Snyder, killed in Iraq in 2006. She's skillfully holding four oversized signs that are too large to be supported without resting on her shoulders and pressing into her torso. These signs are part of a regalia of propaganda that include messages about Matt residing in Hell, praising God for dead U.S. soldiers and breast cancer, a sweatshirt that advertises the WBC website, *GodHatesFags.com*, and what appears to be an apron made out of an American flag (which can later be seen crumpled under her foot as the protest comes to an end). She is also wearing some very dark sunglasses. Above the shouts and chants of the crowd protesting WBC's presence at this event, a local news team is interviewing Shirley. The interviewer appears to be very nervous and doesn't seem to know what to do with her hands when she says, "I just want to know your point of view about the first amendment because it also includes the freedom of speech and--" Shirley interrupts, "The first amendment is beautiful, we love the first amendment!"

The freedom of speech is guaranteed by the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution. It allows people like Shirley and the rest of the WBC to speak freely about their beliefs, no matter how inflammatory or provoking they are to non-members of the church. The irony of this power is that the WBC protesters are also allowed to be protested. The video of Shirley's protest gives the viewer a glance into the latest phenomena to stand in the way of the WBC spreading its hateful and self-righteous message: protest protesters. Shirley's singing voice (she rewrites the lyrics to chart-topping pop songs to suit the church's agenda) is barely heard these days because of the screams and group chants sung by the crowd that has come to drown out the WBC message. It is clear from the video that the local police force is keeping WBC and the anti-WBC crowd on opposite sides of a road. This is most likely to prevent

violence from breaking out, but it already does at most of the WBC public outings: people throw things at them and occasionally the WBC is chased out of an area when the police cannot restrain the crowd.

A similar group to the WBC exists almost solely in cyberspace. The Flat Earth Society movement began in 1492 B.C., at least it did according to the now deceased Charles Johnson, leader of the FES since 1972 (Schadewald). Johnson claimed that Moses was a "flat-earther" and began a movement that currently believes the Earth is a flat disc surrounded on all sides by impassible mountains of ice that prevent humans from walking off its surface. The documented historical roots of the FES can be traced back to 1832 when Sir Birley Rowbotham of England wrote "Earth Not a Globe", and in 1888 when Sir Walter de Sodington Blount conducted a series of experiments that were supposed to prove Rowbotham's suspicions (Reed). The FES, like WBC, bases their beliefs on their interpretation of the bible. The FES has about 300 members.

Unlike the WBC, FES only preaches their gospel of optical illusions and government conspiracies through their website, *theflatearthsociety.org*. Their message is seemingly unprovocative; here is the mission statement from the website:

The mission of the Flat Earth Society is to promote and initiate discussion of Flat Earth theory as well as archive Flat Earth literature. Our forums act as a venue to encourage free thinking and debate.

Yet the free thinking and debate on the forums tends to fall into disarray as inquisitors journey to the site with either open minds or the intent to disprove the FES theories. The discussions end at the point where the defensive language appears. Here is a quick exchange between a visitor to the site named The Knowledge, and an administrator who responds to him/her:

The original post: I had the pleasure of being at the seaside two days ago, in the evening as the light faded. A fishing boat was going out from the harbour into the distance. When watching it from the beach, I could see the light on its mast perfectly clearly. However, when I crouched down, the light disappeared.

As the boat went further from me, so the amount I needed to crouch for it to vanish became less and less. The sea was calm, I estimate the highest waves to have been no more than half a metre at maximum. This is insufficient to obscure the light by getting in the way.

This first-hand observed phenomenon directly demonstrates the curvature of the earth, as one would expect if a sgement (sic) of a sphere was between myself (sic) and the boat. This nullifies the "it looks flat" claim from the brainless FE mantra squad, because if it looked flat one would always be able to see the light, no matter how low you crouched. It also disgrees (sic) with Rowbotham's Bedford Level Experiment.

The response: You forgot to include your pictures.

The response to the response: So did Rowbotham.

The comments don't get much more elaborate for the remaining responses, all of which occur within one day of The Knowledge's last response above. Most of the discussions veer into this dead-end/punch line direction, but why does this happen? The FES is not seeking out attention through the use of public demonstrations like the WBC. In fact FES isn't condemning anyone who doesn't concur with their views. Yet the reactions we see towards both groups are parallel; debate rising up in the form of protests against the group's beliefs, media attention (albeit significantly less for FES) for the leaders of the groups, and what some might call childish behavior. Many protesters forgo their dignity in order to combat a misinterpretation of biblical writ and/or hate-speech that thrives on the very reactions it is inciting.

Saul Levmore holds an unflattering view of the Internet's exercise of free speech. In his essay, *The Internet's Anonymity Problem* he states that the Internet "is the natural and well-evolved successor to the bathroom wall" (54). In this case the bathroom wall is the blank page-- the feared emptiness waiting for the anonymous bard to happen upon it and bequeath the garnered wisdom of, say, an anecdote inciting a direct comparison between a peer and one's anatomy. Levmore's bathroom wall is also the location that one visits to dispose of something foul, in this case "juvenile and destructive communications" (50) where "anyone, anywhere, any time (sic), can have an opinion on anything" (Dreyfus 22). This creates an environment which encourages the type of behavior we see from The Knowledge and others online. When people are able to hide behind the mask of anonymity and are empowered by it, relieved of the consequences that haunt people like Shirley Phelps whose public outings are met with protest and violence, the rules of decency no longer seem to apply.

This reaction to anonymity is not surprising to Hubert L. Dreyfus who has written "On The Internet" and used Kierkegaard's views about the behavior of the press (in 1850) to provide an analogy to the Internet. Dreyfus says, "the new massive distribution of desituated information was making every sort of information immediately available to anyone, thereby producing a desituated, detached spectator" (qtd. in Dreyfus 76). Kierkegaard was warning us about the dangers of bringing all news to everyone, regardless of the significance of the particulars to the individual. Kierkegaard saw this public outreach from the press as fully responsible for "a detached world in which everyone [has] an opinion about and commented on all public matters without needing any first-hand experience and without having or wanting any responsibility" (Dreyfus 76). Dreyfus doesn't make it clear why Kierkegaard takes this position on human nature, but are the predictions accurate? Does the Internet lend itself to this behavior simply by accepting any and all opinions that come upon it?

There is a possible threat that Kierkegaard was aware of almost 160 years ago that would explain why he may have said "I told you so" if he ever had the chance to browse the Internet. Kierkegaard's fear

was that a far-reaching press would bring about the opinions of those who would otherwise be uninvolved with the knowledge the press bestowed upon them. This suggests that geographic context includes an attachment to facts or knowledge that are literally close to the individual processing the information. As Dreyfus concedes, concerning the Internet, relevance and significance disappear with the advent of the hyperlink: a gateway to the information stored on the Internet that is accessible to anyone browsing the particular site holding that link. Without the proper information reaching the people it most affects, Kierkegaard predicted a world in which nihilism would run rampant through cultural consciousness, having the effect of relevance disappearing with any previously relevant news in lieu of the geographically distant news surrounding it. The affect of this new nihilism breaching public opinion would thus create an invitation to anyone's interpretation or opinion of any events, eventually preventing more significant opinions from surfacing from an overwhelming sea of insignificance.

Still, this doesn't fully explain Kierkegaard's concern. Why would it be an issue for someone to have an opinion on data that originates from 100 miles further from anywhere they had ever traveled? Why should we be worried about gathering too much information about anything? Many great discoveries and achievements in innovation are a result of the accumulation of many non-great minds, rather than the occasional one that is able to accomplish a task by itself. The Internet is a perfect example of this: it seems to have been successful in its endeavor to globally usher information to people. Perhaps the answer best lies in turning to the Internet once more to observe human behavior.

Lee Siegel, a writer for *The New Republic* in 2006, experienced first-hand the results of taking advantage of the Internet's mask of anonymity, totally exposing his own indulgence, and facing some professional consequences as a result. Using a technique called "sock puppet" (a false Internet identity created for deceptive purposes) Siegel manufactured an online persona which defended and praised himself as a cultural critic and occasionally embellished these praises with an insult to anyone who said otherwise (Young). Eventually someone caught on to Siegel's trick and exposed his identity, which caught the attention of TNR, and Siegel was promptly fired. The reaction to Siegel's ousting is what Kierkegaard may have been attempting to avoid by limiting the reach of the press. The behavior of the anonymous can eventually digress into the realm of the deplorable. In the case of Siegel this occurs to the extent that unveiling his "sock puppetry" cost him a job and influenced the opinion the public had of him and TNR. This is an example of one's geographic proximity remaining nonexistent to the world around them, and then suddenly catching up to them and causing the social consequences. The next example is a role reversal of Siegel's situation: the anonymous party is now the observer looking in on someone else.

Josh Harris is an Internet entrepreneur whose claim to fame is a project he calls *We Live in Public*. In 1999 Harris conceived of and directed a project (or experiment) that placed roughly 100 people in a bunker-like environment in New York City. The experience was designed to give the tenants free reign over provided food, a gun range, an ex-CIA interrogator who interviewed them, "pods" to sleep in that resembled bunk-like cots, and all for the sake of entertainment-- the entire setup was filmed and broadcast, even to those in the housing. The idea was that this would be the "perfect analogy of what the Internet will be like," as one participant described-- clustering everyone into the same unregulated environment has the similar effect to that of the FES forums (We Live). The experiment eventually fell apart, giving way to aggressiveness from those having cameras in their faces at all times of the day and the psychological effects of having so much freedom among so many people. Some people succumbed to anger and aggression and were asked to leave, others just left of their own accord, but eventually the police got wind of the "cult-like" bunker in NYC and put a stop to the experiment (We Live). It was here that Harris met his next girlfriend, one of the WLIP participants, Tanya.

Josh and Tanya began dating after the events of WLIP. Harris was a millionaire at the time and had a spacious apartment in NYC which Tanya eventually moved-in to. There was one catch which Josh felt she was prepared for: she would have to live in public once again as Harris broadcast every corner of his apartment to the Internet for anyone to see. The viewers would be shrouded in anonymity and casually observe Josh and Tanya eat, watch television, defecate, and make love. It went well until the fights started. Tanya and Josh would argue, concede or walk away, and immediately visit the viewers of WLIP to get feedback. Josh has described this experience as having attracted multiple types of opinions: some people would genuinely attempt to help, others would just observe another's comments, but some would play devil's advocate and incite seeds of doubt into Harris' mind about Tanya's faithfulness or possible secretive behavior (Harvesting). The result was the eventual breakup of Josh and Tanya.

It's hard to imagine the same results would have occurred if the anonymity of Harris' viewers was wiped away. But that's not the way Harris set this new experiment up. He prefers to be the observed non-participating person, not the observer who influences the observed, such is the case of Siegel. Harris had this to say about the collective persona of the anonymous: "They're taking little pieces of you, continuously... they're harvesting my psyche in order to feed themselves. I don't want to give them anything more-- they'll take something from me that I can't replace" (Harvesting). Harris seems to think that these people are ruthless and possibly dangerous, and for good reason. Josh was confronted by a fan of Pseudo.com (Harris' online entertainment project before WLIP and the go-to site for viewing his two WLIP experiments live) after a screening of the documentary *We Live in Public*. The fan demanded an answer to Harris' sudden disappearance from the Internet and reluctance to begin any similar projects.

The demand was never met because the fan jumped on stage and attempted to attack Harris before security guards escorted him out of the building.

What we've seen now are four types of geographic proximities interacting with the right to free speech. With the Phelps family and WBC we can observe the effect that close geographic proximity has on hate speech and aggressive behavior: protests arise specifically against the WBC and there is no question about who is doing the protesting; people are held accountable for their actions. The second is a case in which all parties are completely anonymous, and the results have all the parties involved disrespecting one another or not being held accountable for their dialog. (The FES does have a roster of members available on their website but that doesn't mean their online pseudonyms give any indication as to their birth name identities.) The next two examples are curious reflections of one another. Siegel's is a case in which he stood anonymously as an observer, offering his self-centered observations and attacking naysayers. His unmasking resulted in a negative effect on his professional life when it was discovered that he was avoiding responsibility for his words. Harris played the opposite role, setting himself up as the observed, though not making himself anonymous to anyone doing the observing. He held himself fully responsible for anything that happened in his apartment, never asking for the identification of his viewers and bracing himself against their recklessness.

The power of anonymity gives way to amoral behavior without the call for responsibility. Being geographically close to an issue tends to inflict the notion of accountability on someone. Looking at recent demonstrations in NYC for the Occupy Wall Street movement, one can see the reaction to the behaviors of certain police officers against the non-violent protestors: online news coverage, petitions, and memes (concise, straight-to-the-point images or expressions that convey an idea or spread knowledge) attempt to bring identity and justice to those who violate basic human rights. If the acting police offer did not have an identity then there would be some very different reactions to his/her act. Here now is one last example in this study to possibly shed some light on behavioral trends within a certain geographic proximity.

Identity (non-anonymity) does not always ensure an ethical code of conduct between individuals with power. Errol Morris is a documentary filmmaker whose films have explored the human psyche of anyone who demonstrates radical, unique behavior. In his 2008 film *Standard Operating Procedure* he interviews the American soldiers involved in the infamous Abu Ghraib prison tortures. The media brought Abu Ghraib to public attention when photographs of these unusual interrogation techniques leaked to the press. The "interrogation center of Iraq" quickly became the shame of the United States' military when it was revealed that prisoners were being tied to leashes around their neck, handcuffed into

stress positions for hours on end while naked, and sleep-deprived for days (Standard). The inhumane nature of this behavior is only exacerbated when you consider that someone had to take photos of all this happening in order for the public to become aware of it; the guards and interrogators were documenting all of their unorthodox tactics and, as one guard puts it in Morris' film, "maybe it was for documentation, maybe it was for his own amusement" (referring to an MP and authority) (Standard).

This disturbing news incriminated almost everyone at the prison at the time the pictures were taken. What made all this possible may be even more disturbing-- the officers in charge at the prison were commanding those who worked under them to behave this way. Lynndie England describes this experience: "We just did what we were told to soften them up for interrogation. We were told to do anything short of killing them" (Standard). The U.S. military has severe punishments for disobeying commands, as well as social ramifications among the group's functionality when everyone is not seeing eye-to-eye. It was these conditions that encouraged those who saw what was happening, and knew that it was wrong, to participate regardless. Geographic proximity could not have been closer. The soldiers were living in the same structure and knew each other personally. Yet this immoral behavior continued to be "implemented into the plan" until the anonymity between the guards and the general U.S. public was broken down and criminal charges were pressed upon the guards (Standard).

This reflects the behavior encouraged by online interactions despite the distance created by anonymity. What we can learn from this is that the mask of anonymity can be worn anywhere there are like-minded individuals working towards a similar goal. The mask comes in different forms: as a name used exclusively online, a pair of sunglasses and paraphernalia of a higher cause, or hoods and underwear draped over a prisoners face. Creating a psychological rift between oneself and the rest of those we interact with is made easier with the advent of online forums and peer-to-peer interfaces. Mark Matousek writes this for The Huffington Post in his article about online dating:

> "I, too, felt liberated from myself under the cloak of online courtship. But with this freedom came a sinking sense of virtual moral degradation. I had not been a liar -- but now I was lying. Before, I cared about people's feelings but now was aggressive, elusive and shady. I was fast becoming one of "those people": The spineless, deceptive, selfish, and shallow. Something had to give."

The authority to Mark's anonymity is himself. In this case he concludes that it is “better to be alone... than virtually hooked up and stimulated beneath a façade of online deception" (Matousek). The truth is that we cannot always count on people like Mark to regulate their anonymous activity. If we are to avoid experiencing the events of Abu Ghraib, or combat radical hate-speech from affecting our own

behavior, then we need what many of the examples lack: an authority to regulate the geographic proximity developed by those hiding behind a mask.

Works Cited

The title and subtitle to this essay borrows from two sources, respectively: a line in a Stephen Malkmus song, and the idea of the internet "abolishing distance", taken from an essay by Paul Adams.

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