

Designing for Online Behaviors of Anonymous Users

David Bradshaw

School of Information, Pratt Institute

INFO-601: Foundations of Information

Dr. Irene Lopatovska

April 23, 2020

Abstract

User Experience professionals are tasked with finding a balance of online interactions that remain civil and open depending on the use case of what they are designing. This balancing act needs to consider the psychological influences that online users have when given the ability to interact with other users either anonymously or dehumanized. This study for User Experience professionals is becoming more critical as technology starts to replace or offer virtual versions of all interactions that humans have. With the growing move to the online world cyberbullying and “trolling” are becoming a constant problem that does not just effect people online but can leads to mental hardship that hurts individuals in the real world.

Designing for Online Behaviors of Anonymous Users

More and more of the real world is moving online, and while this has brought people from around the world closer through technology it has also exposed the meaner side of some users. Nearly all aspects of things from the real world have been recreated in a digital way; from communication like Facebook, Twitter and messaging apps to virtual gatherings of people in virtual worlds or forums like role playing video games and community forum boards. As more and more social means became the norm on the internet an interesting pattern started to arise, some users would say and post cruel things or attempt to start arguments with no real reason to do so. This has grown over the last several years and has even been coined as “trolling”, which is seen as someone who purposely tries to anger or cause argument with the author or other posters by posting off-topic items or controversial topics (Hanson).

Cyberbullying has also had a rise in concern in the last decade. While bullying in school age children is nothing new cyberbullying has been escalated and frequently includes topics and bullying techniques that can be viewed by the entire world, which has escalated to causing stress, depression and even suicide from being a victim of cyberbullying (Barlett, 2015, p. 70).

The question becomes why users act this way when online; doing and saying stuff they would not usually say in the real world. For this psychological analysis of users and understanding of the mind is needed. The one common possibility is that when a user is online, they feel a sense of anonymity. It is possible that the user feels they are not visible and real-world attributes of themselves do not apply. For example a user may feel they can attack or bully others online and their own physical weakness or inadequacies cannot be viewed by the victim of their comments or actions which can lead to the user developing a more positive

feeling toward online aggressiveness (Barlett, Gentile, & Chew, 2016, p. 173). The social norms might also be a defining factor for the new technological frontier. The ability to post instantly and communicate behind a keyboard without any connection to the real person is a new structure and it is possible that as new users join a website or social online entity they do not know the normal way to behave due to not having a predefined social structure to follow, this can lead to the standards being set by a prime, or someone who is more outspoken and this behavior can then be followed by the other users (Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, & Groot, 2001).

As technology has evolved so has the need for User Experience professionals. These professionals define and design most of the products that make up the online world. By understanding the psychology of users and their interactions with online products a User Experience professional can try to create a product that avoids the pitfalls of the anonymity model of users online and provides a safe and open place for users to connect. However, this is a tough balancing act as systems need to be a place for free information while also protecting and ensuring civil behavior. Over the last decades the internet has become a problematic landscape in the political and social levels with multiple interactions that differ but are still very connected from communication to information retrieval (Bimber, 2000, p. 329). Finding a balance in the products designed is crucial for any products success as well as creating a safe and more connected place for all users.

A psychological concept has been introduced to explain the behavior of online anonymity this concept is known as the "Online Disinhibition Effect" (Suler, 2004). This effect can have two opposite effects, in some users it may promote them to open up and share more personal things about themselves and in others it may expose a more rude and hateful person

who looks for the darker side of themselves. The ideal is that when the user is given the opportunity to separate their real life from their online actions and persona, they can feel empowered and not have the fear that might be associated with being personally linked to their behaviors or expressions (Suler, 2004, pp. 321-322). As Suler explains there are two possible directions of the disinhibition effect and a User Experience professional should attempt to find the differential causes to ensure their products can focus on the benign disinhibition effect. Social modeling could be seen as a way to lead users in the more civil direction even without the social context to engage with to define what is appropriate behavior for the normative of the online group they are interacting with (Zimmerman, 2012, pp. 6-8). It is possible that the lack of immediate response, as well as not having a face to face contact to the other user in most online interactions can also lead to the disinhibition effect (Suller, 2004, pp. 322-323). While Suller has shown that some users with anonymity can lead to a more open person and not necessary a negative response from that user it has shown that many are negative. This has to be weighed as a User Experience professional tries handle the need of designing for all.

Even with anonymity users should not really change their behavior to the extent that is seen with online behaviors. It is possible that social behavior is only enforced by fear of the consequences (Martin, 2017); which if true would make it near impossible to keep an open internet that is safe for all. This is also viewed in dissociative practices where some users do not connect their actions to the outcome that can happen from them; this is even more seen in actions toward dehumanized entities where they were treated harsher than humanized ones (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975, pp. 254-259). However, one theory is that it can come

down to just seeing others doing something and following suit. For example, areas with lots of vandalism or graffiti usually get more and more vandalism and graffiti (Martin, 2017). This could indicate that some problems could be solved merely by catching the negative comments early and hiding or removing them before others see and follow suit.

Recently Facebook, one of the largest social networks available to the world, has started to improve and try to fight online bullying and harassing comments. While Facebook does usually link to a user there is no requirement to prove you are a specific user or even use a real name or picture. Therefore, the ability to be anonymous on Facebook still exists, although most users on the platform are linked to their real identities. Facebook has introduced new methods to deal with hateful and bullying posts and comments by auto blocking and hiding posts based on key and offensive words as well introducing features for other users to report comments and posts on the behalf of the user who received them (Davis, 2018). The magazine “Popular Science” also attempted to deal with negative comments by removing the ability to comment completely from their website. They argued that the comments, especially those made by anonymous users were affecting the integrity of the scientific articles they posted and that many of the negative or hateful comments would cause a reader to not believe or comprehend the intended meaning of the article. This was even more true of anonymous comments which were mostly uncivil in nature and usually contrary to the original post. It was discovered that these comments caused what is frequently referred to as the “nasty effect” which would lead to other users having their perception of the article skew (Konnikova, 2013). While both Facebook and “Popular Science” took steps to avoid uncivil behavior online they do not necessary deal with all of the issues and the lack of comments or open discussion can just

result in the conversation moving to other, more open, platforms that can facilitate their comments and discussions.

Taking these psychological reasons behind a user's behavioral changes online a User Experience professional should be able to work to create a product that can maintain the freedom of open communication while ensuring civility amongst all users. Some possible fixes are theorized but all have pros and cons. For example, this could be enforced by a system of user accounts that are linked to real world people and validated via some form of government identifications. However, this approach could lead to a fear of tracking or loss of freedom or privacy amongst the users. Another approach could be to put the humanized version of the person a user is interacting with more in front of the current user; thus, ensuring a humanized connection to the person a user is communicating with; this would lead to trying to avoid a de-individualized behavior which normally goes against the norms established by society (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). While this approach would work for some based on the psychological papers published on the topic it will not necessarily deal with users who feel anonymous and have no care of the other person and are attempting to just "troll" users for their own enjoyment.

Unfortunately, this shows that while it is understood why users behave the way they do online it is not easy to design around it. There will always be a balancing act of dealing with openness, dehumanized interactions, disinhibition effect, and crowd mentality. Finding the right balance of these for the specific platform being created will be difficult and pushing the design to over-enforce any concept can lead to loss of users or users simply moving to other platforms who allow what they need. The balance should be skewed based on the target

audience of the platform. For example, due to the ever-growing concern of cyberbullying and the mental impact on school age children this demographic should lean toward a more humanized interaction with less openness and less anonymity. Therefore, ensuring that users are held responsible for their actions same as they would be in a real-world school environment. Finding the balance for all applications is a difficult task for a User Experience professional but will be critical to ensure a safe online world for all users and a platform that meets its interaction goals and facilitates community benefits.

References

- Bandura, A., Underwood, B., & Fromson, M. E. (1975). Disinhibition of aggression through diffusion of responsibility and dehumanization of victims. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 9(4), 253–269. doi: 10.1016/0092-6566(75)90001-x
- Barlett, C. P. (2015). Anonymously hurting others online: The effect of anonymity on cyberbullying frequency. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 4(2), 70–79. doi: 10.1037/a0034335
- Barlett, C. P., Gentile, D. A., & Chew, C. (2016). Predicting cyberbullying from anonymity. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 5(2), 171–180. doi: 10.1037/ppm0000055
- Bimber, B. (2000). The Study of Information Technology and Civic Engagement. *Political Communication*, 17(4), 329–333. doi: 10.1080/10584600050178924
- Davis, A. (2018, October 2). Protecting People from Bullying and Harassment. Retrieved April 10, 2020, from <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/10/protecting-people-from-bullying/>
- Hanson, J. (n.d.). Trolls and Their Impact on Social Media. Retrieved April 23, 2020, from <https://unlcms.unl.edu/engineering/james-hanson/trolls-and-their-impact-social-media>
- Konnikova, M. (2013, October 23). The Psychology of Online Comments. Retrieved April 11, 2020, from <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-psychology-of-online-comments>
- Martin, A. (2017, October 4). Online disinhibition and the psychology of trolling. Retrieved April 2, 2020, from <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/online-aggression>

- Postmes, T., Spears, R., Sakhel, K., & Groot, D. D. (2001). Social Influence in Computer-Mediated Communication: The Effects of Anonymity on Group Behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 27(10), 1243–1254. doi: 10.1177/01461672012710001
- Reicher, S. D., Spears, R., & Postmes, T. (1995). A Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Phenomena. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 6(1), 161–198. doi: 10.1080/14792779443000049
- Suler, J. (2004). The Online Disinhibition Effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321–326. doi: 10.1089/1094931041291295
- Zimmerman, Adam G. (2012), Online Aggression: The Influences of Anonymity and Social Modeling. *University of North Florida Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. 403.
<https://digitalcommons.unf.edu/etd/403>