

Preface

What kind of effect can anonymity have on our society, whether it is in real life or on the Internet? I believe that our society has moved further and further away from the concept of anonymity and as such it is important to analyze the good and bad impacts it can have. Some may say that anonymity is a bad thing; it makes room for citizens to commit crime without just cause and get away with it. Some may say that anonymity is a good thing; *it makes room for citizens to commit crime with just cause and get away with it*. The Internet is no longer an anonymous place where we are free to browse and create without consequence. Our every move is recorded by the government and by social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and search engines like Google. Although it seems that in our daily lives we no longer have the ability to live anonymously, there is still one last sanctuary: www.4chan.org. Even if the government can still track you it provides a wall between the user and his or her peers; it is better than nothing.

I must also heed a warning to my readers. I feel that this warning is best quoted from a book known as “Epic Win for Anonymous” by author Cole Stryker that has greatly influenced this paper:

“Dear reader, under no circumstances should you see this... as an invitation to hop onto 4chan to see what all the fuss is about,” he continues, “...because 4chan thrives on its lack of rules, it hosts content that ranges from harmless to downright terrifying. Violent fetish pornography, racist/sexist rants, and gory photography are just a few of the more unsettling items that litter the pages of /b/.” His last warning: “Seriously. There are some things you can’t *unsee*.”

Introduction

After hours of contemplation I decided to investigate something that I already know a little bit about (this being 4chan), but realized that my main topic is on anonymity and its place in today’s world. The subtopic topic I chose is 4chan, an image-board based website that was started in 2003 by a then 15-year-old Christopher “m00t” Poole. I have personally been a participant of the 4chan community since early 2008. The image-board 4chan employs various sections from /a/ (anime), /s/ (sexy beautiful women), to /b/ (random, the post popular section). /b/ is infamous throughout the Internet for its use of anonymity. When a user (who does not have to log-in or create an account, mind you) posts, they are forced to, anonymously. These posts are brought up onto the front page of the given section on a “real-time” basis, constantly reappearing at the top of the list when “bumped” or “re-commented” on.

This is Recent

Since the creation of the Internet for a widespread public use in the early 1990’s and it’s increase of use since, we have also moved further and further away from anonymity. *Every* corporation out there wants to put an ID on *every* activity of *every* consumer for the sole purpose of tracking consumer behaviors. That may not me such a bad thing; to participate in our capitalist free-market society as a consumer and have it recorded to better our experience... sure, worse

things have happened in the hands of the establishment. But now I pose the question, what if the government takes up that role? What will they do with the information? News flash, it has been happening for years. Since the dawn of time I would argue that humans (let alone the power-hungry) have moved closer to the identification of the individual and further from the idea of the nameless... the unknown. Although themes of anonymity throughout history have been in existence the involvement of anonymity towards the Internet is a very new thing... but it is getting old.

4chan and its users have been the cause of various instances of what we call “hacktivism” within the past decade. The hacking of Sarah Palins e-mail, Project Chanology, the Occupy movement, the Hal Turner incident, the failures of Apple stock, as well as many other acts of sabotage have occurred because of... you guessed it... the ability to appear anonymous. I have a strong belief that anonymity is important and that it is in fact our constitutional right. Some may argue that it only opens the doors for illegal activity. One could say that our 4th amendment right makes way for such illegal activity in a similar vehicle: “The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures...” Why defend our right to hide if we have nothing to hide? To answer this question I would like to quote 1995 Supreme Court case “McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission” on anonymous political campaigning. The defense stated “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.” In a different 1953 Supreme Court case “United States v. Rumely” on anonymous reading the defense demonstrated similar attributes in their argument, stating, “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 specter of a government agent will look over the shoulder of everyone who reads.” You can see how demanding certain information that identifies the individual and his or her opinion can greatly deteriorate the value of free speech. Free speech is our right as a nation but more importantly it is *your right* as an individual. Anonymity has parallels in this sense; it should be our right as a nation, but it is truly about you in the long run.

There are Problems

Everyone who uses the Internet knows what they like to watch, read, and see. Some might use it just for work, but the vast majority of us use it for recreational purposes. Are we anonymous? I think not. Some have found 4chan to be a place where they will not be judged; they can't be, because no one knows who you are. Few are aware; that this anonymity is only worth so much as it is on a peer-to-peer level. By peer to peer I mean to say that you are viewed as anonymous by other users, and that other users are viewed as anonymous by you. The owners, moderators, and “janitors” of the 4chan website can view specific IP addresses (the information that can connect your existence in the Internet to your residence in the real world). In certain situations this information will be released to the authorities and public if deemed necessary or court ordered by the government (thus putting the website in a corner).

Give the 2008 court case “United States v. David Kernell” for instance where the defense was a then-20-year-old college student who managed to “hack” his way into Sarah Palin's Yahoo! Email account. Keep in mind that this kid made a poor decision to hack into someone's e-mail; people have done worse. He wanted to see if she had any “skeletons in her closet” and if

so to bring them to the light of day; a noble cause in my opinion. After a few minutes of researching simply found information such as her birth date and husband's name he answered a few security questions and reset the password in his favor; finally gaining access. Kernell posted every step of the process onto 4chan and eventually found himself giving out all the information until the account was locked by a Yahoo! automated security feature. By the next day (September 18th of 2008) the FBI had managed to contact 4chan founder Christopher Poole and request the necessary information to identify the defendant. The following is an excerpt from the United States Court of Appeals "United States v. David Kernell":

On the evening of September 18, 2008, the FBI contacted Kernell's father to determine Kernell's whereabouts. The next day, Kernell contacted FBI investigators and attended a brief phone meeting arranged by Kernell's attorney. Kernell called the FBI again on the evening of September 20, but never provided any information to investigators, and later on September 20 the FBI executed a search warrant for Kernell's apartment and seized his computer. The seized computer, despite the deletions, contained numerous items related to accessing the Palin email account, including a draft of the "Hello" post.

Later computer forensic examinations revealed that Kernell had taken numerous actions to remove information from the computer relating to his access to the Palin email account. At some point between the initial post on 4chan and the evening of September 18, Kernell cleared the cache on his Internet Explorer browser, removing the record of websites he had visited during that period. He also uninstalled the Firefox internet browser, which more thoroughly removed the record of his internet access using that browser, and ran the disk defragmentation program on his computer, which reorganizes and cleans up the existing space on a hard drive, and has the effect of removing many of the remnants of information or files that had been deleted. Finally, Kernell deleted a series of images that he had downloaded from the Palin email account.

Anonymity in Today's World

Author Cole Stryker wrote a book titled "Epic Win for Anonymous" that analyzes 4chan and all that it has impacted. He thoroughly explains all of the active terminology used on the website, and continues to talk about anonymity and the influence it has on the world. He goes on to say how in today's world you cannot live an anonymous life; he can't even go online to check the movie times without seeing all of his friend's opinions pop up. Outside of a few books that have been written on the concept of 4chan and Anonymous there is very little information on the philosophy of anonymity; the overall ideas and concepts that lay behind anonymity have not been widely discussed. There are however various artists and groups that incorporate anonymity into their work, some intentionally and some not.

On a different tangent I feel that it is important to direct the attention of the reader to the notion of anonymity in the art world. In my opinion anonymity plays the biggest role in art not as the subject, but rather a part of the medium... a vehicle for the medium if you will. We know of many famous artists such as Goldsworthy, and Banksy who have done amazing work in two completely different mediums. These two may be on opposite ends of the spectrum but they do have something in common. Once they are finished with an individual piece or project, they just leave it alone. They might document it personally by taking a few photographs, but other than that they let it be for the public to enjoy. They leave their art alone without taking credit for it. The idea of anonymous art in this sense is personally appealing to me. Often have I made a sculpture or design in a public place and left it for the world to take in. I will admit that I may stick around to observe the audience from afar, to give myself the satisfaction of taking in their pleasure. We should not let pleasure go too far, however.

I would like to direct my reader's attention to one of the largest problems facing our society today: drug addiction and alcoholism. Our society is slowly moving towards the idea that addiction and alcoholism are actually diseases of the mind. My point being the drugs are not the problem but rather the solution to an obsessed mind functioning on impulsive behavior. You may ask why I have brought you to look at this dilemma we face as a nation today. The answer to this question lies within the answer to another question; how do we treat the addict and alcoholic? Like any disease, sickness, or disability we feel most comfortable talking about it in a place where it will not affect our daily lives... a place where we can separate our healing from the world around us. Sound familiar? That's right, we heal best when we have a guarantee of anonymity. I do not live in a civilization where we are allowed to be "unknown". In some ways I wish that it was an option for my family and me, but it does not work like that. I believe that we should have this freedom. The programs and groups that I have spoken of are known as "Alcoholics Anonymous" and "Narcotics Anonymous" or AA and NA for short.

I would like to quote the Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book first from the beginning of Chapter 2 titled *There is a Solution*, "We are average Americans. All sections of this country and many of its occupations are represented, as well as many political, economic, social, and religious backgrounds. We are people who normally would not mix. But there exists among us a fellowship, friendliness, and an understanding, which is indescribably wonderful. We are like the passengers of a great liner the moment after rescue from shipwreck when camaraderie, joyousness and democracy pervade the vessel from steerage to Captain's table. Unlike the feelings of the ship's passengers, however, our joy in escape from disaster does not subside as we go our individual ways. The feeling of having shared in a common peril is one element in the powerful cement that binds us. But that in itself would never have held us together as we are now joined." It had been decided through the years that there is no greater power to combat alcoholism than that of one alcoholic helping another. AA has been and always will be the light at the end of the tunnel for the man still sick a suffering of this disease. I would also like to quote the *Twelfth Tradition* of AA that states, "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities." The man that struggles with these problems cannot solve them in a place where everyone around him will identify him. For this reason the principle of anonymity was set in place so the man would not have to bring back the shame, guilt, and embarrassment (that probably plagued his life) to his family and work. It is a simple concept, but for the program of AA and its members it has done wonders.

Conclusion

Anonymity is a concept that is to be taken with of a grain of salt... much like freedom of speech in some respects. Our society is afraid of anonymity, the idea that we cannot always understand the world around us, or the people in it. We are too quick to identify he who is responsible for the good or the bad. We are too quick to jump to conclusions and make rash generalizations about our fellow man. We are too quick... period. I say that we need to get our noses out of everyone's business and pay attention to our own labors and concerns. Above all we need to stand up to the government that is saying we should not have this right. Our country was founded on core beliefs that are being trampled today. I have a strong belief that we need to stand-up for our right live anonymously. Anonymity has more positives than negatives... but the day we give that up and are forced to put a label on all that exists is the day that we begin to live our lives under a microscope, our government watching our every move.