Is it ever acceptable to use a fake name online? Why or why not? Should websites require you to use a real name, or have a verification process? Why or why not?

In my opinion, there are scenarios in which using a fake name online is acceptable, however, I wish to emphasize that these scenarios are few and shouldn’t be taken lightly. The internet has evolved over the last thirty-five years from a simple institutional network for scientific research into a daily-use tool, ofttimes classified as another utility alongside running water and electricity. Specifically, it has matured significantly over the last decade in areas such as social networking, multi-media sharing, discussion boards, e-commerce, and e-banking. There are over four-billion active internet users, and over two-billion of them actively use social networks. For many users the contrast between their physical and digital identity has greatly, if not completely, diminished. As such, I propose as rule of thumb that the accuracy of one’s digital identification should follow the same ethics and standards as if the scenario were physical.

Using a fake name is acceptable in scenarios where the name solely provides a means of an anonymous label. This is very common on discussion boards where the purpose is to explore a specific topic, and not the personal information of its contributors. This provides privacy, safety, and a feeling of security, especially when the topic is controversial. Individuals can express their true and full opinions with a feeling of anonymity. While sharing your true name may not seem like a big deal, this small piece of personal information provides a great starting point for gathering more personal information. This process has become easier with the evolution of social networks like Facebook.

In contrast, using a fake name is not acceptable when it’s supposed to explicitly label yourself (e.g. social networks, chat rooms, online services relating to your personal information, etc.). Legal documents and applications, physical and digital, should always contain truthful information. Just as physical documents normally have a signature section to validate information correctness, digital documents will have a check-box or e-signature section. Utilizing a fake name on social networks is, in my opinion, an insult to the service and its users. Besides generally being against the EULA (End-User-License-Agreement), it is also all too often used to “troll” or for “catfishing”, which can cause their victims emotional and mental harm, and possibly lead to physical harm. To help guard against multiple accounts with fake names, most social networks enforce an email/text verification process. Perpetrators can still get around this by creating multiple free email accounts and phone numbers, but the process is much more tedious.

Resources:

1. <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2018/01/global-digital-report-2018>
2. Discovering Computers 2016, page 77

Hi Vanessa,

Thank you for sharing your ideas. Perhaps my comment is a tangent, but I found this statement interesting. "...people abuse technology as if it won't affect their lives."  People hide behind a fake identify and do things in the digital world that they would, hopefully, not do in the physical world. Regardless of how subtle the effects, our digital lives will help shape our physical lives, whether for good or bad. I'm happy that most society frowns upon trolling and the various forms of phishing. Society correctly looks upon these actions as bullying and theft. Where I think many fall ethically short is when it comes to bootleg media, digital infidelity, digital violence, etc..

Per your overall argument, I think a compromise could be made. Perhaps all sites should enforce its users to register with their true credentials, but only their username "alias" would be used in forums where it's preferable for the users to remain anonymous. This way system administrators could provide personal information of those who improperly use the service, as to more easily track them down. This raises another issue of how to ensure that their "true credentials" are actually accurate in the first place.

Cheers!

