POL507 Power, Change and Technology
Research Essay
Michael Francki
500554567
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Importance of Online Anonymity as a Tool for Freedom of Speech In a Democratic Free
Society

        The Internet is a marvel of human engineering never in human history has there been a
tool for global communication that has been more powerful or that more people have had
access to. There are many examples of the internet shaping our society by spreading the
thoughts and opinions of almost all social groups. It is extremely important to critically analysis
the way we as a society use it, what parties have a conflicting power struggles over it and how
all this changes society. This essay will specifically examine anonymity as a tool being use for
online communication. Arguing that it promotes the ideals of a demonstrating free society.
Specifically that it protects the freedom of of those who use and therefore it is an important right
to protect in a modern global society and it would be detrimental to hinder it.

        Freedom of speech is a corner stone ideology that is both protected and needed free
democratic state. The ability to speak against those in power or in favour of controversial topics
is necessary to give the general public ability to freely take part in democracy. "Indeed,
throughout history, people's willingness to engage in debate on controversial subjects in the
public sphere has always been linked to possibilities for doing so anonymously" (Bodle, 2013,
p.) Its clear to see that online debate and conversation although done through a new median is
just as important and potentially more powerful then the debates done in a public sphere done
in a pre-internet society. If we can accept that free speech is a societal virtue and furthermore
anonymity in some situations is necessary for certain people to discuss topics and views that
they would feel unsafe or unwilling to otherwise. Then it is clear if online is new public sphere
then protecting one ability to be anonymous one it is equivalent to protecting there freedom of
speech.

        The idea of a public sphere is extremely important to continue this examination of web
anonymity and its importance in our society. "It is that space within which people deliberate over
matters of common concern, matters that are contested and about which it seems necessary to
reach a consensus"(Dean, 2003, p. 95). To show that protecting someones ability to be
anonymous online is the same as protecting the right to partake in anonymous debate in the
public sphere. It is important to show that online is in fact a public sphere. There are opponent
to this claim, one way to attack the online public sphere candidacy "the Net's domination by
young, white, American men"(Dean, 2003, p. 98) is that is is not public enough it is occupied by
a sub groups of the public who are often like minded. This is now a dated argument the lowering
cost and increasing availability of internet enabled devices is vastly increasing the publicness of
the online space. The other way to show that it is not a public sphere is to show even if it is a
public space it is not a public sphere because it is not beneficial for democracy. That the online
conversations are in some way illegitimate or lack some quality necessary for the debate to
reach proper consensus. There is some gut reaction that face-to-face communication without
use of technology is somehow best and must be the most genuine form of communication "face-

to-face interaction needs to be understood as imaginary"(Dean, 2003, p. 98) This should be accepted to be false adding an online median between the face should logically in no way affect quality or how genuine it is. I assert that online is intact a public sphere because it is both public and promotes democracy by being an acceptable place for debate of topics of which consensus is needed.

Opponents of online anonymity could argue it is a tool that can be miss used by hiding criminal and nefarious activities done while online. This is clearly concern, criminals should be pursued but if we are to accept that freedom of speech is right that we wish to uphold in our society infringing on it to stop potential criminal or just immoral acts would completely undermine the right of free speech. Having some restricted free speech in an obvious misnomer, restricted free speech is the same as not have freedom of speech. Opponents might also argue that because of the vast volume of information and opinion available and the ease that the they can be published in contrast to more traditional medians such as print and even radio and other broadcasts. That one posted anonymously online inherently have less worth because of the author not wanting to be connected to it. The average person would ignore this specific form of media.Therefor making it useless tool for free speech if no one giving it any merit. The theory is anonymous content is generally of lesser quality and will be ignored in favour of author identifiable counter parts because they are seen as more reliable and with higher credibility. Looking at a study done to test such a hypothesis this appears to not be the case. They tested the perceived credibility of online content that was either anonymous or identifiable. "Study 1 examined whether writing a blog anonymously has any impact on perceived credibility. The results found no difference in perceived credibility when the blogger was identifiable and when they were anonymous" (Chesney, 2010) This study suggest that there is no scientific justification to such a claims. The anonymous content on the web is viewed with the same credibility as identifiable content. Online anonymity is still a useful and necessary tool for free speech because the public views such content as credible, there is no reason to believe that there is any perceived lack of credibility caused by anonymity.

Now examining a case study of a society that has decided to take a stance of security and safety even if that means compromising anonymity and examining the results and implications. Japan as depicted in the paper Japanese Risk Society: Trying to Create Complete Security and Safety Using Information and Communication Technology. In Japan there is a high perceived threat level to personal safety (even though crime stats don't show any particular high level of danger). Japan has "[increased] capacity to monitor, track and record individual behaviour "(Murata, 2010). In order to increase safety or at least the perceived level of safety There is further pushes to increase the surveillance capabilities the government and the authorities to monitor it's public. "everyone would be monitored anytime and anywhere… [to] combat activities that infringe on others' liberties, such as crimes and terrorism, may ironically infringe on civil liberties. "(Murata, 2010). Although coming from concerns of peace and safety to protect the liberties of a free society the implications of an extreme lack of anonymity even while online is major concern. Higher powers having unrestricted access to all online (or otherwise) activities is an extreme breach of privacy caused by a lack of the availability anonymity. Even on there is no compelling evidence that such measures have any affect on true threat levels. If it is accepted that a breach of anonymity is acceptable for the sake of potential increases to safety it becomes unclear as to where the line is (or if one exists) because more information can always be collected and that information might increase safety. Development and employment of such

surveillance tools that work against the tools of anonymity, even if done for nodal causes will inherently act against freedom speech and other person liberties that are crucial for free societies.

Anonymity is not a given freedom while online there are strong powers working in opposition. If not actively combated it reasonable that it would be lost and freedom of speech vicariously with it. The concept of governments surveilling is not new or unique. Using the internet to do so is a simple natural progression. With the value data and communication information being regard so highly government espionage with the goal of identifying the source, destination and payload of online communication is gigantic and growing industry all over the world. This can be seen with The Five Eyes Intelligence alliance that includes Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States "Traffic analysis—now called data mining—is back, with vast quantities of metadata collected to sift and prioritize the staggering flood of plain-language communications coursing through the cables. Encrypted communications are also collected—and decrypted when feasible and judged worth the effort. " (Marking 70 Years Of Eavesdropping In Canada). With such strong powers working against online anonymity it might seem unfeasible to achieve in our current societal structure. This is why individuals must actively protect there online privacy by the use and development of tool to protect there identity as well push for stronger government oversight to minimize at all cost the infringements on their rights and freedoms done legal by there own and other governments.

Now having examined online anonymity as a tool for freedom speech that is used in the public as an effective to share thought and opinions on a global scale with high level of credibility. If as a society we except that freedom of speech is necessary for a free democratic society to function and effectively empower the general population to have that tool they need to change and shape society fairly. It is unacceptable for governments to infringe on the freedom of speech to protect other liberties because it is inherently a loss of freedom. Online anonymity is vital right to keep and protect because of the strong forces and tools working against it active support is of upmost importance to support the ideals of a democratic free global society.

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