Accountability on the Internet

The Argument between Anonymity and Responsibility

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***Abstract*—This electronic document briefly analyzes the relationship between anonymity and responsibility and likens it to the relationship between free speech and censorship. One specific example in “Twitter” will be used, and a short analysis of the cause of some behavior on the internet will be done with a real world example using online gambling.**

***Index Terms*—Anonymity, responsibility, free speech, censorship**

# Introduction

The veritable explosion of technology has caused society to evolve in ways that never could have been predicted. Ideas that previously took years or even decades to circulate around the world can now happen almost instantaneously. Communities of people with a larger population than some countries can be formed without human contact. With the rampant evolution of communication, the policies that previously governed us have a worse and worse time adapting to an online format that has people calling for both anonymity and responsibility.

While it may seem clear cut that malicious people on the internet should be held responsible in some way and that in general people should be allowed to remain anonymous on the internet, the extent to which these principles should be followed is a problem that continues to cause the greatest minds in the world to ponder.

A good understanding of the relationship between free speech and censorship is essential to understanding and coming to personal conclusions on the topic.

This document will analyze the juxtaposition of free speech and censorship in relation to technology and social media, the perspective of social media giant “Twitter” on the topic, how the requirement of anonymity and the requirement of responsibility contradict each other, the way that online interactions has lower social and personal inhibitions, and discussing whether or not limiting free speech online is a viable action fundamentally.

# The Relationship between Free Speech and Responsibility

On the internet, free speech and anonymity go hand in hand, as do censorship and responsibility. It is no surprise then, that many of the same principle arguments between free speech and responsibility offline also apply to the argument between anonymity and responsibility online. Former Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy equates the internet and social media to a public forum for exchanging views [1]. From this perspective, it is easy to see how the concepts overlap.

Anonymity on the internet is what gives people the ability to exercise free speech. While, outside of a few exceptions, there are few legal consequences for exercising free speech on the internet, the ability to vocalize true thoughts and emotions are limited, similarly to real world conversation, by the social repercussions that follow. This limitation is often bypassed by the unique aspect of the internet that lends individuals a nearly unmatched ability to remain anonymous [2]. Suddenly, the fear of speaking in favor of unpopular opinions and debating the merits of them is no longer so limiting, and people can connect with people they may identify with but not want to be identified as can form smaller, less popular communities.

On the other hand, this anonymity gives people the power to be irresponsible with little repercussions online. Malicious people who, as an example, make fun of others within a small group of individuals, may suddenly voice these opinions to a massive audience because of the lack of social repercussions that limited them before.

Like how the power of free speech limits the power of censorship, the power of anonymity limits the power of responsibility.

# The Lowered Inhibitions of Online Interaction

Online, it seems like the amount of malicious people increases by several folds compared to real world interaction; however, a more likely explanation is that being online leads to the same polite people we see in real life behaving openly maliciously or irrationally. Following this train of thought, it logically follows that online interaction has lower inhibitions compared to interacting with people in the real world.

An excellent method to analyze the reason this could be the case is to create an analogy between real world and online interaction and compare it to a similar analogy between real world gambling and online gambling.

It is a well known and thoroughly researched actuality that gambling online instead of in personal lowers inhibitions and causes higher spending, and for the same reasons it is likely that online communication causes lower inhibitions and higher irrational thought.

Online gambling causes lower inhibitions partly because of accessibility and simple, welcoming interfaces that emotionally reward the user for interacting, but the main reason is that the physical aspect of handing over money or handing over a credit card is removed [3]. By replacing this aspect with the simple click of a button, the mental understanding of loss is lessened, and the user is more likely to keep spending.

Relating back to the topic, the same principles can be applied to online communication. In person, people naturally feel anxious of being judged, causing people to more carefully consider their speech. Online, especially when emotional, people are less likely to analyze their speech and often underestimate the size and variety of the audience they are able to reach. Suddenly, someone who has had a bad day at work has gone from complaining in person to their family, to using far more agitated language to an innumerable audience online instead.

# Twitter

Because there is no clear cut answer, it is important to analyze the actions of the big players in the social media business. After trying a laissez-faire approach to speech on their massive platform, Twitter has veered away from their original plan and has begun using clear cut rules of what they will and will not allow on their website [4].

This approach is interesting because it establishes that Twitter does not believe that there are universal moral guidelines to determine what people should and should not be allowed to say; however, they know what they do not want people to say on *their* platform and hand out bans accordingly.

# The Possibility of Regulation

The largest demand of those standing on the side of responsibility over anonymity is the request for regulation; however, attempts to suppress the freedom of speech seldom go well. It is unlikely that attempts to suppress the average person’s ability to speak freely on the internet will be met calmly and acceptingly. The internet community has and will continue to stand firm against strong, inflexible rules.

Also, the main platforms used to communicate online, social media, are all privately owned. This means that the government cannot legally regulate them due to the first amendment. This means that there are not truly many avenues for any type of meaningful regulations to be enforced upon the general populace [5].

# Conclusion

The argument between anonymity and responsibility holds many parallels to the ongoing argument between free speech and responsibility and understanding that both are a push and pull relationship are key to understanding the topic. Online interaction inherently has less inhibitions than offline interaction similar to the relationship between online and offline gambling. Naturally because of this, people are more likely to act irrationally online than offline. With this in mind, people should probably be judged less harshly for statements made online rather than offline. Viewing Twitter’s example of regulating one platform instead of many poses an interesting thought that online forums should be regulated individually to the best of a particular type of person’s morals rather than the internet as a whole. Truthfully, an overall unsatisfying but nevertheless effective answer to the question is that it depends. Because of the erroneous nature of the internet and its relation to the question at hand, considering situations by a case by case basis is effective at a personal scale, though impossible at an overall scale.

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