Anonymity

Anonymity is derived from the Greek word ἀνωνυμία, *anonymia*, meaning "without a name" or "namelessness". In colloquial use, anonymity typically refer to the state of an individual's personal identity, or personally identifiable information, being publicly unknown.

The relative term **incognito**, from the Latin *incognitus*, denotes that behind an action is someone who wants to remain anonymous.

There are various situations in which a person might choose to withhold their identity. Acts of charity have been performed anonymously when benefactors do not wish to be acknowledged. A person who feels threatened might attempt to mitigate that threat through anonymity. A witness to a crime might seek to avoid retribution, for example, by anonymously calling a crime tipline. Criminals might proceed anonymously to conceal their participation in a crime. Anonymity may also be created unintentionally, through the loss of identifying information due to the passage of time or a destructive event.

In certain situations, it is illegal to remain anonymous. In the United States, 24 states have "Stop and identify" statutes that requires persons detained to self identify when requested by a law enforcement officer.

The term "anonymous message" typically refers to a message (which is, for example, transmitted over some form of a network) that does not carry any information about its sender and its intended recipient. It is therefore unclear if multiple such messages have been sent by the same sender or if they have the same intended recipient.

The problem of determining whether or not the identity of a communication partner is the same as one previously encountered is the problem of authentication.

In mathematics, in reference to an arbitrary element (e.g. a human, an object, a computer), within a well-defined set (called the "anonymity set"), "anonymity" of that element refers to the property of that element of not being identifiable within this set. If it is not identifiable, then the element is said to be "anonymous".

Compared with pseudonymity

Sometimes it is desired that a person can establish a long-term relationship (such as a reputation) with some other entity, without necessarily disclosing personally identifying information to that entity. In this case, it may be useful for the person to establish a unique identifier, called a pseudonym, with the other entity. Examples of pseudonyms are pen names, nicknames, credit card numbers, student numbers, bank account numbers, and IP addresses. A pseudonym enables the other entity to link different messages from the same person and, thereby, the maintenance of a long-term relationship.

Someone using a pseudonym would be strictly considered to be using "pseudonymity" not "anonymity", but sometimes the term "anonymity" is used to refer to both (in general, a situation where the legal identity of the person is disguised).

Means of obtaining anonymity

Anonymity is a result of not having identifying characteristics (such as a name or description of physical appearance) disclosed. This can occur from a lack of interest in learning the nature of such characteristics, or through intentional efforts to hide these characteristics. An example of the former would include a brief encounter with a stranger, when learning the other person's name is not deemed necessary. An example of the latter would include someone hiding behind clothing that covers identifying features like hair color, scars, or tattoos, in order to avoid identification.

In some cases, anonymity is reached unintentionally, as is often the case with victims of crimes or war battles, when a body is discovered in such a state that the physical features used to identify someone are no longer present. Anonymity is not always found in such morbid situations, however. As an example, a winner of a lottery jackpot is

anonymous (one of however many play the lottery) until that person turns in the winning lottery ticket.

Anonymity may also be created through a gradual eroding of ownership information, such as the passage of time and loss of attribution to a saying.

Anonymity and social situations

Anonymity may reduce the accountability one perceives to have for their actions, and removes the impact these actions might otherwise have on their reputation. This can have dramatic effects, both useful and harmful to various parties and/or entities involved, relatively. Thus, it may be used for psychological tactics involving any respective party to purport and/or support and/or discredit any sort of activity or belief.

In conversational settings, anonymity may allow people to reveal personal history and feelings without fear of later embarrassment. Electronic conversational media can provide physical isolation, in addition to anonymity. This prevents physical retaliation for remarks, and prevents negative or taboo behavior or discussion from tarnishing the reputation of the speaker. This can be beneficial when discussing very private matters, or taboo subjects or expressing views or revealing facts that may put someone in physical, financial, or legal danger (such as illegal activity, or unpopular, or outlawed political views).

In work settings, the three most common forms of anonymous communication are traditional suggestion boxes, written feedback, and caller-identification blocking. Additionally, the appropriateness of anonymous organizational communication varies depending on the use, with organizational surveys and/or assessments typically perceived as highly appropriate and firing perceived as highly inappropriate. Anonymity use and appropriateness have also been found to be significantly related to the quality of relationships with key others at work.

Protesters outside a Scientology center on February 10, 2008 donning masks, scarves, hoods, and sunglasses to obscure their faces, and gloves and long sleeves to protect them from leaving fingerprints.

With few perceived negative consequences, anonymous or semi-anonymous forums often provide a soapbox for disruptive conversational behavior. The term Internet troll is sometimes used to refer to those who do this online.

Relative anonymity is often enjoyed in large crowds. Different people have different psychological and philosophical reactions to this development, especially as a modern phenomenon. This anonymity is an important factor in crowd psychology, and behavior in situations such as a riot. This perceived anonymity can be compromised by technologies such as photography.

Anonymity, commerce and crime

Anonymous commercial transactions can protect the privacy of consumers. Some consumers prefer to use cash when buying everyday goods (like groceries or tools), to prevent sellers from aggregating information or soliciting them in the future. Credit cards are linked to a person's name, and can be used to discover other information, such as postal address, phone number, etc. The ecash system was developed to allow secure anonymous transactions. Another example would be Enymity, which actually makes a purchase on a customer's behalf. When purchasing taboo goods and services, anonymity makes many potential consumers more comfortable with or more willing to engage in the transaction. Many loyalty programs use cards that personally identify the consumer engaging in each transaction (possibly for later solicitation, or for redemption or security purposes), or that act as a numerical pseudonym, for use in data mining.

Anonymity can also be used as a protection against legal prosecution. For example, when committing unlawful actions, many criminals attempt to avoid identification by the means of obscuring/covering their faces with scarves or masks, and wear gloves or other hand coverings in order to not leave any fingerprints. In organized crime, groups

of criminals may collaborate on a certain project without revealing to each other their names or other personally identifiable information. The movie *The Thomas Crown Affair* depicted a fictional collaboration by people who had never previously met and did not know who had recruited them. The anonymous purchase of a gun or knife to be used in a crime helps prevent linking an abandoned weapon to the identity of the perpetrator.

Anonymity in charity

There are two aspects, one, giving to a large charitable organization obscures the beneficiary of a donation from the benefactor, the other is giving anonymously to obscure the benefactor both from the beneficiary and from everyone else. There are many reasons this is done. Anonymous charity has long been a widespread and durable moral precept of many ethical and religious systems, as well as being in practice a widespread human activity. A benefactor may not wish to establish any relationship with the beneficiary, particularly if the beneficiary is perceived as being unsavory. Benefactors may not wish to identify themselves as capable of giving. A benefactor may wish to improve the world, as long as no one knows who did it, out of modesty, wishing to avoid publicity.[1]

Issues facing the anonymous

Attempts at anonymity are not always met with support from society.

Anonymity sometimes clashes with the policies and procedures of governments or private organizations. In the United States, disclosure of identity is required to be able to vote, though the secret ballot prevents disclosure of how individuals voted. In airports in most countries, passengers are not allowed to board flights unless they have identified themselves to some sort of airline or transportation security personnel, typically in the form of the presentation of an identification card.

On the other hand, some policies and procedures require anonymity.

Referring to the anonymous

When it is necessary to refer to someone who is anonymous, it is typically necessary to create a type of pseudo-identification for that person. In literature, the most common way to state that the identity of an author is unknown is to refer to them as simply "Anonymous." This is usually the case with older texts in which the author is long dead and unable to claim authorship of a work. When the work claims to be that of some famous author the pseudonymous author is identified as "Pseudo-", as in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, an author claiming—and long believed—to be Dionysius the Areopagite, an early Christian convert.

Anonymus, in its Latin spelling, generally with a specific city designation, is traditionally used by scholars in the humanities to refer to an ancient writer whose name is not known, or to a manuscript of their work. Many such writers have left valuable historical or literary records: an incomplete list of such *Anonymi* is at Anonymus.

In the history of art, many painting workshops can be identified by their characteristic style and discussed and the workshop's output set in chronological order. Sometimes archival research later identifies the name, as when the "Master of Flémalle"—defined by three paintings in the Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt— was identified as Robert Campin. The 20th-century art historian Bernard Berenson methodically identified numerous early Renaissance Florentine and Sienese workshops under such sobriquets as "Amico di Sandro" for an anonymous painter in the immediate circle of Sandro Botticelli.

In legal cases, a popularly accepted name to use when it is determined that an individual needs to maintain anonymity is "John Doe". This name is often modified to "Jane Doe" when the anonymity-seeker is female. The same names are also commonly used when the identification of a dead person is not known. The semi-acronym Unsub is used as law enforcement slang for "Unknown Subject of an Investigation".

The military often feels a need to honor the remains of soldiers for whom identification is impossible. In many countries, such a memorial is named the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Anonymity and the press

Most modern newspapers and magazines attribute their articles to individual editors, or to news agencies. An exception is the British weekly *The Economist*, which may be the world's only un-bylined paper. All British newspapers run their leaders (i.e. editorials) anonymously.

Anonymity on the Internet

Most commentary on the Internet is essentially done anonymously, using unidentifiable pseudonyms. While these usernames can take on an identity of their own, they are frequently separated and anonymous from the actual author. According to the University of Stockholm this is creating more freedom of expression, and less accountability.[2] The online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, is collaboratively written mostly by authors using either unidentifiable pseudonyms or IP address identifiers, although a few have used identified pseudonyms or their real names.

Full anonymity on the Internet, however, is not guaranteed since IP addresses can be tracked, allowing to identify the computer from which a certain post was made, albeit not the actual user. Anonymizing services such as I2P - The Anonymous Network or Tor address the issue of IP tracking. Their distributed technology approach may grant a higher degree of security than centralized anonymizing services where a central point exists that could disclose one's identity. It was shown that it is possible to compromise the anonymity of many Internet users by a group of collaborating eavesdroppers when eavesdropping on a relatively small number of routers, even when the most central routers are protected from eavesdropping.[3]

Sites such as Chatroulette and Omegle, which pair up random users for a conversation, capitalized on a fascination with anonymity. They are examples of anonymous chat or stranger chat. Other sites, however, including Facebook and Google+, require users to sign in with their legal names. In the case of Google+, this requirement has led to a controversy known as the nymwars.

The prevalence of cyberbullying is often attributed to relative Internet anonymity, due to the fact that potential offenders are able to mask their identities and prevent themselves from being caught. Cyberbullying, as opposed to general bullying, is still a widely-debated area of Internet freedom in several states.

By 2013 several websites took actions to stop anonymity.[4]

Legal protection of anonymity

Anonymity is perceived as a right by many, especially the anonymity in the internet communications. The partial right for anonymity is legally protected to various degrees in different jurisdictions.

United States

- The right for *anonymous political campaigning* was established in the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission* (1995) case: "Anonymity is a shield from the tyranny of the majority...It thus exemplifies the purpose behind the Bill of Rights, and of the First Amendment in particular: to protect unpopular individuals from retaliation—and their ideas from suppression—at the hand of an intolerant society".
- The right of individuals for *anonymous communication* was established by the decision in case *Columbia Insurance Company v. Seescandy.com, et al.* (1999) of the US District Court in the Northern District of California: "People are permitted to interact pseudonymously and anonymously with each other so long as those acts are not in violation of the law."
- The right of individuals for "anonymous reading" was established in the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Rumely* (1953) case: "Once the government can demand of a publisher the names of the purchasers of his

publications, the free press as we know it disappears. Then the spectre of a government agent will look over the shoulder of everyone who reads".

Anonymity and politics

The history of anonymous expression in political dissent is both long and with important effect, as in the Letters of Junius or Voltaire's *Candide*, or scurrilous as in pasquinades. In the tradition of anonymous British political criticism, the Federalist Papers were anonymously authored. Without the public discourse on the controversial contents of the U.S. Constitution, ratification would likely have taken much longer as individuals worked through the issues. The United States Declaration of Independence, however, was not anonymous. If it had been unsigned, it might well have been less effective. John Perry Barlow, Joichi Ito, and other US bloggers express a very strong support for anonymous editing as one of the basic requirements of open politics as conducted on the Internet. Saipansucks.com is an example of an

Modern pasquinades glued to the base of Pasquino, one of the Talking Statues of Rome

anonymously written website that socially and politically criticizes the United States' Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and UticaSux.com politically criticizes the local government of Utica, New York, in the United States.

Anonymity and pseudonymity in art

Anonymity is directly related to the concept of obscurantism or pseudonymity, where an artist or group attempts to remain anonymous, for various reasons, not limited to: adding an element of mystique to themselves and/or their work, attempting to avoid what is known as the "cult of personality" or hero worship, where the charisma, good looks, wealth and/or other unrelated or mildly related aspects of the person(s) is the main reason for interest in their work, rather than the work itself; also the ability to break into a field or area of interest normally dominated by males, such as James Tiptree, Jr, the famous science fiction author who was actually a woman named Alice Bradley Sheldon, as seems to also be the case with JT LeRoy. The reasons for choosing this approach vary. Some, such as Thomas Pynchon, and J. D. Salinger who seem to want to avoid the "limelight" of popularity, simply want to live private lives. Some others include avant-garde ensemble The Residents, costumed comedy rock band The Radioactive Chicken Heads, and until 2004, musician Jandek.

This is frequently applied in fiction, from The Lone Ranger, Superman, and Batman, where a hidden identity is assumed.

Mathematics of anonymity

An example: Suppose that only Alice, Bob, and Carol have the keys to a bank safe and that, one day, the contents of the safe are missing (without the lock being violated). Without any additional information, we do not know for sure whether it was Alice, Bob or Carol who opened the safe; the perpetrator remains anonymous. In particular, each of the elements in {Alice, Bob, Carol} has a 1/3 chance of being the perpetrator. However, as long as none of them has been identified as being the perpetrator with 100% certainty, we can say that the perpetrator remains anonymous.

Anonymity is not an absolute. That is, the degree of anonymity one enjoys may vary. In the above example, if Carol has an ironclad alibi at the time of the perpetration, then we may deduce that it must have been either Alice or Bob who opened the safe. That is, the probability of the elements {Alice, Bob, Carol} of being the perpetrator is now 1/2, 1/2, and 0, respectively. This amounts to a reduction of the perpetrator's anonymity (i.e., although the perpetrator still remains anonymous, it is now more likely than before that (s)he is either Alice or Bob).

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