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Does Online Anonymity Undermine the Sense of Personal Responsibility?

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Abstract

This paper begins exploring the media visibility of anonymity online, in particular in relation to trolls and online bullying. It then explores anonymity in the case of Chelsea Manning who leaked USA military secrets but only lost anonymity sometime after her leak was made public. This discussion explores issues of responsibility and the reasons for being anonymous. The paper then briefly discusses anonymity based on the discussion of the Manning case in relation to the Snowden case, where Snowden refused anonymity, and the Pentagon papers. The paper concludes pointing out that issues of responsibility in relation to anonymity remain similar whether digital or not, but that anonymity now exists in a context in which there is greater ability to share information between many more people, faster and with radically lowered costs of publishing than before.

Keywords

Hacking, leaking, internet, digital, anonymity

Anonymity can be understood in, at least, these ways:

To be unknown but to be able to speak.

To be concealed when speaking.

To ensure the author controls what is known about the author.

To sever identity markers of the author from a media-object they authored.

To be and/or do wrong and be protected against the consequences of the wrong.

To have no face and to be able to speak.

All these different expressions of what anonymity means work as well to describe anonymity in offline contexts as they do in online¹. Yet despite a fundamental similarity in what anonymity means in and between online and offline contexts, recent years have seen recurrent alarms, and at times moral panics, about anonymity online. This paper explores different meanings of anonymity and finding at its heart a relationship between responsibility and security. Anonymity, security and responsibility will be examined through a comparison between how anonymity was and was not used during the Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden leaks of confidential information. The comparison will also briefly take in the earlier and pre-internet Pentagon Papers leak. Finally, the ways anonymity has changed due to the speed and much easier spreading of large quantities of documents will be outlined. This is a large amount of ground to cover in a short piece and much argument will be indicative rather than fully established, however the core point will be made that the meaning of anonymity has been changed in the same way many other things have been changed by the rise of digital and internet socio-technologies. Anonymity has changed not so much by having its constituent parts of security and responsibility transformed, but by changing under the pressure of the effects of many more people having access to vastly cheaper, faster moving and significantly greater amounts of information.

Trolls and bullying on twitter and Facebook have provided spectacular examples of appalling behavior. Various chat rooms that foreground their commitment to anonymity regularly provide examples of doing wrong on the assumption that anonymity provides freedom from any consequences. As I write, news in the UK is following the story of a ‘swatting’ which led to an innocent person’s death. ‘Swatting is a term for phoning up police with misleading information to try and have a police swat team sent to a target’s house. In this case, a gamer upset about someone’s treatment of them in an online game engaged a third party via a chatroom who then swatted their target. In this case, the wrong address was given, and an entirely unrelated family had an armed police swat team show up on their door, leading to the police shooting dead a young man. At the time of writing an individual has been arrested, but not convicted, of calling in the swat team, but the gamer who requested the swatting remains anonymous (Anderson, 2017).

In understanding the media visibility of online anonymity, it is worth noting that in the UK the main press focus on this case of swatting was on the online nature of the cause of the dispute (over a \$1.50 bet in an online game), rather than on police shooting someone who did not move their arms precisely as requested by the police (Anderson, 2017). Anonymity online is in the news, not the consequences of a militarized police force. There is, of course, also no point in denying the role of anonymity in such incidents. Those calling in swats, or sending multiple pizzas to a target, or making threats to kill or rape via twitter, are usually not doing so because they mean to take responsibility for their actions. Yet while acknowledging this use of anonymity, we should not lose sight of the fact that anonymity has a range of meanings and cannot be reduced to the one meaning of doing wrong and being protected from the consequences.

The Chelsea Manning story underlines this. Manning was a whistle blower who released both extensive and shocking documents primarily about the USA military at war, which would otherwise have remained unknown to the public. Chelsea Manning tried to stay anonymous following the publication of leaks from her, though the attempt failed.

Manning communicated via various means (irc, Jabber) with Wikileaks, with the aim of severing the link between the leaker and the leaked material. Anonymity is understood here as the ability for your identity not to be connected to your message. There is a complexity to the story, as at first Manning tried to contact newspaper reporters, who either did not respond or she felt did not seem particularly interested. She wrote a short cover note to the leaks, that was not in the end sent by Manning, with her name on it suggesting that anonymity was at this early point only an option and that she was contemplating attaching her name to the leaks. Manning then leaked anonymously to Wikileaks, making contact via encrypted chats. A test document was sent and published followed by thousands of files. Wikileaks generated significant international attention through releases such as the Collateral Murder video and then the leaking of USA diplomatic cables. At this point, there was both enormous publicity for the leaks and Manning remained anonymous. It was only when Manning admitted to another person, Adrian Lamo, that she was the leaker that anonymity failed. Lamo was a hacker who Manning apparently contacted after seeing him profiled in Wired magazine and he assured Manning of confidentiality, but Lamo told others that Manning was the leaker. (Zetter and Poulsen, 2010)

Manning was then arrested in May 2010, and charged with a number of offences, including ‘aiding the enemy’ which is a capital offence, though prosecutors said they would not pursue the death sentence. Manning’s subsequent treatment in prison was considered bad enough that the UN special rapporteur on torture called it ‘cruel, inhuman and degrading’ (Pilkington, 2010). Both the potential for a death sentence and the treatment Manning underwent in prison underlines that sometimes anonymity is essential to the ability to release information when the consequences of doing so are dangerous. Manning was eventually sentenced in 2013 to 30 years imprisonment (with an expected release around 8 years) and the sentence was commuted by President Obama with Manning’s release coming in May 2017. For Manning, the loss of anonymity had severe repercussions.

Manning ended up in prison because her strategy of remaining anonymous failed. It is useful to emphasize this point that even though she ended up in prison that was because her strategy failed and not because it was impossible for anonymity to ensure both the documents to be made public and for Manning to have remained free. Given space, we might also contrast this with Edward Snowden’s approach in which he both leaked and claimed responsibility for those leaks, because he wanted to ensure the leaks were known to be legitimate (YouTube, 2013). What these cases, alongside trolls and swatting, show us is that personal responsibility in relation to anonymity has to be understood in (at least) two dimensions. From the cases of Manning and Snowden, it is possible to articulate a range of different understandings of what anonymity means. These are not exclusive and may well often be mixed up, but it is useful to try and focus on the nature of anonymity as seen through Manning and Snowden.

On the one side, anonymity can offer forms of security.

Creative security, the right to experiment freely.

Choice security, the right to be wrong, to make mistakes, particularly in artistic and creative practices.

Personal security, the right to address wrongs when you cannot deal with the consequences of addressing those wrongs.

Judgmental security, the right to be judged on the criteria for the judgement and not on extraneous factors such as gender, race, appearance.

On the other side, anonymity can deny forms of responsibility.

Creative responsibility, to make things whose consequences we appropriate to ourselves.

Choice responsibility, to be known as who we are for our choices; to be the author.

Personal responsibility, to contribute to and create the customs and laws of one's society.

Judgmental responsibility, to be accountable for the ways we act toward others, to be available for consequences of being the author.

But do these understandings of anonymity suggest differences between security and responsibility secured by online and offline anonymity? I have pursued online examples to ensure that the potential effects of internet and digital socio-technologies on anonymity are the center of attention but having distilled the inter-relations of security and responsibility that are part of anonymity, it can be asked if there is much obvious difference between online and offline in these contexts? To do this it is useful to add one more example of a leak in the pre-internet Pentagon Papers.

The Pentagon Papers leaks are often mentioned in relation to both Manning and Snowden. This was a leak about the Vietnam war, which required the leaker, Daniel Ellsberg, to photocopy 7,000 pages, page by page over several nights. And then Ellsberg had to find a newspaper willing to publish, and therefore was only able to have the story told if aided by powerful gatekeepers (Chokshi, 2017). The important comparison between Manning and Snowden's leaks and the Pentagon Papers is not around anonymity and personal responsibility, though there are similarities; for example, Ellsberg rather like Manning initially had his identity concealed and then, like Snowden and Manning, revealed leading to his prosecution. Yet a clear difference is in the way Manning and Snowden were able to copy and take much larger amounts of data and were able to transfer data more easily. Manning and Snowden could also have simply published raw documents on their own, but they both sought out intermediaries to help (Snowden through newspapers to ensure they would tell the full story and would continue to analyze the huge cache of data, Manning through Wikileaks to try and ensure editing of the documents while keeping herself anonymous).

The difference I am focusing on here is a familiar one from the rise of the internet and the digital: the ability to connect many more people, faster and with radically lowered costs of publishing than before. What has changed with the rise of internet and digital technologies is not perhaps a change in the relationship of anonymity to personal responsibility or security, but the extension to far more people of the chance to, far more easily, confront the dual nature that is at the heart of anonymity. This dual nature can be expressed by the two questions: Will anonymity allow me to be responsible because it ensures I can distribute information? Will anonymity allow me to deny responsibility for my actions and utterances?

The dilemma of anonymity — what will I do if my actions cannot be connected to me — is available to more, with effects more easily spread and with wider distribution. It is these effects that offer something different in anonymity online, whereas the question of personal responsibility remains in its principles fundamentally the same before and after the internet.

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ⁱ The question I am addressing uses the word ‘online’, I would like to give a pre-warning to try to control for language that I am going to use the terms online and offline to differentiate contexts that are essentially mediated by internet and digital technologies (that is contexts that could not exist without internet technologies) from those that do not. Further, I am not assuming these are separate contexts or that there is a determination between them nor that we somehow live in one or the other but not both. Online and offline here are abstractions to identify particular dynamics, just as if I used terms such as race, gender, class, sexuality and so on to analyse the characteristics of specific forms of power in society.