

Anonymity

I, like everyone else in Silicon Valley, downloaded Secret last week. It's incredibly well done, certainly the best yet of any of the gossip/anonymous apps.

Unlike most others, I deleted it, and have thus far resisted reinstalling it (which has been tough!). Unlike Facebook or Twitter, I felt worse--though entertained--after each use. At the point I deleted it, three of my friends had been on the receiving end of super nasty comments.

I've often thought about the need for an anonymous social network to go along with the fully public and the friends-only ones. But I can't figure out a way to stop an anonymous network from decaying into a Mean Girls-style burn book. If I were running Secret, my number one focus would be to kill every comment about a specific person or company. If Secret becomes more of a confessional than a burn-book, it can probably thrive.

Anonymity breeds meanness--the Internet has proven this time and time again. People are willing to say nice or neutral things with their name attached--they need anonymity for mean things and things they are embarrassed about. In fact, the closer to real identity internet forums get, the less they seem to decay. Anonymous social networks have been (thus far, anyway) in the category of services that get worse as they get bigger--unlike services like Facebook or Twitter that get better as they get bigger.

People love gossip until it's about themselves. My prediction for Secret is that it gets very popular (like the previous gossip services) and then eventually the rancor gets untenably bad and people stop using it (like the previous gossip services). But until we reach that point, I assume we'll see some really nasty things that people can't stop reading.

