

Anonymity on the Internet: Why the Price May Be Too High

By allowing anonymous Net communication, the fabric of our society is at risk.



Anonymous communication is seen as the cornerstone of an Internet culture that promotes sharing and free speech and is overtly anti-establishment. Anonymity, so the argument goes, ensures governments cannot spy on citizens and thus guarantees privacy and free speech. The recommendations of the American Association for the Advancement of Science's conference on "Anonymous Communication Policies for the Internet" [1] support this view. Among the findings were that "online anonymous communication is morally neutral" and that "it should be considered a strong human and constitutional right."

This view is fundamentally mistaken; by allowing anonymous communication we actually risk an incremental breakdown of the fabric of our society. The price of our freedoms is not, I believe, anonymity, but accountability. Unless individuals and, more importantly, governments can be held accountable, we lose all recourse to the law and hence risk our very freedom. The following sections argue this in more detail and suggest the only real solution is more openness, not less.

Social Justice Requires Accountability

Individuals living in a free society reap benefits in terms of sustenance, shelter, and protection. In return, they are expected to contribute to the community. Problems occur due to imbalances in this relationship. If individuals or groups acquire excessive wealth or power, or, conversely, do not receive just rewards, tension is inevitable. Small groups, such as villages or family units, where people know

and depend more directly on each other, tend to be reasonably stable despite significant imbalances. However, in larger communities, such as cities or countries, such differences can quickly lead to crime, social unrest, protests, and even revolution. In circumstances where people can be largely anonymous, and the threat of punishment is thus minimal, they find it easier to justify to themselves actions against those they perceive as outsiders or enemies.

Large social groupings necessitate some sort of decision-making mechanism (monarch and government, to name two) to guide them, and a system of controls (police and judiciary) to ensure fairness and compliance. In a democratic society, citizens "consent" to such bodies resolving any problems or conflicts that may arise, rather than taking action themselves. By punishing misconduct, society aims to deter repetition of such offenses and send a clear warning to those who may be similarly tempted to violate the rights of others. The democratic system also incorporates controls (elections and laws) that ensure that governing bodies cannot abuse their position. Obviously, resolving any unfairness, whether involving individuals, groups, or the state, requires that those responsible for the problems can be held accountable. In a free and fair society, justice must exist, and be seen to exist.

Experience suggests a society relying solely on the good will and conscience of its citizens would be unlikely to succeed in ensuring justice. Similarly, attempting to guarantee justice by adopting measures preventing the very possibility of wrongdoing is unfeasible since there is little hope of covering all eventualities. We should, of course, attempt to raise individuals to be good and conscientious citizens,

and take precautions in an attempt to make misbehavior impossible, but we would surely be foolish not to retain the safety net of accountability.

The Consequences of Anonymity

Accountability requires those responsible for any misconduct be identified and brought to justice. However, if people remain anonymous, by definition, they cannot be identified, making it impossible to hold them accountable. Proponents of anonymous communications on the Internet thus open the door to many forms of criminal and anti-social behavior, while leaving victims and society helpless. Internet-based crimes, such as hacking, virus writing, denial-of-service attacks, credit card fraud, harassment, and identity theft are increasing. Already, damage estimates are measured in billions of dollars per year, but the human cost, in terms of ruined reputations, loss of trust, and a general deterioration in morals, is immeasurable.

While all this is dangerous enough, there is a much more ominous aspect to anonymity. Were anonymous communication to become the default, then it would be available, not just to the private citizen, but to the state and to those individuals comprising it. Highly sensitive material could be leaked, paybacks could be made to secure lucrative deals, pressure could be placed on officials, elections could be rigged, and arrangements could be made for political opponents to be attacked or even eliminated, all with impunity. Distrusting a government accountable to the people is one thing, facilitating a government completely unaccountable is quite another. Some may argue that governments already employ anonymity to cloak clandestine operations, so it would make no difference. However, where governments do currently use it, they do so illegally. Those involved know it is wrong and know the penalties if they are caught, thus deterring all but the most desperate or naive.

Free Speech

The right to freedom of speech is a fundamental aspect of the democratic tradition. The rationale for it is simple: Ideas transform society, and any idea, no matter how bizarre it may appear initially, might ultimately prove beneficial. Citizens should thus not

be unduly restricted from or punished for expressing their views, however unpalatable they may seem. The very notion of free speech under law means protecting the speaker from prosecution and persecution, thus the speaker's identity is known. While anonymous communication is not necessary for there to be free speech, it clearly ensures that no restrictions or punishments can be imposed on anyone, whatever they may say. Does this apparent benefit outweigh its costs, as advocates claim?

Freedom of speech is concerned primarily with protecting the individual against the power of the establishment, be it the political or religious authorities, or the moral majority. Anonymous communication, however, is likely to be singularly ineffective in this regard. In dictatorships and undemocratic countries where free speech is most needed, it is unlikely these regimes would make such communication available at all. Even in circumstances where anonymous communication is allowed, unless it is pervasive, its use might easily be detected and taken as an indication of wrongdoing. Besides, messages sent anonymously are unlikely to have much impact on their own. Only if the recipient of a message knows and trusts its writer is action likely to ensue. Trust is built up as a result of numerous encounters, but if the communications are truly anonymous then it is difficult to establish such a relationship. Messages sent anonymously are thus unlikely to have much impact on their own and hence reliance on anonymous communications for whistle-blowing, informing the world of human rights violations, or promulgating a political platform would seem to be misplaced.

History is made by those brave enough to speak out, despite the serious personal risks involved. Reform may take longer to come about, but surely bravery, honesty, and openness should be encouraged as a means of effecting change. Cowering behind a cloak of anonymity hardly seems an auspicious basis for profound social upheavals. Anonymity seems to offer a cheap and easy way to speak out against authority and promote change; in reality it is ineffectual and may ultimately prove to be very costly.

When it comes to more mundane personal communications, anonymity is said to have the advantage of promoting free and open exchanges, unhampered

by prejudices often formed by race, gender, or religion. Text-only communications certainly remove most, though not all, such clues, but this is a transitory situation. Once voice and videoconferencing technology become widespread, few people will exchange its convenience for such nebulous gains. Of course, enabling open discussion, particularly of medical, psychological, or legal problems, is undoubtedly something valuable. It is quite natural for people to be reticent about talking openly of such personal matters, so when they need advice they either turn to professionals in such areas (who guarantee to hold client conversations in the strictest of confidence), confide in close friends (whom they trust to keep the conversation private), or turn to complete strangers (whom they hope will not learn their identity.) On

Distrusting a government accountable to the people is one thing, facilitating a government completely unaccountable is quite another.

the Internet however, even assuming that one's identity never accidentally slipped out (to be linked with all the intimate details poured out over the months or years) and that one could trust the advice of a totally unknown confidant, anonymity can be seriously misused. There are legitimate restrictions to the right to free speech, in particular, it does not apply to libelous remarks or ones intended to defraud, or to incite hatred or violence. In order to protect the innocent, all communications must be subject to the rule of law and this, as argued here, implies that their originators must be accountable and hence not anonymous.

That communication must be subject to law should not be taken to mean the government has the right to track, intercept, or read the communication. All that is necessary is that the courts, as opposed to the government, be able to establish the source of a communication, when, and only if, it becomes the subject of legal dispute. The need for accountability requires all communication be traceable and that this information be available to courts subject to due process. It does not entail that others, even the recipient, need know the source. Authors could thus hide their identity if they

wish, but on the understanding that they can still be held accountable under law.

The Way Forward

Advocates of anonymous communication claim anonymity is essential to ensure free speech on the Internet, and this outweighs any harm that might result from drug barons, the mafia, and other criminals being untouchable. I have argued that this view is mistaken. Accountability lies at the very heart of the democratic tradition and is crucial to the continued stability of a free and fair society. Removing its safety net would only encourage deceit and lead to more crime and increasing numbers of victims unable to obtain justice. More significantly, those in power could use anonymity to their own ends, making governments unaccountable. It was distrust of government that led to calls for anonymous communications as a means to ensure free speech. The end result of anonymity, however, plays right into government's hands and has little real impact in terms of free speech.

The way forward is clear: embrace accountability and reject anonymous communications. Concerned citizens can use the improved communications of the Internet to participate more fully in government. Our freedom comes at the price of vigilance. If we abdicate our responsibilities we have only ourselves to blame. Moving to a more participatory form of democratic government is a better, safer, more stable option than that offered by the quicksand of anonymity.

Accountability, openness, and honesty may sound like old-fashioned morality, but these traits have stood us in good stead. They are the price of our freedoms, a small price to pay, surely, for the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. **G**

REFERENCE

1. Teich, A., Frankel, M.S., Kling, R., and Ya-ching, L. Anonymous communication policies for the Internet: Results and recommendations of the AAAS conference. *The Information Society* 15, 2 (1999).

DAVID DAVENPORT (david@bilkent.edu.tr) is an assistant professor in the Computer Engineering Department of Bilkent University in Ankara, Turkey.

© 2002 ACM 0002-0782/02/0400 \$5.00