# [Name Withheld]: Anonymity and Its Implications


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**Anonymity allows the individual to have a voice without having a name. Since the word "anonymous" entered the English language with the advent of the printing press, the implications of being anonymous - and its lexical offspring "anonymity" - have shifted with time, place, and circumstance. What are the perceived effects of being anonymous/anonymity on the individual and on society? In this paper, I will explore some of the shifting meanings and implications of this concept, first as it relates to authorship, then (as it came to be viewed) as a signature condition of modern life. The perceived effect of anonymity on the social good includes promoting freedom of expression, enabling the free flow of information, enhancing therapeutic disinhibition, and fostering an atmosphere where ideas are judged on merit. Negative consequences include lack of accountability and credibility, nondisclosure, and deindividuation. The requirements for maintaining anonymity and pseudonymity are discussed and anonymity on the Internet. Finally, I will explore how anonymity/pseudonymity has come to be seen as a key way to protect privacy in an era of ubiquitous surveillance technologies and to promote free expression in cyberspace.**


### The Anonymous Author

Before there was the adjective "anonymity", there was the noun "anonymous." According to Ferry (2002), the word "anonymous" was introduced into the English language during the sixteenth century. Meaning "without a name" or nameless, it was borrowed from the Greek and referred to writings whose authors were unknown or concealed. Before the advent of the printing press, manuscripts circulated among small elite groups whose members could be counted on to know the author's name without being told. As the reading public expanded, this assumption no longer held. In addition, an anonymous author could signify that the writer was a commoner, or that his or her name had been forgotten during the passage of time. By designated a work as anonymous, it could also

imply that it was sanctified by the weight of tradition and embodied the voice of the people. It is possible this type of anonymous work was more likely to be viewed as a cultural inheritance than the work of any one, named individual.

In the centuries that followed, anonymous works were common. There were many reasons that an individual might be reluctant to claim authorship of a text. In certain places and times, it was considered improper or even scandalous among elite circles for one's name to appear in print. It was also a way for a female author to conceal her gender. Up through the nineteenth century, English authors could expect that an anonymous work would be received in the public sphere in a similar fashion as a signed one. It is possible that "in some instances it would have a better start in the world if it appeared anonymously." (Ferry, 2002) Up until the late 1700s, Ferry conjectures that a poem was viewed as a "skillfully made object fashioned according to formal conventions, rather than as a personal expression of its author." Works of craft do not have the same tradition of signing as do writings and other works of art, though there is a custom of using a makers' mark to identify the craftsman or workshop.

According to the "*Dictionary of Anonymous and Pseudonymous English Literature*", a work that was commenced in the later nineteenth century, "timidity" is cited as an overriding motive for withholding the identity of the author. Timidity is attributed to diffidence, fear of consequences, or shame. (Halkett and Laing, 1926) Perhaps tellingly, the word diffidence is now rare or obsolete, and means "want of confidence or faith; mistrust, distrust, misgiving, doubt." (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989)

Fledgling authors, or those venturing out of their ordinary spheres, may have been reluctant to sign their names to works that might not be well received. The second reason, fear of consequence, was in response to the threat of retribution from chuch or state for works considered heretical, inflammatory, or threatening to the established order. Shame was viewed as a concern for authors of pornographic materials or "personal attacks and lampoons."

Being anonymous (at least in fiction) has different implications based on how a text is understood. By the nineteenth century, readers increasingly made correlations between a text and its author. Authors became increasingly anxious that their literary works would be viewed as confessional or self-relevatory, and some tried to combat this through withholding or disguising their identities. (Ferry, 2002) To this day, those engaged in traditional literary criticism often look for meaning by delving into the author's life circumstances and intentions. On the other hand, textual criticism deemphasizes the author by concentrating on the text itself.

The author's status was elevated by the introduction of copyright protection, and the

resulting potential for economic gain influenced the decision to publish anonymously. Consequently, “the author becomes an owner of intellectual property and takes his or her place in an emerging bourgeois society.” (Griffin, 1991) As Griffin notes (citing Foucault), between the sixteenth and eighteenth century a reversal took place as works of fiction became signed and scientific texts were largely unsigned.

## Anonymity and Modern Life

By the twentieth century, the term anonymity had taken root. When a word changes form in this manner, it signals a change in the culture at large. For a group of European authors, the most influential of whom was the novelist E.M. Forster, anonymity became an aesthetic ideal. The “cult of anonymity” was both a protest against the inclination to “conflate poet and speaker”, and a way of motivating artists to create in a disinterested way by putting the art first, not the ego. (Ferry, 2002) Anonymity is also consistent with the ideal of equality and meritocracy, since it has the potential to put those of different social backgrounds and rankings on equal footing, at least temporarily.

During the industrial revolution, the concept of anonymity became a “cultural motif” associated with the social ills of urban life. These included the lack of individual identity, interchangeability, facelessness, the loneliness of the crowd, and the suffering that resulted from industrialization. Later, anonymity became more internalized and was associated with many of the perceived ills of modern life, including “personal feelings of dislocation and displacement.” (Ferry, 2002)

Echoing the concerns of the literary world, researchers in the social sciences began to explore how group membership led to “deindividuation”, a psychological theory of how individual behavior is effected by joining a crowd. To cite just a few examples among many, researchers have found that anonymity can lower the threshold at which individuals are likely to engage in antisocial behavior. (Rowland, 2000) Others have studied how anonymity affects the lack of helping behavior in urban settings. (Solomon, 1981) In a recent study of aggressive behavior in Northern Island, it was found that disguised offenders were more likely to engage in violent attacks. (Silke, 2003)

Though many saw anonymity as a social ill, it was a liberating escape from small town life and gossip for others. For many, anonymity proved to have a therapeutic component. The addiction recovery program that evolved into Alcoholics Anonymous began to take root during the 1930s and 1940s. According to the AA website, anonymity was initially adopted to avoid the stigma associated with alcoholism. Previous temperance movements had employed tactics such as prohibition (to prevent the creation of new

alcoholics) or “taking the pledge”, which relied primarily on individual resolve. A basic tenet of twelve step recovery programs is that individuals who face similar difficulties are best suited to help one another. The spiritual benefit of anonymity resides in the fact that it “discourages the drives for personal recognition, power, prestige, or profit that have caused difficulties in some societies .” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, n.d.) Following AA tradition, no individual is authorized to speak for the group. An individual can only speak for him or herself.

## Anonymity and the Social Good?

The tradition of anonymity in the therapeutic setting allows people to learn from and support one another without fear of stigmatization. This is only one way that anonymity can benefit the social good. In the United States, people have long had an expectation of anonymity in the public sphere, at least when they are away from home. One of attractions of urban living has long been to escape the social controls that are inherent “where everybody knows your name.” Perhaps even more important than alleviating embarrassment, anonymity can help prevent the possibility of “abusive social and political control.” (Morgan and Newton, 2004) Another benefit to anonymity includes the potential that works and ideas are more likely to be judged on their own merit than, as in the words of the journalistic maxim, “without fear or favor.”

In the United States, anonymity has been viewed as a way so encourage freedom of expression as guaranteed by the First Amendment. It enables one to voice unpopular views without fear of retribution, especially in public or political matters. Anonymity is seen as being even more precious in repressive regimes or for those in the minority. Rowland (2003) traces how the United States legal system has repeatedly upheld the right for individuals to publish anonymous texts. The tug-and-pull between the right to free expression (and the underlying need for privacy) and the need for disclosure has been and still is an area of controversy within the legal system. Anonymity is often seen by law enforcement agencies and the courts as a way to facilitate illicit or anti-social activities. Echoing social scientists concern over deindividuation and disinhibition, anonymity is seen as having the ability to “encourage libelous or defamatory comments.” (Rowland, 2003)

On the other hand, law enforcement agencies often use the promise of anonymity when it suits their needs, such as encouraging whistleblowers to step forward. It reduces the possibility of punishment by those in a position of power, such as loss of employment or social standing. Anonymity is used in criminal cases to protect witnesses who fear reprisals, stigma, or social ostracization. In sexual assault cases, the identity of the victim is often concealed. In the United State, lawsuits with anonymous plaintiffs are often filed

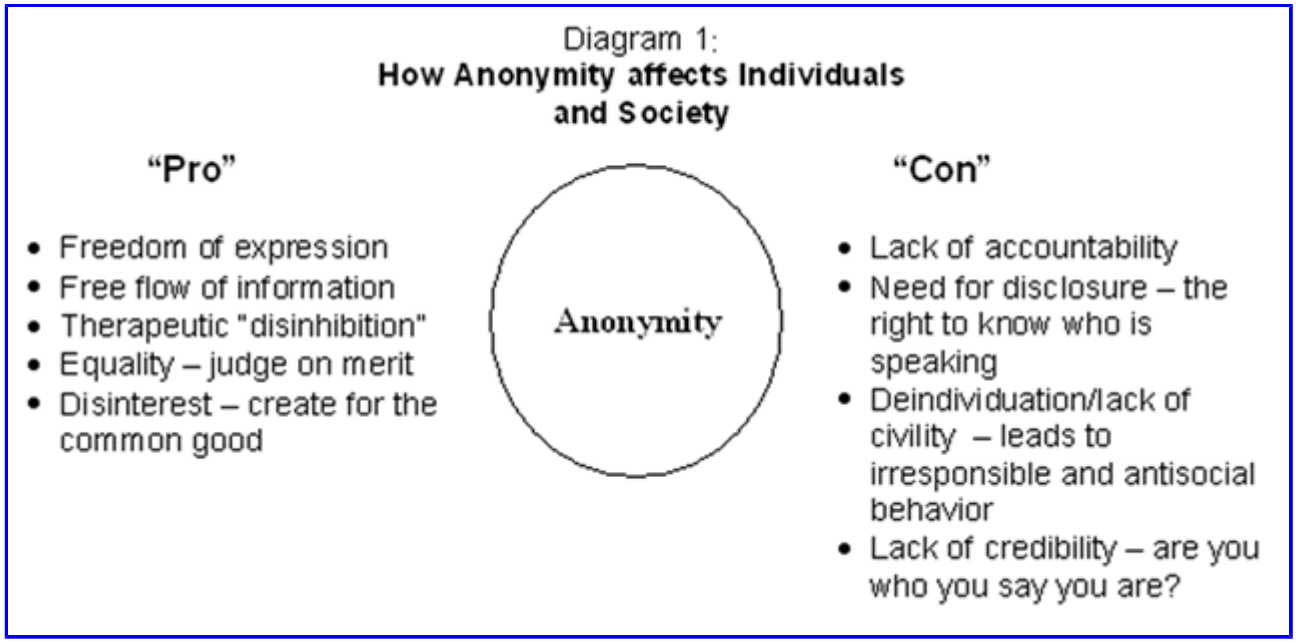
under the pseudonym “Jane Roe” or “John Doe.”

Anonymity in journalism has a long tradition in the United States. Overholser (2005) writes that “anonymous source reporting and our national government were born together.” For example, during George Washington’s administration, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson financed newspapers so that they could have a venue to anonymously influence public opinion. Nieman (2005) points out that anonymity allows information to flow to the public despite conditions of secrecy. Sometimes policy requires that only the head of an organization is supposed to speak for attribution. In such cases, when subordinates supply background information it must be anonymously. Nonetheless, there is the perception that the use of anonymous sources has “run amok” within American journalism. (Nieman, 2005)

The dark side of anonymity becomes apparent when it is used to shield the individual from accountability. It can be used to deceive (either maliciously or playfully), falsely accuse others, or evade responsibility for one’s actions. The classic example is the “poison pen” letter or the anonymous accuser. Although most newspapers will use anonymous sources in their reporting, many currently avoid printing unsigned or anonymous letters.

At least one influential online community that eschews anonymity asks members to “own your name.” “The WELL”, one of the longest-lived cyberspaces and one that prides itself on lively and intellectual discussion, requires members to use their real names so that “you know who you’re talking with.” According to their website, this leads to “real conversations and relationships.” (*The Well*, n.d.)

The diagram below depicts some of the tensions surrounding anonymity by summarizing how anonymity has been seen to influence the social good, as well as the social “bad”. It shows the positive (“pro”) and negative (“con”) effects that anonymity may exert on the individual, as well as on society at large.




Maintaining Anonymity

Anonymity can be either purposeful or unintentional. Anonymity can be viewed as part of the general problem of information hiding. It exists when "an agent performing an action maintains anonymity with respect to an observer if the observer never learns certain facts having to do with whether or not the agent performed the action." (Halpern and O'Neill, 2005) They define three components of anonymity: the identity of the agent who performs an action; who the information needs to be hidden from (the observers); and to what extent the information needs to be hidden. The third component, the degree of information hiding, is the most challenging.

In certain circumstances, anonymity or psyeudonymity (where one is named but one's "real name" is not revealed) may be viewed as either misinformation or disinformation. Fetzer (2005) makes the following distinction between the two concepts: misinformation is "false, mistaken, or misleading information", while disinformation is the deliberate dissemination of information known to be untrue. By omitting important details, it can be argued that anonymity is misinformation. To rise to the level of disinformation, there must be a deliberate agenda to promote one's "personal, religious, or ideological objectives." There are five types of disinformation. Briefly, they include having someone who is "apparently incompetent" assume a task; omitting relevant evidence; using "ad hominem" attacks to discredit the messenger (and therefore the message); or creating a biased account of another's work. (Fetzer, 2005)

Pseudonymity is used as an alternative to anonymity in many circumstances. With pseudonymity, certain critical pieces of information are blocked out and can only be obtained under proscribed circumstances. Pseudonymity can be useful to researchers

(including marketers) because associations are maintained. Therefore, a more holistic picture of an individual's behavior is possible. One of the dangers of pseudonymity is that it can be compromised if the database that contains the association between real identities and alternative ones is broken. Maintaining anonymity or pseudonymity is always problematic:

> There are many real misuses that can compromise identities, including opportunities for insider collusion, deceptive aliases, tampering with the controls, malicious alterations of audit trails and accountability information, and surreptitious tracking of individuals through inferences drawn from logs, databases, and unencrypted headers. From a realistic electronic-system point of view, true anonymity is both riskful and unachievable. (ACM, 1996)

Perfect privacy can be said to exist when "no one has information about X, no one pays any attention to X, and no one has physical access to X." (Gavison, 1980) These are roughly equivalent to secrecy, anonymity, and solitude. She notes that anonymity is compromised whenever an individual becomes the subject of attention. Anonymous information can be tied to a specific individual when pieced together with seemingly "innocent" pieces of information. Complete anonymity must also encompass identifiability and recognizability. We may recognize someone without knowing his or her name. In addition, we can identify someone through corollary information. (Rowland 2000)

The table below expands on Gavison's model. It summarizes the components of nameability, which can be viewed as the opposite of anonymity. To various extents, anonymity can be said to be compromised when one or more of the following conditions are met.

Table 1: Components of Nameability

| |
|---|
| Having a name |
| Visibility – capable of being seen |
| Recognizability – the ability to know someone if seen again |
| Identifiability – the ability to perceive another's age, gender, and other physical characteristics |
| Traceability – ability to piece together identity through corollary information |

## Anonymity and the Internet

Echoing its earlier role in protecting print authors, anonymity has emerged as a way of maintaining privacy online. It can shield individuals from online marketing and potential misuses of electronic commerce. Some researchers have found that the anonymity

offered by the Internet can provide a beneficial effect for some individuals. The lack of face-to-face interaction can produce a beneficial "disinhibition effect" that decreases social anxiety and shyness. The Internet can therefore be used to dispel loneliness, gain emotional support, promote intimacy, make friends, and build self-confidence and social skills. (Morahan-Martin and Schumacher, 2003)

Suler (2004) studied how the online disinhibition effect encourages individuals to reveal personal details or "act out" in ways that they might be reluctant to in daily life. The effects were divided into "benign" and "toxic" disinhibition. He described how "disassociative anonymity" permits individuals to segregate their daily lives from their online activities, while "invisibility" gives people the "courage to go places and do things that they otherwise wouldn't." (Suler, 2004) The minimization of status and authority means "what mostly determines the influence on others is one's skill in communicating (including writing skills), persistence, the quality of one's ideas, and technical know-how."

Anonymity is maintained on the Internet through a variety of formal and informal mechanisms. Formal mechanisms include trusted intermediaries such as anonymous remailers and anonymous electronic cash or escrow accounts. To a lesser degree, anonymity can be maintained through informal means such as the use of names or "handles" that cannot be linked to an individual. Sometimes naïve users who use their real names are surprised when they find out that acquaintances can easily find their postings through Google and other search engines. There seems to be an expectation that information trails will be as difficult to track as in the real world. For example, when you sign a hotel register or guest book in real life, it could take a detective to track down this type of information. Nevertheless, on the Internet, search engines are constantly crawling websites and centralizing data in mammoth repositories from which information is easily retrieved.

Another issue that has risen to the surface is that online anonymity can foil criminal investigations. There is a growing perception that the Internet is "the perfect communication tool for terrorists". (Rowland 2003) In addition, anonymity is used by online predators to establish contact with and gain the confidence of children.

## Anonymity and the Threat of New Technologies

New technologies are making it possible to locate, track, and identify individuals and record their activities. Among these are facial or gait recognition technology, global positioning systems, RFID tags, and video surveillance. A proliferation of databases contains medical, financial, consumer, criminal, and other personal information.

Historically, most databases have contained a fragmented view of the individual. However, there is always the danger that databases can be combined to paint a more comprehensive portrait. In November 2002, it was reported that John Poindexter, the director of the Information Awareness Office of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) was developing plans for a centralized database that would contain information from multiple information sources. Data discovery tools would be used to find patterns and associations. The purpose of the "Total Information Awareness" system was to detect possible criminal or terrorist activity. The news of this system resulted in a public outcry and in 2003, Congress eliminated funding for the project. However, the possibility exists that similar projects already are already underway or being planned. (*Electronic Privacy Information Center*, 2005)

It has been argued that anonymity/pseudonymity is an important method of preventing government and corporate misuse of data collection and surveillance technologies. Brin (1998) argues that rather than relying on increased secrecy, an open society is best served by increased transparency. Historically, most marketplace transactions have not been anonymous and anonymity has been the "default condition." An overly secretive society is one where errors are less likely to be corrected through criticism and where criminals feel less likely to be caught. An overriding question for Brin is "Who will ultimately control the cameras?" since it is unlikely the cameras are going away. By enabling citizens to "watch the watchers, surveillance technologies can be used not only to see what individuals are up to, but to force accountability upon "the mighty." (Brin, 1998)

Public individuals and corporations have attempted to uncover the identity of anonymous individuals or groups in so-called SLAPP lawsuits ("Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation"). Since 1998, there have been over 150 CyberSlapps revolving around anonymous postings on the Internet. Seventeen states have adopted anti-SLAPP statutes. In general, the courts have held the position that online postings should be treated in the same way as print media. (Rowland, 2003) Among others, Rowland raises the question whether the Internet adds a new dimension to anonymity. For example, in the real world it is improbable that one could maintain multiple identities simultaneously. The Internet also allows one to mask one's gender, age, ethnicity, and other identifying characteristics.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have begun to explore anonymity from an interdisciplinary perspective. It is clear that anonymity has many positive and negative implications that vary with historical era, milieu, circumstance, and the researchers own beliefs. Understanding the

implications of anonymity and its theoretical components can influence systems design and information policy, among other areas. A future research topic beyond the scope of this paper is the cross-cultural implications of anonymity.

Anonymity allows those without a name to have a voice. In our culture, the surname is shared by family members and indicates kinship. Because of this, we cannot say that our names are ours alone. Those actions that bring us notoriety or celebrity can have residual effects on our family. A name is usually required to interface with educational, healthcare, financial, legal, governmental, and other societal institutions. It is given to us at birth and engraved on our headstones after death. It is entirely possible to talk to someone without knowing his or her name (though one may be at a disadvantage.) However, it can be problematic to talk about someone if his or her name is not known.

Anonymity has taken on added significance in recent years for several reasons. One reason is that the Internet has allowed individuals to explore, even "play with" anonymity (usually in the form of pseudonymity) in expanded ways. This allows people to try out new identities, develop social skills, and engage in discourse with less fear of stigma, embarrassment, or even reprisal. The downside is that it can also embolden some people to engage in antisocial, malicious, or harmful activity.

Another reason for the increased attention given to anonymity is that surveillance technologies allow unprecedented amounts of information to be collected and collated about individuals. According to Foucault (1995), an effect of the panopticon is that it disassociates the "seen/being seen dyad." The panopticon was a proposal for a model prison. Guards are located in a central structure where they can see the prisoners, but the prisoners cannot see them. Within the panopticon prison, power operates in such a way that it is both "visible" and "unverifiable". The prisoners see the tower and know they can be watched. However, they can never verify the exact moment when they are the objects of attention.

The dense network of technologies for surveillance, security, data collection, and data mining can lead to the sense that anyone can be watched, even if it is a byproduct of another activity. Therefore, each individual is potentially in a similar predicament as the inmate in the panopticon. Yet, when one is fully anonymous, by definition, one is not being watched. For this reason among others, anonymity continues be an area of concern for those interested in privacy, individual expression, and the free flow of information.

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