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Online Anonymity: Harmful or Beneficial?

Online anonymity has been in the minds of many individuals in recent times. It has sparked many discussions in the media, online, and in conversations among friends. The discussion about online anonymity is tricky because for all of recorded history, anonymity has been a grey issue. An issue that has no definite answer, but definitely has passionate supporters on both sides. I set out to research online anonymity because recent legislation, specifically in the United Kingdom, has been challenging and threatening anonymity on the internet. The information leaked by Edward Snowden and new digital fingerprinting technology question if being totally anonymous on the internet is even a possibility (Baraniuk 5; Giles 3). My goal in researching online anonymity was not only to discover if it indeed was harmful or beneficial, but to find out who is trying to be anonymous and why? It was apparent when I began researching, that there was no finite answer to my question, but I was sure that when I was done researching, I would come to a logical conclusion. I already knew that the prospect of being anonymous online was being jeopardized by legislation and government surveillance, but didn't know really why someone would want to be anonymous, or if it was still possible to be totally anonymous. I set out to get to the bottom of this mystery. My research began defining anonymity.

First, background information. As defined by the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, anonymity is “the state of being anonymous”, therefore online anonymity is “the state of being anonymous”, online. The three ways one may identify online: using real name, pseudonymity,

and anonymity (Chen et al. 233). The real name identification method, commonly used in social networking environments, describes a user as that of their actual name. A pseudonym describes a user as that of a fake name or reworking of the user's actual name. Anonymity describes a user as someone who is unidentified and unknown. In a way, pseudonymity is a form of anonymity, but pseudonymity gives users a static, unchanging identity. But, in the words of Gabriella Coleman, "Anonymity is under attack". "Anonymity values seem to be at an all time low" and this is even more concerning given the recent nature of technology and spying. Companies and Governments are collecting data and are accessing and using data without user's knowledge. This threatens online anonymity (Coleman 1).

There are countless usages of online anonymity. For example, one could use anonymity to send racist or abusive messages. As a result, online anonymity and online bullying have driven some to suicide (Baraniuk 2). But, youth are now using online anonymity to find themselves and share their ideas in a safe and anonymous way (Keipi and Oksanen 1110). Anonymity can be used as an outlet for someone to voice an unpopular belief (Coleman 1). Additionally, anonymity can aid in pointing out corruption, or sharing an illegal political idea (Pao and Taplin). There are many different reasons to be anonymous online, ranging from good to bad.

Online anonymity certainly has its downfalls and can be misused to commit crimes or cause pain on another person. Nicola Brookes, an unassuming 45-year-old from Brighton, United Kingdom, challenged the conduct of internet trolls who ganged up on a celebrity. When Brooks refused to back down, she was hit with nearly 10,000 messages from anonymous strangers threatening her. Brooks says, "A lot of people wouldn't say things to other peoples' faces that they do on the screen" (Baraniuk 2). The harsh attacks on Brooks were enabled by anonymous emails and anonymous accounts. It is nearly a fact that when people are anonymous, they tend to

be more irrational. In a study by psychologist Ed Diener, masked trick-or-treaters stole more candy when given the opportunity, from the houses they visited on Halloween (Baraniuk 2). This study demonstrates the deplorable behavior by those with no identity. In fact, Google's executive chairman, Eric Schmidt said "The internet would be better if we had an accurate notion that you were a real person as opposed to a dog, or fake person, or a spammer" (Giles 2). The examples of bullying and harassment online enabled by online anonymity are endless. After Nina Davuluri became the first Miss America of Indian descent, she received numerous anonymous, racist messages on Twitter (Baraniuk 2). In extreme cases, this type of vicious cyberbullying has led some innocent victims to suicide (Giles 1). Many experts argue online anonymity is a serious problem that need to be addressed. Jonathon Taplin of University of Southern California said, "[online anonymity] ...brings out the worst in humans." Taplin compared the modern internet to a Tower of Babel with, "thousands vetting anger, and little or no understanding" (Pao and Taplin). Anonymity can certainly influence more aggressive behaviors than pseudonym and real name (Chen et al. 230). There is still hope. Actions taken by websites to prevent anonymity have worked in preventing rude, spam, or fake comments. TechCrunch, a technology news website, has seen a decrease in number of rude, spam, or fake comments after requiring users to log into their Facebook account to post a comment. Because Facebook has a real name policy you see a lessening in the number of inappropriate comments as the user's post is tied to a real name with real risks or consequences (Giles 2). In addition to harassment and bullying, online anonymity can be used to misguide people or create fictitious profiles. For example, a female student of the age 18 was tricked into keeping in touch with an anonymous man for months. The female student in question developed feelings for this man over online conversation, but didn't even know his name. In the end, all the man wanted was sex. In this case anonymity was used to take

advantage of trust by creating a safety net and as a result expression became more free. Many women are being taken advantage by predatory males through anonymity and the creation of misleading fictitious profiles (Keipi and Oksanen 1109). This is not a lone case. There are endless stories similar to the one Keipi and Oksanen mentioned in their journal. To conclude, the availability of online anonymity can create cases where being anonymous can facilitate harassment, bullying, criminal activity, or impersonation.

Online anonymity is not all harmful, there are many ways in which being anonymous online can be beneficial. Many benefits to being anonymous online include freedom of creative expression, the ability to share an unpopular idea, and the ability to share an illegal political idea (Baraniuk 2). To begin, persons feel the safest online when they are anonymous. The internet puts people in a situation of invisibility via anonymity and pseudonym. Anonymous people are more likely to give honest answers or disclose their confidential information. On the contrary people, in the real name mode are less likely to disclose confidential information (Chen et al. 230). The nondisclosure of personal information can also benefit youth. A 17-year-old male described that anonymity online allowed him to receive treatment as if he had been much older. In turn, this granted him greater customer service. He said, “without anonymity, I strongly believe that I would not have been treated as well in the same situation”. The risks of anonymous interaction are lessened when the anonymous partners have an incentive toward respect and courtesy (Keipi and Oksanen 1106). It is this respect and courtesy that is necessary when dealing with anonymity as, “power comes with danger” (Pao and Taplin). Anonymity enables the pushing back of increased surveillance and oppressive governments (Coleman 1). Anonymous communication can help residents voice an unpopular belief without government knowledge. In 2007, South Korea began requiring users of the country’s most popular websites to sign up using

their national identify number to post comments. South Korea's actions eliminated the act of being anonymous. In the months following, users became afraid to write comments on these online services, and users kept silent of most public issues. The national ID requirement effectively destroyed discussion on popular topics and limited citizen's ability to speak their mind (Giles 5). The policy reduced harsh language by 30 per cent, but had, "no ambiguous civilizing effect". A majority of technologically knowledgeable users fled to international websites where the law didn't apply. The policy was later revoked (Baraniuk 2-3). Anonymity is not something that is only available to a select few, it is quite common for the public to want to be anonymous. A Pew Research Center Survey found 26 per cent of people have used a temporary email address or username to comment online, while 18 per cent used a fake name (Baraniuk 3). In 1999, Almost 95 per cent of people chose not to provide personal information to websites (Chen et al. 229). Anonymity is very common, and for good reason, anonymity separates a user and his/her action, creating an environment with no consequences. Anonymous activity online provides the tools "bullies" need to remain hidden, but anonymity also allows victims to speak out and express themselves more clearly. Although "bullies" may be destructive to others, they may be using anonymous communication therapeutically (Keipi and Oksanen 1107). In this regard, anonymity is beneficial. Another interesting aspect of anonymity is that it forces users to care about personality and opinions rather than appearance or beauty. Anonymity enables raw discussions that are solely based on the content of the message rather than the character that is sending it (Keipi and Oksanen 1108). To summarize, online anonymity can aid the disclosure of confidential information, enable fair treatment and discussion, and allow liberation from oppressive governments.

With the given nature of technology, is total anonymity even still possible? According to a survey by the Pew Research Center in Washington DC, 59 per cent of Americans don't believe online anonymity is actually possible (Baraniuk 5). Rightfully so, companies such as BlueCava have developed software that gathers hundreds of clues each time a user visits a website that can identify his/her device, one in a billion. Companies like BlueCava look at fonts, software, language settings, operating system, browser, and device name to uniquely identify users (Giles 3-6). Another company, BehavioSec, identifies users by the way they move their mouse or use their smartphones touch screen. BehavioSec's software identifies online users with an accuracy rate of 99.7 per cent. This identification process is known as digital fingerprinting. Digital fingerprinting seems to be threatening online anonymity. Author and Researcher, Gabriella Coleman believes "Anonymity's values" to be at an all time low (1).

To conclude, online anonymity can be both harmful and beneficial. Online anonymity can be used for creative expression, the ability to share an unpopular idea, or illegal political idea. On the contrary, online anonymity can also facilitate harassment, bullying, criminal activity, or impersonation. I have learned that many new digital fingerprinting technologies can identify even anonymous users with extreme accuracy. It is increasingly more difficult to be totally anonymous with the large amount of tracking software websites use. I have come to the conclusion that pseudonymity is the best way to identify oneself online. Pseudonymity provides a small safety net but also identifies users with recognizable names others can understand. Others agree with the compromise pseudonymity affords users. Danah Boyd at Microsoft Research says, "Most of the time we want pseudonymity, not anonymity..." (Giles 5). Pseudonymity is the perfect compromise in the way users identify themselves online.

