

The Value of Pseudonymity and Anonymity in online communities

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore identity in online communities specifically how pseudonymity and anonymity allow for the navigation of context collapse, identity play, the presentation of ideas contrary to popular beliefs and self-disclosure. Ultimately, I argue against Zuckerberg's comments that anonymity in online communities only provides users with a way to harass and troll others. It is important to note that despite there being some validity to claims that anonymity/pseudonymity are proponents to antisocial behavior and harassment, this paper concludes that the benefits far outweigh the negatives and that using real names and pseudonymity should not be seen as *incompatible but rather complimentary*.

Tags: #Identity #Pseudonymity #Anonymity #Contextcollapse #identityplay #SpiralofSilence

Introduction:

Whenever anonymous internet uses are the subject of mainstream news articles they are often framed in the context of anti-social behavior, doxing attacks, trolling or hacking (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015, para. 1). With much of the popular debate surrounding pseudonymity and anonymity being negative there is an inconsistently large amount of internet users employing the positive uses signaling a need to explore their side of the argument and look at the beneficial aspects that pseudonymity and anonymity allow online. The purpose of this paper is to explore identity in online communities specifically how pseudonymity and anonymity allow for the navigation of context collapse, identity play, the presentation of ideas contrary to popular beliefs and self-disclosure. Facebook is currently leading the real name movement with Zuckerberg claiming that having two identities represents a lack of integrity and therefore anonymity/pseudonymity should be removed from the internet as it causes antisocial behavior. On the other side of the argument there are researchers such as van der Nagel, Frith; and boyd (2015, para. 6; 2007, p. 2) that argue both pseudonymity and anonymity allow users to enact unique valuable identity practices online. Despite there being some validity to claims that anonymity/pseudonymity are proponents to antisocial behavior and harassment this paper argues that the benefits outweigh the negatives and that using real names and pseudonymity should not be seen as incompatible but rather complimentary. Anonymity as defined by Christopherson (2007) is the complete removal of identifying information from one's online interactions. Pseudonymity is defined as when a user is identifiable by a name or signifier created by the user that will be an identifier for their actions across the site. Their difference is significant to this paper as the two terms are often conflated. Anonymity is the extreme opposite of a real name internet while pseudonymity is a compromise between the two. This paper will argue pseudonymity allows users to navigate converging contexts online and anonymity allows users to explore identity

without fear of repercussions for breaking social norms, self-disclose online and allow users to present ideas that are contrary to popular beliefs. These are the four overlooked benefits of anonymity and pseudonymity respectively which makes it an important aspect of online communities.

Context Collapse

One of the overlooked activities pseudonymity in online communities affords its users is the navigation of context collapse. As described by Marwick and boyd (2010, p. 122) context collapse is the removal of territorial boundaries surrounding identity construction that occurs on social media sites. Users may interact with and construct their identity in front of a single amalgamated audience consisting of a diverse range of people. This is a problem because people present themselves differently depending on who they are interacting with. People may only feel comfortable sharing some personal details with people they feel close to. For example, people generally only talk about their romantic relationships or potential love interests with close friends and might not feel comfortable sharing it with their work friends. As described by Papacharissi (2009, p. 207) this confluence of public and private causes behavioral changes in its users to adjust their behavior to make it appropriate for a variety of people and contexts. However, any changes short of removing the 'real name' requirement of social networks such as Facebook are ineffective such as changes to privacy settings. Marwick and boyd (2010, p. 122) outline that setting an account to private does not solve this as users still have to deal with audiences that are not usually brought together such as acquaintances, work friends, and family. In other words, private accounts cannot split the audiences to allow multiple self-presentations as would be required. Another solution commonly utilized is self-censorship, users simply choose not to discuss certain topics online especially controversial topics (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 125). If people aren't talking about the things they desire to discuss or are adjusting what they are saying to cater for certain groups of people, inauthenticity can be a result. Which is the opposite of what Zuckerberg is arguing, the idea that using 'real names' is authentic. As Marwick and boyd (2010, p. 123) argues, people present themselves based on audience and context. To clarify, people have different facets of their identity that they wish to present to certain groups of people in certain contexts and therefore pseudonyms can be used to maintain levels of separation between these differing groups.

Identity Experimentation

An important aspect of anonymity is that it allows people, especially adolescents, to experiment and explore their identity. Social media users can perform their identity online though selectively posting images, writing posts, interacting with others and commenting on other users posts'. Anonymity allows users to explore their identity in ways separate to their pre-existing online identity. As described by Christopherson (2007),

anonymity allows users to experiment with different behaviors without fear of social consequences. Some social risks include social scrutiny, peer pressure and in extreme cases excommunication (Ellison, Blackwell, Lampe & Trieu, 2016; Maczewski, 2002). Users can almost become different people without being singled out and evaluated negatively by peers (Christopherson 2007). An example of this is the anonymous question and answer site Ask.FM. Ellison et al., (2016, p. 10) explores identity exploration through Ask.FM by stating, the anonymous feature of Ask.FM allows users to learn about themselves through answering and asking questions in textual form. One of the participants in the study explains that answering questions anonymously gives her the opportunity to write about her feelings and opinions in ways that other real name identity-based sites do not afford to (Ellison et al., 2016, p. 10). Divulging personal feelings and opinions on social media sites with an identifiable identity may lead to social scrutiny or peer pressure. Adolescence is a time of extensive biological and cognitive development and a goal for this time is for adolescents to form a strong sense of identity, which if formed, predicts higher wellbeing later in life (Ellison et al., 2016, p. 10; body, 2007). This is why providing adolescents with ways to explore their identity is especially important. Another example of someone whose situation is particularly assisted by the affordances of anonymity online is outlined by Maczewski. For this person, who lived in a rural community, being a homosexual went against the social norms and was unaccepted in the community (Maczewski, 2002, p. 122). Anonymity in online communities allowed this individual to explore his sexual identity in multiple ways without fear of being excommunicated or receiving negative backlash from his rural community (Maczewski, 2002, p. 122). This exemplifies the need for anonymity in online communities for adolescents to explore their identity as real name based online communities, pose too many social risks onto users.

Spiral of silence

Anonymity affords users in online communities the ability to express their opinions, especially when incongruent, without fear of isolation. Users don't feel comfortable expressing their opinions online when they are incongruent as they fear isolation (Luarn & Hsieh, 2014). People feel that if they express their opinions that don't match up with their friends, they will be heavily criticized for deviating from the norm. This act of self-censoring can be explained by the spiral of silence theory which was proposed by the German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. Lin and Salween (1996, p. 129) propose that the spiral of silence theory is that media presentations of issues acts as a barometer for public opinions and that individuals whose opinions do not match with this perceived majority choose to keep quiet to avoid ostracism. In other words, people decide to express their opinions based on external forces. A solution to the spiral of silence theory is the disinhibition effect. As described by Suler (2004, p. 322) the disinhibition effect is when people feel freer and more open to expressing themselves online and do/say things online they wouldn't normally in a face to face conversation. A major factor that creates this disinhibition effect is anonymity (Suler, 2004, p. 322). Anonymity grants

users the ability to separate their actions online from their offline identity which in turn allows them to feel less vulnerable about expressing incongruent opinions (Suler, 2004, p. 322). Users can compartmentalize their selves to shield them from any negative backlash or threats of isolation allowing for unpopular opinions to be discussed, a part of healthy discussion. Although this separation of online activities from offline identities may lead to harsh criticism rude language or hatred from anonymous users the benefits of having a healthy discussion and deviating from the norm outweigh the potential negatives.

Self-disclosure

Anonymity in online communities allows users to self-disclosure in stigmatized contexts. Seeking support, especially for stigmatized contexts is beneficial when help is received, but there is also a possibility for undesired responses. Accordingly, people do not always seek out support when they need it. Expressing both the experience and negative emotions of situations like relationship breakups, interpersonal conflict, unemployment and abuse can be difficult to talk about in both offline and online contexts (Andalibi, Haimson, Choudhury, & Forte, 2016; Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte, 2017). Therefore, the affordances of anonymity in helping user's self-disclosure in specialized online support groups is important. Not disclosing abuse has negative health outcomes while disclosing has positive health outcomes in the forms of social help and/or relief (Andalibi et al., 2016). There are many reasons people may seek help online such as lack of offline support, stigmatized context gender norms. For example, in many cultures, men are socialized and brought up to believe that they should be able to fix their problems on their own (Andalibi et al., 2016). For a man in one of these contexts to admit they need help would break social norms and may be unfavorably judged. However, finding places or online communities to do such is also difficult as many sites lack the required affordances. For example, as described by Andalibi et al., (2017), it is uncommon to find users sharing negative emotions on and social media sites such as Facebook. This is referred to as positivity bias according to Andalibi et al., (2017) which refers to the idea that social media websites often favor positive self-presentations to negative self-presentations. Facebook is generally viewed as a place for sharing positive stories: it's a place where people go to relax and wind down. Users also don't always seek support online because they fear losing 'face'. 'Face' is what Goffman calls the positive self-image people use present themselves in interactions with others (Andalibi et al., 2016). People feel content with their 'face' intact and as such try to maintain it (Andalibi et al., 2016). Anonymity is a solution to this. As outlined by Andalibi (et al., 2016) users are more comfortable sharing and self-disclosing online when they are anonymous which increases the intimacy of disclosures. Consequently, anonymity increases the benefit to risk ratio of self-disclosure online by removing the risks. Users do not need to worry that they will lose 'face' as their actions or words cannot be attributed back to them personally. Users do not need to worry about cultural norms, social context or being unfavorable judged.

Conclusion

Ultimately anonymity and pseudonymity grant users with protections to their privacy when participating in activities online that bare high risks of social degradation and scrutiny. This allows people in online communities to disclose personal information online, explore their identity, navigate complex contexts and express opinions that are contrary to popular beliefs. Each level mentioned above, represents different situations online that are benefited by either anonymity and/or pseudonymity. And these benefits such as lower social risks provided by the exclusively online features of anonymity and pseudonymity cement their place and value in online communities. It is the persistence, visibility, spread ability, and searchability of actions done online under a real name identity that limits online community's potential. There is no reason why online communities or more broadly the internet should be limited by real word standards, such as permanent identities. Anonymity is a double-edged sword. Being anonymous shields internet users from criticism, social norms and conventions which allows people flexible options of participating in online communities, but on the other hand since there are no consequences it also allows people to be rude, harass people and be negative. Therefore, I suggest that anonymity/pseudonymity and real name identities need not be in a dichotomy but can be effectively used together complement each other.

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