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Anonymity helps us curate our online selves

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Anonymous communication frees Internet users from the whims of law enforcement and the free hand of the market

December 9, 2014 2:00AM ET

by **Hannah Gais** (</profiles/g/hannah-gais.html>) - [@hannahgais](#) (<http://www.twitter.com/hannahgais>)

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From increased demands for encryption and private browsing to using pseudonyms online, the post-Edward Snowden era has renewed the conversation about online privacy.

A Pew Research poll released on Nov. 12 found (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/11/12/public-privacy-perceptions/>) that a whopping 91 percent of adults surveyed believed consumers have lost control of how companies collect and use their personal data. At least 70 percent of social networking site users expressed concern about the government accessing information shared on social media sites without their permission.

The market has tapped into these concerns. A wave of apps that make anonymous or pseudonymous communication a breeze (or at least claim (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/16/-sp-revealed-whisper-app-tracking-users>) to), such as Whisper, Snapchat and Yik Yak, has flooded the market. Even Facebook — whose co-founder Mark Zuckerberg once lambasted (<http://venturebeat.com/2010/05/13/zuckerberg-privacy/>) the use of pseudonyms on the social media site, arguing that having different online and offline identities “is an example of a lack of integrity” — has come around. Facebook recently launched an anonymous mobile app (<http://time.com/3534690/facebook-anonymous-app-rooms/>), which allows users to start invitation-only chat rooms based on shared interests. The company now offers direct support (<http://www.theverge.com/2014/10/31/7137323/facebook-adds-direct-support-for-tor-anonymous-users>) for users of the online anonymity network Tor who wish to access the social network without sharing identifying information such as their IP address and physical location.

However, these changes have seen pushback, particularly from law enforcement (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/09/23/i-helped-save-a-kidnapped-man-from-murder-with-apples-new-encryption->

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rules-we-never-wouldve-found-him/). The FBI, whose Director James Comey has repeatedly (http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/2014/09/25/68c4e08e-4344-11e4-9a15-137aa0153527_story.html) blasted (<http://www.fbi.gov/news/speeches/going-dark-are-technology-privacy-and-public-safety-on-a-collision-course>) Apple and Google's efforts to encrypt their servers, recently raided several Tor-based websites. The operation, unmistakably dubbed Operation Onymous (i.e., no longer anonymous), claims to have quashed more than 400 black market domains (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/kashmirhill/2014/11/07/how-did-law-enforcement-break-tor/>). It's a huge victory for law enforcement against Tor's seemingly impermeable defenses.

We need a holistic understanding of privacy that protects anonymity online and is not dependent on the free hand of the market or the whims of law enforcement. As consumers spend more and more time online, we need to adopt an understanding of privacy that acknowledges the increasing symbiosis of the online and the offline as well as the importance of anonymity in constructing identity. In other words, a modern definition of privacy should make ample room for, not crowd out, spaces of anonymous expression.

Uninhibited cyberspace

Debunking the dualism between the online and the offline should begin with an understanding of our relationship with the digital world.

Science fiction writer William Gibson first coined the term "cyberspace" in his 1982 short story collection "Burning Chrome." Although its use proliferated rapidly, Gibson would later describe the term, according to Wired, as an "'evocative and essentially meaningless' buzzword" (http://archive.wired.com/science/discoveries/news/2009/03/dayintech_0317) that could apply to any cybernetic theories. But the coinage stuck, along with its misleading connotations. When described through spatial metaphors

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(http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=898260), the online world is rendered as a world unto its own, separate and distinct from the real, or offline, world.

Critics say our online activities represent this dualism, particularly when we choose to remain anonymous. For example, the online disinhibition effect (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15257832>) refers to an apparent discrepancy between individuals' uninhibited online activity and their behavior in the real world. According to John Suler, who introduced the phrase in 2004, once sheltered behind this veil of anonymity, users let go of traditional inhibitions and are freer to act. The activity that results from this freedom may be benign (e.g., working through mental health issues, exploring sexuality or dealing with grief), but it could just as easily be aggressive or hateful. The Web operates differently: What happens in anonymous cyberspace stays in cyberspace. GamerGate (<http://gawker.com/what-is-gamergate-and-why-an-explainer-for-non-geeks-1642909080>), an online movement ostensibly about the ethics of video game journalism that has been criticized for having misogynistic roots, is the most recent example of this.

There has been an ongoing push to de-anonymize our interactions on the Web. As Zuckerberg noted in 2010 and Google+ has unsuccessfully tried to enforce since 2011, one way to prevent abuse is to require users to use their real names online. Proponents of singular online identity say it increases accountability and authenticity.

“ Anonymity allows Internet users to engage in interactions that mirror those in the real world. ”

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To assume that eliminating anonymous online identities can easily repair user misbehavior in cyberspace is deeply problematic. First, skeptics view de-anonymization in the context of government and industry interests. As Catherine Crump wrote in *The Stanford Law Review* (<http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3333&context=facpubs>), a singular online identity simplifies the process of data retention, making “it easier to link acts to actors [and promote] the value of accountability, while diminishing the values of privacy and anonymity.”

“Tools that permit anonymity have long been available to everyone, including criminals. The difference here is that regular people are now using encryption or anonymization by default. What this interferes with is, by definition, mass surveillance,” Ryan Calo, an assistant professor at the University of Washington School of Law and the faculty director at the Tech Policy Lab, said in an email.

Second, online data retention is far more widespread and permanent — and often out of our control. (After all, our Facebook profile is not stored on a server in our homes.) For instance, if a user posts an angry tweet and then removes it hours later, the post remains on Twitter’s servers and can also be cached elsewhere. Searches on service providers such as Amazon and Facebook can be tied to an online profile. By contrast, human memory is more forgivable. If we miss a parent or significant other’s birthday, chances are he or she is more likely to forget than forgive.

Third, assuming virtual misbehavior is a result of fragmentation of identity ignores the fact that our online and offline selves are already bound together. As Crump notes, for better or for worse, “cyberspace is part of lived space, and it is through its connections to lived space that cyberspace must be comprehended.”

“Social media is part of ourselves; the Facebook source code becomes our own

code,” wrote Nathan Jurgenson for The New Inquiry (<http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-irl-fetish/>) in 2012. We now have “Twitter lips and Instagram eyes.” If we lived entirely digitally, selfies would become screen shots and humorous Facebook updates would be exclusively about interactions we had online. This interaction and interplay with real life keeps social media from being entirely dull.

Anonymity preserves identity

Anonymity advocates say anonymous online interactions are key to preserving and building online identities. “The ability to be anonymous is increasingly important because it gives people control,” said (<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2012/apr/19/online-identity-authenticity-anonymity>) Andrew Lewman, the executive director of the Tor Project, in The Guardian in 2012. “It lets them figure out their identity and explore what they want to do or to research topics that aren’t necessarily ‘them’ and may not want tied to their real name for perpetuity.”

Others say they feel safe sharing new ideas and opinions anonymously because their online musings will be judged only by people they don’t know in real life. “I’ve been tweeting my personal experience of loss, which was made easier because I was cushioned by anonymity,” wrote Shatki, a pseudonymous Twitter user, in an email. “Using a pseud helped me to try out new ways of thinking ... I was evolving as I learned how to deal with losing my husband and way of life.”

Anonymity also allows Internet users to engage in interactions that mirror those in the real world. “Online, using pseudonyms is actually more like our ordinary face-to-face experience,” Judith S. Donath, a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard, wrote in Wired (<http://www.wired.com/2014/04/why-we-need-online-alter-egos-now-more-than-ever/>). “Face to face, we develop relationships in separate contexts — and the things we talk about,

the jokes we make, the secrets we reveal — vary tremendously.”

Anonymity, then, is a means of providing users with not just control over what data they make publicly available but also a way to curate our online selves. By using systems that allow us to choose what we do and don’t make public, we are defining privacy as empowerment. As Alvaro Bedoya, the executive director of the Center on Privacy, Technology and the Law at Georgetown University, said (<https://www.dropbox.com/s/rzpgetenl6uwdbu/PCLOB%20Written%20Testimony%20-%20Alvaro%20Bedoya%20-%20FINAL.pdf?dl=0>) in his testimony before the U.S. Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board on Nov. 12, “privacy empowers one to control the dissemination of personal information and to prevent the nonconsensual taking of that data.” Privacy gives us the space and the will to act freely and without judgment.

Ultimately, if we are truly seeking a digital experience that mirrors or at least plays off the real world, we should seek to foster these diverse identities and the anonymous interactions that construct them.

Hannah Gais is assistant editor at the Foreign Policy Association and the managing editor of ForeignPolicyBlogs.com.

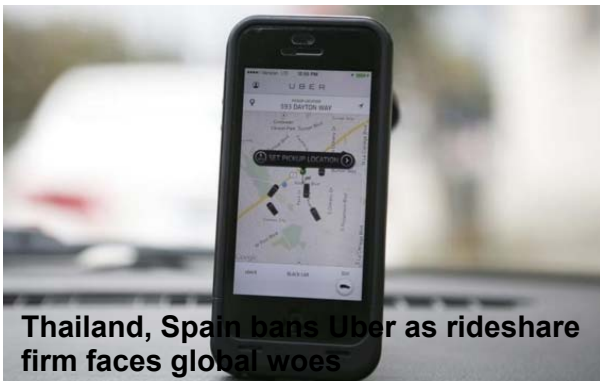
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You don't mention the worst threat of all (which drove me to start using a pseudonym) - "Good Christians". I also think that the companies and law enforcement forget about internet stalking, which is what happens when you use your real name and piss off some Bible-pounding "Good Christian" (by disproving a literal reading of the Bible or telling them they don't have the right to dictate the actions of others, or both). I should know - I used to use my real name and was hounded (including receiving death threats, publication of private information, etc.) for months, until a call to the North Carolina state police brought it all to an end (the churches and "Good Christians" responsible were in that state). For all I know, that stuff may STILL be floating around the internet - I don't go to Christian sites so I don't keep track of things like that. I don't mess with them, why the hell do they think they have a right to mess with ME?

I also hold the local paper partially responsible for the torching of my electronics workshop, because they INSISTED that any letter be published under a person's real name, unless that person could prove that their life would be in danger from the publication. Problem is, in this hellhole of a state, churches are automatically considered the "Good People!!!" and anyone who goes against their proselytizing and abuse is automatically suspect. They have to believe that a person WILL be killed if their real name is used before they'll keep it hidden - and of course "Good Christians" don't commit acts of terrorism (like arson, murdering pets, vandalism, stalking, and interference in work and attempts to find a job, all of which I've experienced at their hands).

Yes, my shop was torched. I couldn't get the fire department to get their thumbs out of their butts and investigate either - and I had to threaten one fireman and push him away to keep him from destroying even more stuff in a secondary building that wasn't torched (although I found indications that the "Good Christians" expected the fire to spread). They blamed "Bad wiring" (which I could disprove if they'd stopped and listened to me), but as I was told later, most of the homes of gay couples in this hellhole of a county who were "burned out", the fire was blamed on "Bad Wiring".

Finally, I've had to fight with Google a couple of times because they kept on connecting private (special) email accounts from the ones that I use for anonymity. They just didn't seem to understand "I've received death threats and internet stalking for saying one could accept evolution as fact and still be a Christian". It seemed that as far as they were concerned, the fact that I was still alive meant that the threats, stalking, and so on weren't real or I wasn't as upset about it as I should have been. They finally relented, and so I feel a

tad safer in utilizing my freedom of speech in places such as here at Al Jazeera (still can't use it in public in this hellhole, however - it's too dangerous).

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REPLY

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David Aubke

11 hours ago

Being truly anonymous has never been easy, either before or after the advent of the internet. Anonymity is certainly a valuable asset under certain circumstances - to avoid political persecution, to extricate oneself from an abusive relationship, etc. There will always be effective ways to remain anonymous both on and offline but they will probably never be terribly easy and that seems OK to me.

Embarrassment over being caught researching Furries or exploring your bigoted side on comment boards are not valid reasons to argue for easy anonymity as a basic right.

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REPLY

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RichardSzulewsk

12 hours ago

One of the advantages of freedom is also one of the disadvantages of freedom.

You are able to say and act as you please. But the people reacting to your words or actions are also free to react as they please.

For most on the far left and right they seek to speak with total freedom but condemn others for the same since it hurts their sensibilities not seeing the incongruity of their actions.

We must encourage all types of free speech not matter how distasteful. But we must be SELF policing and not ask the authorities to do it for us...for they usually can not be trusted with such authority.

I would rather hear what people have to say so I can judge them by their words AND actions.

If you state your intentions are to harm you SHOULD expect a visit from the authorities without screaming "free speech." No one said you can't say it. They are only making sure that you have not already set up the plan to perform the harm.

If you state that people you oppose are "evil" that is your right. They also have a right to actively oppose your words with their own.

Speech is fundamental to a healthy society. We need to tell the authorities that they can watch whatever speech they want. They are not allowed to limit it though.

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REPLY

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