Internet Anonymous (IA): A Question of Etiquette

In today's society, rapid innovation has spurred unprecedented growth in technology, in turn creating new ways for individuals to communicate with one another. Conversations and relationships used to be limited by geographic location (face-to-face conversations and long distance letters), but improved mobile and internet services have created opportunities for virtually anyone in the world to connect to one another in real-time. While this undoubtedly expands an individual's circle of knowledge and influence, it also raises legal and ethical questions.

If dialogue is no longer limited by physical—or even vocal—interactions, and are now mediated by computers and other machines, should we reevaluate conversation etiquette? How can we contribute to today's society as informed consumers? In a globally connected world, are there safeguards we can put in place to create a better social experience?

With the increase of cross-platform and cross-cultural interactions, there is growing concern about online security and privacy. This is also closely related to the idea of staying anonymous on the internet. While there are not enough clear laws concerning online privacy and anonymity, courts in the United States have begun treating anonymous speech along the same lines as a journalist's confidential sources—anonymous speech on the internet is worth protecting, and revealing an individual requires due process: a valid case, sufficient justification, and good faith by the plaintiff (Ekstrand, 2003). Anonymity is legalized, but to what extent should it offer privacy and individual protection? This type of new information is enabled only by technology. So how much freedom for anonymity can people expect from the internet? Is there a certain point in which people must account for their actions? A national poll conducted by the PEW Research Center revealed that 59% of people surveyed believed individuals should

have the ability to use the internet completely anonymously, contrasted with 34% of the general public who disagreed (Rainie, Kiesler, Kang, & Madden, 2013). The PEW Research Center further found that people who were most likely to advocate anonymity were men, under age 65, liberal democrats, and those living in urban cities. Traditionally, the more well-educated the individual, the more worried he or she is about security and taking proactive action. There is a clear need to address anonymity from the perspective of personal privacy, to "be on guard" in case of malicious third-party behavior.

It is important to note that most people who employ measures to stay anonymous online waver on the spectrum between correct identification and being completely obscured—between using their real names, a recognizable screen name, and posting without disclosure, young adults were more apt to use all three things at greater rates than older users (Rainie, Kiesler, Kang, & Madden, 2013). This type of varied behavior is logical, as we use different sites for many different reasons. Anonymity tailored as the situation requires is the most flexible approach, and seems the most intelligent in terms of balancing content with self-regard and identification.

More research is required to look into the reasons why people switch between different levels of anonymity online. Past research that focused on a specific subset of internet users, bloggers, revealed that individuals are typically cautious about disclosing themselves online, either through visual identification or conversation, and bloggers whose target audience included those they knew in real life reported a lower degree of anonymity than those who stated otherwise (Qian & Scott, 2007). Considerations of the audience may play a big part in whether or not an individual chooses safeguards to remain anonymous online.

These modes of anonymity may also be related to the type of content that is being shared. For example, a survey conducted through The Pirate Bay, a popular website that facilitates peer-

to-peer (P2P), BitTorrent file-sharing, indicated that 17.8% of respondents use a VPN or similar service to remain anonymous in correlation to their legal and social environments, with those living in a stricter, more-enforced area choosing higher degrees of anonymity (Larsson, Svensson, de Kaminski, Rönkkö, Alkan Olsson, 2012). Torrent sites such as The Pirate Bay are often involved in copyright infringement lawsuits through the user content uploaded and shared. Perhaps the legal implications of pirated material encourages users to be careful of revealing their identity online.

Anonymity is also socially and psychologically related to the user environment. Previous research has differentiated users into pro-social and pro-self orientation (those mainly interested in benefiting the group as a whole versus those seeking self-advantage), and have shown that even pro-selfs offer up information if the group members are visualized homogenously; group identity and the focus on a collective goal may be the underlying reasons behind this effect (Wodzicki, Schwämmlein, & Kimmerle, 2011).

This in-group phenomenon may be the foundation for anonymous websites like 4chan, a forum site driven by a community based on insider-knowledge, jokes, and memes. 4chan's momentum has steered towards the creation groups like Anonymous, a group of well-publicized activists and hackers (Poole, 2010). The fallout of collective anonymity is not without controversy, for example 4chan's recent, derogatory-toward-female-gamers-and-feminists gamergate scandal and the nude celebrity photo leaks (Kushner, 2015). As 4chan's original founder Christopher Poole stated, freedom of anonymous speech was never his intention (Poole, 2010). As a result, many users have migrated to 8chan, which began with an emphasis on free speech and anonymity (O'Neill, 2014), the "wilder west" in terms of forum posts and content.

Along with free speech and accountability, there is the worry of how people

communicate behind the computer screen. There are many serious results, for example online flaming (hostile, aggressive insults between users) and cyberbullying. A study on Youtube comments showed that flaming appears to be very common, and that it may occur due to perceived flaming norms and reduced awareness for other people's feelings, more often occurring because of a disagreement/perceived offense than merely for fun (Moor, Heuvelman, & Verleur, 2010). By extension, cyberbullying in an anonymous environment is also a concern.

Research has found that anonymous forum posts were identified as a criterion to distinguish cyberbully attackers, who were more anonymous relative to non-aggressive communications, from staunch defenders, who were less anonymous relative to non-aggressive communications (Moore, Nakano, Enomoto, & Suda, 2012). Hiding behind computer monitors, cyberbullies use anonymity to reduce the ability of the victim to identify the threat and defend him/herself, while at the same time shielding themselves from the social consequences. This is especially troubling. But as Moore, Nakano, Enomoto,& Suda (2012) noted, techniques like text-matching were successful in the experiment to identify aggressive posts, hinting at future ways to filter and report cyberbullying more effectively.

Why are hostile interactions increased in an online setting? The concept of online disinhibition has been focused on in recent years—online disinhibition (characterized by rash, impulsive behaviors unrestrained by social etiquette) occurs when individuals self-disclose or act out more frequently/intensely than they do in-person (Suler, 2004). Suler (2004) explored six factors that could affect an individual's behavior online: dissociative anonymity (actions cannot be traced back), invisibility (character cannot be judged), asynchronicity (consequences do not happen in real-time), dissociative imagination (not real, inconsequential), minimizing authority (no authority, can act on will), and solipsistic introjection (can't see people, so protect

intentions). These can often combine to create impulsive actions with strong consequences.

Further exploration unravels disinhibition into several smaller elements taken from anonymity as a whole. Research found that lack of eye contact chiefly affected negative online disinhibition effects, suggesting a more nuanced approach to online anonymity in relation to disinhibition is required (Lapidot-Lefler, & Barak, 2012). There are clearly a complex number of interactions happening between the points where an individual is facing a computer monitor and sending the message for other people to receive.

Although we previously labeled disinhibition and anonymity broadly, a close look at the smaller details is required to fully understand why people act a certain way through technology-assisted communication. Hiding behind a faceless computer monitor is easy. Figuring out motivations, emotional states, and human relationships are far harder. This type of anonymity has never been seen before in human history, so it stands to reason that reactions and exploration are all relatively new, slow in today's fast-paced world. But to fully connect technology with society, it's our responsibility to explore anonymity and its consequences, to pay full attention to something that's integral to our daily lives. We do not know enough about this topic—current literatures does not look at the link between actions and consequences with the scope of inner motivation, nor does it pull anonymity together with human relationships and government policies. To continue living alongside technology, we must define what it means to have etiquette in an anonymous world.

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