The New Invisible Man: How Anonymity Corrupts

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Anonymous authorship is as old as the written word. Throughout history, people have hidden their identity to avoid persecution, prejudice, and personal condemnation. In modern free societies, with the barriers of intolerance removed, what is the purpose of anonymous authorship? As the internet revolution continues to produce new forums of communication, the desire to achieve the most appealing platform coincides with the need to make participation the least restrictive and most convenient. The result has been the emergence of user anonymity. This new Invisible Man attacks, vandalizes, and perverts with such impunity, that it is changing the very structure of civil discourse.

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Introduction

One inconvenience I sometimes experienced in so small a house, the difficulty of getting to a sufficient distance from my guest when we began to utter the big thoughts in big words… Individuals, like nations, must have broad and natural boundaries, even a neutral ground, between them. I have found it a singular luxury to talk across the pond to a companion on the opposite side. In my house we were so near that we could not begin to hear, we could not speak low enough to be heard, as when you throw two stones into calm water so near that they break each other's undulations... As the conversation began to assume a loftier and grander tone, we gradually shoved our chairs further apart till they touched the wall in opposite corners, and then commonly there was not room enough (Thoreau, 1854, p. 185).

In his book, Walden, Henry David Thoreau postulates that intimacy creates barriers for conversation; that the very nature of greater discourse requires boundaries that allow for communication to be articulated and understood with less effect of personal consideration. There are many ways in which these ideas are implied and understood in communication. Depersonalization allows for objectivity that can be difficult to otherwise achieve due to the social norms of sensitivity. The advent of technologies that serve to enable distant communication also have the effect of removing non-verbal cues that may inhibit certain responses. Furthermore, technology that facilitates confidential communication may encourage and enable people seeking personal and potentially embarrassing information. What happens, however, when all of the elements of accountability are removed, so that communication is no longer attributed to an identifiable person? With the proliferation of online collectives that embody this ideal, as paramount to total freedom of communication, the anonymity empowering individuals to communicate without inhibitions, has proven shockingly frank in nature and divisive in ways never before experienced.

History

Anonymous authorship is nothing new. Several ancient texts are studied and cited routinely without knowledge of authorship. The Bible is perhaps the greatest example of a book that has little accountability with regards to authors, editors, and translators. It is a prime example, in fact, of early collectivism (Lanier, 2006). Anonymity in Bible composition was a product of persecution, combined with a lack of qualified authors, as the world of literacy was still in its infancy. Other areas of anonymous authorship include criticisms of governments, religion, and authoritative entities that seek retribution against such acts. In these scenarios, anonymity is preferred due to potential repercussions. Sometimes, an act of vandalism, such as graffiti, may be used as an anonymous communication tool to provide a message in a manner that challenges authority and social norms. In most of these examples, anonymity is not necessarily desired but rather a reaction to a system that does not condone certain perspectives or methods. A different tool of anonymity used by authors is the pseudonym, a fictitious name under which a work is published. Reasons relate to the ideas previously stated but may also include issues such as gender bias or public attribution to an author's prevalent writing style. In these cases, the anonymous nature of authorship serves to deceive (or reinforce) prejudices based on social expectations. In most instances, however, there are methods of accountability or ways in which to verify the persons responsible for these works.

Modern Anonymity

In today's free societies, where many of these issues no longer force such means of obfuscation, a new variety of anonymity has emerged. The freedom to contribute anonymously is transforming the normative of civil discourse. The lack of accountability provides a new forum, empowering individuals to engage and attack ideals without retribution and without consequence.

Perhaps the most divisive communiqués in the emergent online community are blogs. Seen as tools to promote the free exchange of opinions, blogs allow users a way to create online information and response in immediate fashion. While there are varying levels of moderation, they are generally regarded as a means for providing free uncensored correspondence. Embodied in the ideals of free speech, these tools seem an obvious evolution of the response mechanisms employed by newspapers, periodicals, or talk radio. Disturbing trends have evolved from the haphazard administration of these web forums, particularly the opportunity to harass and attack with impunity. Due to inconsistencies and absence in monitoring, this activity often escalates to humiliation and threats of violence. In many cases, these threats are implicitly illegal but the difficulties in identifying perpetrators, combined with the sheer number of incidents, make prosecution impractical (Abelson, 2001).

Has the absolute power of anonymity corrupted communication decorum? Is the *paradigm shift* in technological communications simultaneously producing a divergent path of moral decay? One needs only to follow any number of recent news stories to illustrate the point. Following are some specific cases, which speak to the manner in which anonymity undermines the benevolent ideals of free speech.

The Case of Godzilla

In 2006, Jeff Bergosh was elected to the Pensacola County School Board. Soon after, an anonymous user, *Godzilla,* began posting to a web forum hosted by the local area newspaper. The nature of the messages was outrageously opinionated with regards to school reform. The user advocated the end of mandates on education, abandoning truants and ill performing students, while unconditionally praising the efforts of Jeff Bergosh. Further posts included character assassinations of opposing board members and mockery of their viewpoints. Moderators of the web forum, sensing such strong congruence with the school board member, decided to investigate. It was quickly determined that the registered user was, in fact, Jeff Bergosh himself, who used his personal email to set up an account. After some initial denial, Bergosh eventually conceded that he was *Godzilla* and then went on the offensive, charging that the newspaper violated confidentiality (a claim that was refuted through the user registration agreement) (Hendler, 2007). His reaction confirms that Bergosh, an elected official, whose job it was to express public opinion regarding the school board, engaged in an anonymous inflammatory debate to promote ideas that he would not publicly support in such an extreme manner.

Online Collectivism and Wikipedia

Cognitive Authority is the personal recognition of validity versus speculation, the idea that credible authorship is directly influential on perception (Rubins, 2004, p.56). However, anonymous collectivism is challenging these perceptions and the very foundation of what people

accept as authoritative information. Perhaps the most demonstrative example of the shortcomings of this ideology is Wikipedia "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit" (Wikipedia, n.d.). Widely acknowledged for its convenience and currency in information seeking, Wikipedia is commonly one of the primary results for popular search engine queries. In his incendiary article on the subject, noted technology author, Jaron Lanier, laments the decline of the individual voice noting, "When you see the context in which something was written… you learn so much more then when you find the same text placed in the anonymous, faux-authoritative, anti-contextual brew of the Wikipedia" (Lanier, 2006). He goes on to point out that his own collectively authored biography is both inaccurate and improperly reflective of his life's experiences (Lanier, 2006).

A more dire consequence of the lack of accountability in Wikipedia is the possibility of complete fabrication. While Wikipedians (the community of authors and editors) serve to monitor the forum, so that vandalism is quickly corrected, subjects that are infrequently monitored, due to a low level of interest, may exist in various states of fallacy, until an interested party sets the record straight. In one such case, a man decided, as a joke, to edit the biography of renowned journalist John Seignethaler, linking him to the Kennedy assassination, among other serious false claims. The entry went unchanged for 132 days until it was brought to Seignethaler's attention (AP, 2005). Wikipedia responded by requiring registration of editors, although circumvention of accountability, in this respect, is fairly common knowledge to the savvy online enthusiast.

Some subjects are particularly vulnerable to personal divisiveness, allowing Wikipedians to use the forum as a means to promote political platforms. Hours before the announcement of Sarah Palin for Vice Presidential running mate, a user made numerous flattering changes to the biographical entry on the Alaska governor. The day of the announcement, the site registered 2.4 million hits on Palin's page. Seeing a notable bias of favoritism, the entry was soon edited, the user responsible for the changes was challenged and thus retired his/her status on the website without being identified (Cohen, 2008). Other entries on political candidates are so routinely changed, that Wikipedia instituted new rules on participation in editing for its more subjective entries. While Wikipedia continues to evolve, the casualties of inaccurate content have little recourse and the added burden of monitoring reflective content beyond their control.

Virtue in Peer Production
In the critique of online collectivism, it would be negligent to ignore the many benefits of peer production. Yochai Benkler and Helen Nissenbaum co-authored a journal article to this effect, demonstrating the myriad of successes in online collaboration. In it, they point to the technological phenomena of distributed computing and open source software development, as socio-technical developments in the online community, that serve to promote progressive efforts to solve problems. The processes are likened to community barn raising, in that the collective strives to achieve a single goal (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006, p.395). Projects such as Linux, Perl, and BIND are cited as examples, in which experts develop and collaborate on software that cannot be owned or restricted, wherein the developers themselves are unpaid, motivated only by personal challenge and sense of accomplishment. There are varying degrees of recognition in the process but the focus remains the greater good (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006, p.396).

In a comparison of the online information collectives of Wikipedia and Slashdot, they make crucial distinctions in the validity of one over the other.

"The Slashdot software platform, Slash, is given a very active role in moderating the discussion and the peer review process. Rather than relying on self-discipline and a sense of common purpose, the software builds in limits on use that are designed to constrain anti-social behavior. For example, each user receives only five moderation points in any three-day period. Users cannot post constantly… their submissions will be rejected…" (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006, p.399).

Interestingly enough, the Wikipedia entry on Slashdot is decidedly negative.
"While Slashdot's haphazard editorial style produced a unique voice in the pre-blog age, users frequently post criticisms of perceived arbitrary or biased editorial choices. Slashdot itself is known for its biased positions relating to privacy and the open source movement." (Wikipeia/Slashdot, 2008)

Ironically, Wikipedians flagged this article for lack of citation, undermining its own credibility on the subject (Wikipedia, n. d.).

That commons-based peer production fosters virtue and community, as articulated in this article, is certainly a valid and relevant argument. The cracks in its persuasive façade lie in the devices of anonymity, as the authors concur that the social construct is essential to success. (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006, p.418). Once again, it seems that the lack of normative social structure ultimately undermines the process and that accountability is the key to correcting the vandalistic elements that erode the purpose and validity.

The Deviance of Invisibility
In a social experiment of sorts, radio and television personality, John Hodgman, conducted a series of interviews on the topic of invisibility versus flight. He asks the simple question, if you could choose just one power, what would it be? Those choosing invisibility often gave rather nefarious purposes as to their choice. Typically, the power of invisibility would allow them to spy, steal, and commit acts of deviance, appealing to their darker instinctual desires. One interviewee likened the choice to your level of personal shame, indicating that those choosing invisibility did so to hide their true character. (Hodgman, 2001)

Applying this study to social behavior on the World Wide Web, one could compare the power of being invisible with the confidential nature that defines so much online activity. Invisibility is demonstrated by anonymous users in online forums, where they attack, fabricate, and judge others with impunity. Interestingly, science fiction author H. G. Wells proposed similar ideas over 100 years ago in his book, The Invisible Man (1897). In this book, the antagonist achieves physical invisibility, only to find it isolating and empty. Throughout the course of his experience, the contradiction between extraordinary power and loneliness drives the character to commit acts of theft, violence, and murder. The culmination of his insanity becomes clear in his declaration to a friend and colleague.

"We have to consider all that invisibility means, all that it does not mean... I can walk round a man, whatever weapon he has, choose my point. Strike as I like. Dodge as I like. Escape as I like... Not wanton killing, but a judicious slaying. The point is, they know there is an Invisible Man--as well as we know there is an Invisible Man. And that Invisible Man, must now establish a Reign of Terror." (Wells, 1897, p.125-126).

The parallels between the Invisible Man of 1897 and the modern day anonymous internet user may not be identifiable in action but they are indubitably analogous in intent.

Conclusion

"A social system is defined as a set of interrelated units that are engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal… Each unit in a social system can be distinguished from other units. All members cooperate at least to the extent of seeking to solve a common problem in order to reach a mutual goal. This sharing of a common objective binds the system together." (Rogers, 1962, p.23-24)

The World Wide Web, as an entity, encompasses too many individuals and disparate social systems to abide by this definition. The subsets, however, are identifiable in their common interests and purposes. It is within the structure of each subset that accountability is lost.   The overwhelming nature of the World Wide Web allows for invisibility, as one can virtually wander undetected through the nebulous frontier that continues to expand with little structure or restriction. Does social rectitude follow this expansion or are the tenets of civil discourse becoming diluted, as accountability becomes vague and anonymity prevails? It remains to be seen. While the world revels in the creation of an unbridled communication revolution, the social normative may be an evolutionary trailer at best.

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