

Effects of Anonymity and The Internet

- Jaismine Kaur

“Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.”

- Oscar Wilde

Novelists have written under pseudonyms time and again to exhibit their true selves, to write of, perhaps, something not allowed by the society. Or even maintain their personal lives differently. Anonymity has always allowed people to be a “self” distant from their social presence.

The Internet and social media offer people the freedom to dissociate from their personal identity and self consciousness. This can also prove beneficial for the people to overcome their issues of anxiety, self esteem, and their need for desirability. But on the same spectrum: from trolling to the dark web and other extremist contents, nature and nurture seem to complement each other in this culture of hate. As social and political conspiracies pervade, ideologically fuelled as well as misinformed people form groups of extremist hatemongers as they find like-minded individuals as themselves, hence validating their ideas. This deindividuation, with decrease in self and societal regulation, over-stimulates the senses without any self, or external, policing. No accountability or association of the actions with the individual, leads to less self-regulation.

One of the biggest challenges will be finding an appropriate balance between protecting anonymity and enforcing consequences for the abusive behaviour that has been allowed to characterise online discussions for far too long.

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Role Playing games, superheroes as well as villains, all hide behind their masks and characters to act out an alternate self, whether to feel fulfilled and validated, to be someone they have always wished to be vicariously, or just to see how their actions can probe a reaction out of someone.

Communication involves much more than words; more social cues and reactions like gestures, facial expressions, subtle body composure, or signs displaying varied emotions help us conduct our own reactions while communicating, and convey our own emotions and reactions better. Social media tends to reduce our communication to mere words, where we render the opposite party's words our own subjective meaning and tone. Taking it a step further, anonymity erases guilt by escaping the reaction of the receiver of our actions. This reduced communication helps the majority escape accountability from their own selves and reduces their self awareness. When a mirror isn't present to display us the externally influenced ethical and societal conscience, many morals are escapable.

A paper written as far back as 1999 (Social desirability, anonymity, and Internet-based Questionnaire by Adam Joinson) studies the effect of the internet on people, and how their behaviour and choices contrast with their online as well as their real-world presence.

“A key behavioural difference between online and real life's that users of computer networks can be characterised as **disinhibited**. That is, people on the Internet are more willing than they would be in real life to exchange hostilities, swap personal information, seek potentially threatening information, and publish normally protected aspects of themselves.”

Are all our personalities that we compartmentalise to fit different environments, really dissociated from each other? Do people necessarily present their true, dark selves behind the mask of anonymity? That question would have to be preceded by another question: what even is the true self? Perhaps we never know who we truly are; amongst societal ethics and its constructed conscience for our-selves, to the principles we supposedly follow in this age of neurosis and repression. It is often portrayed that the end of the world shows how flimsy the code of ethics and this face of civilisation really is. The internet, truly, presents that End as a pretext. The self often moulds according to the environment it is present in. In the world of the Internet, Good and Innocence can generally never survive.