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Reconsidering Anonymity in the Age of Narcissism

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To all the names in history: The time has come to sacrifice that name.

—Anonymous (*Manifesto of the Anonymous Nomad*)

Ego & fame are by default, inherently contradictory to anonymity. The tallest blade of grass gets cut first. Remain unknown. Be #Anonymous.

—Anonymous (@YourAnonNews), April 16, 2012

The premise of this collection is that privacy and anonymity are vanishing under the onslaught of government and corporate surveillance. The premise is not a new one; in 2009 many advocates, activists, librarians, and civil libertarians were finding it impossible to imagine privacy and anonymity existing into the near future. This was a time when Silicon Valley executives were building the digital infrastructure of surveillance capitalism and defending it by casting privacy as morally dubious. For instance, when Google's Eric Schmidt was asked by a reporter whether we should entrust our data to them, his patronizing response was calculated to eliminate any positive valence to privacy: "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place."

But around that same time a mysterious collective bearing the name Anonymous came to prominence—a far-flung global protest movement predicated on the idea that cloaked identities could be put to work fighting for justice by enabling truth-telling and disabling celebrity-seeking behaviors. While initially used by nameless trolls coordinating one-off harassment escapades across the internet, the Anonymous moniker took on new meaning in 2008, as participants identifying with the label engaged in a staggering array of hacks and political operations designed for media uptake. Figures identifying as Anonymous used their technical know-how and trollish sense of media spectacle to call for a moratorium on Japanese and Norwegian whaling; demand justice for victims of sexual assault and police brutality, sometimes by revealing the names of alleged perpetrators; hack governments and corporations alike; assist the occupations in Egypt, Tunisia, Spain, and North America; support

the Syrian uprising; dox police officers who pepper-sprayed protesters; expose pedophiles online; and even provide clothing to the homeless. News outlets came to count on Anonymous for a steady stream of sensational stories. One affiliated crew called LulzSec devoted itself to delivering a new “hack-a-day” for fifty days. As they infiltrated Sony Pictures, published fake news on PBS’s website, and snatched emails from the Arizona Public Safety organization, they served up fodder to the press even as they gleefully self-reported their exploits on social media to a growing and satisfied fan base. “In the last few weeks these guys have picked up around 96,000 Twitter followers. That’s 20,000 more than when I looked yesterday. Twitter has given LulzSec a stage to show off on, and showing off they are,” wrote one security researcher. Anonymous managed to court even more controversy with ritualized stunts like “FUCK FBI FRIDAY,” which saw the hacktivists take to Twitter at the end of each week and taunt the agency tasked with snuffing its members out. For an anthropologist who studies the cultures of hacking and technology, it was an exhilarating moment; I was glued to my seat.

But as that exemplary moment passed, the story of Anonymous veered towards the ironic, and ultimately even tragic, as the core participants were betrayed and arrested, and the name began to lend itself to military operations—such as anti-terrorism campaigns in service of the nation-state—that many of its earlier members would have at times vehemently opposed. Given the omnivorous power of the contemporary digital surveillance machine to coax data from humans and then use it against us, I was never so naive as to actually believe that Anonymous could be our saviors. My take was humbler: I mostly marveled at the way these masked dissenters embraced anonymity as a sort of ethic to prevent social peacocking behaviors and to motivate participants into silent solidarity rather than individual credit-seeking, even as they were hounded, and sought collective publicity, for their epic hacks, pranks, and protests. It certainly helped that Anonymous contributed to a number of political causes I supported, such as Occupy Wall Street, the exposure of surveillance firms, and struggles against government corruption. I appreciated that groups of people were taking up the mantle of anonymity largely

for good—even if it seemed it might be for one last time before anonymity itself dissipated altogether.

My pessimism about the viability of anonymity and privacy to survive (much less thrive) still generally overpowers my optimism. But even as the glory days of Anonymous waned, a slightly more muscular privacy and anonymity movement finally coalesced. Thanks in part to Edward Snowden's massive leak of NSA documents, which provided much stronger proof of government surveillance and its collusion with the private sector than had previously existed, a battle to preserve privacy and anonymity is now being vigorously waged. Shortly after the Snowden disclosures, countless hacker-driven technology projects, galvanized by his exposé, continue to develop the sort of privacy-enhancing tools that journalists, domestic-violence victims, human-rights workers, and political dissidents now rely on to move through the world more securely. The usability of these tools has considerably improved. Whereas five years ago I struggled to recommend simple security tools to friends and family, today I can point to Signal (an encrypted texting and phone application), the Tor browser (which anonymizes web traffic), and half a dozen other applications, each of which has garnered increased funding and volunteers thanks to increased scrutiny of state and corporate privacy violations. Even Google announced that they would instantiate strict end-to-end encryption of its services to ensure the data it relies on to fuel its commercial enterprise would not be so easily available to others, though they've yet to carry out these changes. Existing policy, technology, and advocacy organizations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation, Fight for the Future, the Library Freedom Project, Big Brother Watch, and Privacy International have also helped ensure that privacy remains a marquee political issue. A steady stream of new scandals, such as the revelations that Cambridge Analytica used personal data harvested from Facebook to influence election results, has amplified these concerns, and demonstrated the extent to which questions about personal data and privacy remain very much unsettled.

As a member of a loose confederacy of anonymity-defenders, I routinely give lectures about the ways anonymity can enable democratic processes like

% of Internet Users Who Have Experienced Security-Related Issues

21%

▲ Have had an email or social-media account compromised

12%

▲ Have been stalked or harassed online

11%

▲ Have had important personal information stolen (*i.e.* SSN)

6%

▲ Have lost money as a result of an online scam

6%

▲ Have had their reputation damaged because of an online event

4%

▲ Have been led into physical danger because of an online event

dissent and whistleblowing. In the course of this proselytizing, it has become apparent that anonymity is often harder to defend than other closely related civil liberties like free speech and privacy. Anonymity gets a bad rap. And it's not difficult to see why: the most visible uses of anonymity online, like comments forums, tend towards the toxic. Numerous newspapers in recent years have eliminated these forums, reined them in, or reconfigured them, attentive to the ways they often fail to engender civil discourse and instead breed more hateful and harmful speech. Anonymity similarly enables trolls on social media to dodge accountability as they viciously attack (mostly) people of color, women, and the genderqueer.

The negative connotations that many have of anonymity is evident in their perception of what journalists and scaremongers call the dark web. When I ask my students what they think happens there, many describe it as the most sinister corner of the net, infested by menacing pervy types who hack bile onto our devices, festering and erupting into mini-volcanoes of stolen passports, cocaine, and child porn. Some even believe that being anonymous online is tantamount—in every instance—to trawling the dark web. The metaphor of darkness has clearly worked to implant nefarious and inaccurate pictures in their minds, so I counter with a different image.

Since my students have little understanding of how anonymity works, first I explain that, far from being a binary choice like a light switch that turns off and on, anonymity typically involves an assortment of options and gradients. Many people conceal themselves by name alone, contributing online with a screen name, alias, nickname, avatar, or no attribution at all: “anonymous.” This social anonymity concerns public attribution alone and shields a participant's legal name, while identifying information, like an IP address, may still be visible to a network observer such as the system administrator running the site where content is posted. There is also no single godlike anonymity tool providing omnipotent, unerring, dependable, goof-proof protection with the capacity to hide every digital track, scramble all network traffic, and envelop all content into a shell of encryption. Far from it: flawless technical anonymity is considered a demanding and exacting art that can occasion loss of sleep

for even the most elite hackers. A user seeking out technical anonymity must patch together an assortment of tools, and the end result will be a more or less sturdy quilt of protection determined by the tools and the skill of the user. Depending on which and how many tools are used, this quilt of protection might conceal all identifying information, or just some essential elements: the content of exchanged messages, an originating IP address, web browser searches, or the location of a server.

The same anonymity, I continue, used by the criminal or bully or harasser is also a “weapon of the weak,” relied on by ordinary people, whistleblowers, victims of abuse, and activists to express controversial political opinions, share sensitive information, organize themselves, provide armor against state repression, and build sanctuaries of support. Fortunately, there is no shortage of examples illuminating the benefits derived from the protection of anonymity: patients, parents, and survivors gather on internet forums like DC Urban Moms and Dads to discuss sensitive topics using aliases, allowing for frank discussions of what might otherwise be stigmatizing subjects. Domestic-abuse victims, spied on by their perpetrators, can technically cover their digital tracks and search for information about shelters with the Tor browser. Whistleblowers are empowered today to protect themselves like never before given the availability of digital dropboxes such as SecureDrop, located on what are called onion, or hidden, servers. These drop-off points, which facilitate the anonymous sharing of information, are now hosted by dozens of established journalism venues, from the *Guardian* to the *Washington Post*. Hosting data on onion servers accessible only via Tor is an effective mechanism to counter state-sponsored repression and censorship. For example, Iranian activists critical of the government shielded their databases by making them available only as onion services. This architecture makes it so the government can seize the publicly known web server, but cannot find the server providing the content from the database. When the web servers are disposable, the content is protected, and the site with information directed at empowering activists can reappear online quickly, forcing would-be government censors instead to play a game of whack-a-mole. Relying on a suite of anonymity

technologies, hacktivists can safely ferret out politically consequential information by transforming themselves into untraceable ghosts: for example, one group anonymously infiltrated white-supremacist chat rooms after the tragic murder of Heather Heyer and swiped the logs detailing the workings of hate groups organizing for the Charlottesville rally, as well as their vile reactions and infighting.

Still, it is true that terrible things can be accomplished under the cover of technical anonymity. But it is necessary to remember that the state is endowed with a mandate and is significantly resourced to hunt down criminals, including those emboldened by invisibility. For instance, in 2018 the FBI requested around 21.6 million of its \$8 billion annual budget for its Going Dark program, used to “develop and acquire tools for electronic device analysis, cryptanalytic capability, and forensic tools.” The FBI can develop or pay for pricey software exploits or hacking tools, which they’ve used to infiltrate and take over child porn sites, as they did in 2015 with a site called Playpen. Certainly, the state should have the ability to fight criminals. But if it is provided with unrestricted surveillance capabilities as part of that mission, citizens will lose the capacity to be anonymous and the government will creep into fascism, which is its own type of criminality. Activists, on the other hand, who are largely resource-poor, are often targeted unfairly by state actors and therefore require anonymity. Indeed, anonymity allows activists, sources, and journalists not yet targeted by the state to speak and organize, as is their right, without interference.

The importance, uses, and meaning of anonymity within an activist entity like Anonymous is less straightforward than my earlier examples. This might partly stem from the fact that Anonymous is confusing. The name is a shared alias that is free for the taking by anyone, what Marco Deseriis defines as an “improper name.” Radically available to everyone, such a label comes endowed with a built-in susceptibility to adoption, circulation, and mutation. The public was often unaware of who Anonymous were, how they worked, and how to reconcile their distinct operations and tactics. There were hundreds of operations that had no relation to each other and were often ideologically

out of alignment with each other—some firmly in support of liberal democracy, others seeking to destroy the liberal state in favor of anarchist forms of governance. It’s for this reason also that “Anonymous is not unanimous” became a popular quip among participants, reminding onlookers of the group’s decentralized, leaderless character and signaling the existence of disagreements over tactics and political beliefs.

For members of the public, as well as my students, their assessment of Anonymous often depended on their reaction to any one of the hundreds of operations they might have come across, their perception of the Guy Fawkes figure, and other idiosyncrasies like their take on vigilante justice or direct action. While some spectators adored their willingness to actually stick it to the man, others were horrified by their readiness to break the law with such impunity. Amid a cacophony of positions on Anonymous, I invariably encountered one category of person loath to endorse Anonymous: the lawful good type (academic law professors or liberal policy wonks, for instance), always skeptical and dismayed at the entirety of Anonymous because of a small number of vigilante justice operations carried out under its mantle. The strange thing was the way those lawful types found agreement with a smaller, but nevertheless vocal, class of left activists—those keen to support direct action maneuvers but full of reservations when they were carried out anonymously. They tended to agree on one particular belief: that people who embrace anonymity for the purposes of acting (and not simply speaking), especially when such actions skirt due process, are by default shady characters because anonymity tends to nullify accountability and thus responsibility; that the mask is itself a kind of incarnated lie, sheltering cowards who simply cannot be trusted and who are not accountable to the communities they serve.

But these arguments ignore the varied and righteous uses of anonymity that Anonymous put in service of truth-telling and social leveling. With the distance afforded by time, my conviction that Anonymous has generally been a trustworthy force in the world and commendable ambassador for anonymity is even stronger today. Even if their presence has waned, they’ve

left behind a series of lessons about the importance of anonymity that are as vital to heed as ever in the age of Trump. Of these lessons, I'll consider here the limits of transparency for combating misinformation and anonymity's capacity to protect truth-tellers, as well as its ability to minimize the harms of unbridled celebrity.

LESSON 1: TRANSPARENCY IS NOT A PANACEA FOR MISINFORMATION

Let's first consider the power of Anonymous and anonymity in light of the contemporary political climate, with journalists, commentators, and activists in a turbulent existential crisis over trust, truth, and junk news. Let me state from the outset that demanding transparency, in my political playbook, sits high on the list of expedient tactics that can help embolden democratic pursuits. Seeking transparency from people, corporations, and institutions that may have something bad to hide, and the clout to hide it, has worked in countless circumstances to shame con men and scumbags out of their coveted positions of power (and I resolutely defend anonymity for its ability to engender transparency). Still, the effectiveness of demanding transparency and truth has often been overstated, and its advocates sometimes naively attribute an almost magical faith to such a tactic while deeming the anonymous means to those same ends of truth-telling immoral. In the past, when I've discussed the importance of anonymity and the limits of demanding transparency in the pursuit of truth, very few people took me all that seriously besides a small group of scholars and activists already invested in making similar claims. All this changed when Donald Trump became president. Suddenly it was a lot easier to illustrate the logic behind Mark Twain's famous quip: "Truth is mighty and will prevail. There is nothing wrong with this, except that it ain't so."

Journalistic common sense, still largely intact leading up to the election, dictated that refuting falsehoods would preserve the integrity of the marketplace of ideas—the arena where truth, given enough airtime, can blot out lies. After Trump clinched the election, though, many journalists were forced to confront

the fact that common sense, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz so astutely put it, is “what the mind filled with presuppositions... concludes.” For critics, Trump’s moral failings are self-evident in his dastardly behavior and pathological lying, both of which have been recorded meticulously by journalists. *The Washington Post* has tracked Trump’s false or misleading statements since his first day in office, and found that his zeal for fibbing has only ballooned with time. However, though his supporters also discern Trump as audacious, they’re armed with a different set of presuppositions and therefore reach radically different conclusions about his character and actions. In the same *Washington Post* audit of Trump’s false statements, one online commenter shows how some of his defenders are willing to overlook his lies, interpreting him as authentic and emotionally forthcoming compared with the typical politician: “Trump is often hyperbolic and wears his feelings on his sleeve for all to see, refreshing some might say. One often wonders if it’s even possible for him to be as duplicitous as the typical politician. His heart and policies do seem to be in the right place.”

Appealing to those who distrust the contemporary political milieu, some of Trump’s staunchest supporters argue that he serves a higher, nobler purpose by shaking up the establishment. Even as common sense can “vary dramatically from one person to the next,” as Geertz put it, Trump has still managed to sequester our collective attention, baiting the media to cover his every move, often through a false yet convincing performance of authenticity. Whether in horror, amusement, or adulation, the American public stands together, beer in one hand, BBQ tongs in the other, mouths agape, mesmerized by his outrageously cocky antics. While some see the Trump presidency as an ungovernable slow-moving train wreck unfolding right before their eyes, others are clearly elated, cheering Trump on as if attending a monster truck rally. Trump is such an effective performer that he has not only managed to dodge any repercussions for his disturbingly brazen lying thus far, but also stands ready to accuse the establishment media of being liars: “I call my own shots, largely based on an accumulation of data, and everyone knows it. Some FAKE NEWS media, in order to marginalize, lies!” Under such a ruthless assault, truth struggles to prevail.

In contrast to Trump, Anonymous—a sprawling, semi-chaotic (though also fairly organized at times) string of collectives, composed of thousands of people and dozens of distinct groups acting in all four corners of the globe under its name, with loose to no coordination between many of them—comes across, in almost every regard, as a more earnest and trustworthy entity. While Trump helps us see this afresh, I’ve long made the following point: if one takes stock of the great majority of their operations after 2010, Anonymous generally followed a number of rather conventional scripts based on a drive to tell the truth. Anonymous would often pair an announcement about some indignation they sought to publicize with verifiable documents or other material. Such was the situation when Anonymous launched #OpTunisia in January 2011 and were some of the first outsiders to access and broadly showcase the protest videos being generated on the ground—footage they posted online to arouse public sympathy and spur media coverage. Anonymous routinely acquired emails and documents (and have, by the way, never been found to have doctored them) and published them online, allowing journalists to subsequently mine them for their investigations. Their drive to get the truth out there was also aided by splashy material engineered to go viral. Truth-telling, after all, can always benefit from a shrewder public relations strategy.

On occasion, Anonymous relied on the classic hoax—lobbing out a lie that in due time would be revealed as a fib to get to a higher truth. For instance, LulzSec hacked and defaced PBS in retaliation for its *Frontline* film on WikiLeaks, *WikiSecrets*, which drew the ire of LulzSec members who condemned the film for how it sensationalized and psychoanalyzed the “dark” inner life of Chelsea Manning, skirting the pressing political issues raised by Wikileaks’ release of diplomatic cables. Gaining access to the web server, the hackers implanted fake news about the whereabouts of two celebrity rappers. Featuring a boyish headshot of Tupac Shakur, head slightly cocked, sporting a backwards cap and welcoming smile, the title announced the scoop: “Tupac still alive in New Zealand.” It continued: “Prominent rapper Tupac has been found alive and well in a small resort

in New Zealand, locals report. The small town—unnamed due to security risks—allegedly housed Tupac and Biggie Smalls (another rapper) for several years. One local, David File, recently passed away, leaving evidence and reports of Tupac’s visit in a diary, which he requested be shipped to his family in the United States.” Although at first glance it may be unclear why, the defacement delivered a particularly potent political statement. While the fake article and hack caused quite a sensation in the global press, most journalists failed to address LulzSec’s criticism of the film’s shallow puffery. And yet LulzSec managed to force sensationalist coverage via its hack-hoax combo, instantiating through this back door their original critique of journalists’ tendencies to sensationalize news stories.

But in most cases, hoaxing was used sparingly and Anonymous simply amplified messages already being broadcast by other activists or journalists. For instance, one of their most famous operations, #OpSteubenville, concerned a horrific case of sexual assault by members of the high school football team in the small steel-factory town of Steubenville, Ohio. After the *New York Times* wrote an exposé detailing the case, Anonymous continued to hyperactively showcase developments around the Steubenville assault through videos and on Twitter, ensuring its visibility for months until two teenagers were found guilty of rape in March 2013.

Anonymous, like Trump, lured in both the public and the media with splashy acts of spectacle. But Anonymous came together not as a point of individual will to seek credit but as the convergence of a multitude of actors contributing to a multitude of existent social movements, collectives, and organizations. Anonymous flickered most intensely between 2011 and 2015, during a tumultuous period of global unrest and discontent, evident in a range of large-scale popular uprisings across the world: the 15-M movement in Spain, the Arab and African Springs, the Occupy encampments, the student movement in Chile, Black Lives Matter, and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. Anonymous contributed to every one of these campaigns. Their deep entanglement with some of these broader social causes has been commemorated by many who worked with or benefited from Anonymous. In 2011, a photo was shared of

Tunisian children sitting in their school's courtyard, donning white paper cutout Guy Fawkes masks, a gesture of gratitude to Anonymous for bringing the message of their plight to the world. More recently, consider the untimely death of Erica Garner, an anti-police brutality activist and the daughter of Eric Garner, a man who died at the hands of a NYPD officer. Not long after her passing, the person fielding her Twitter account paid their respects to Anonymous: "Shout out to Anonymous... One of the first groups of people that held Erica down from jump street. She loved y'all for real #opicantbreathe."

The point of juxtaposing Trump's lying with Anonymous's truth-telling is merely to highlight that transparency and anonymity rarely follow a binary moral formula, with the former being good and the latter being bad. There are many con men, especially in the political arena, who speak and lie without a literal mask—Donald Trump, Silvio Berlusconi, George W. Bush, Tony Blair—and are never properly held accountable, or it requires a David and Goliath-like effort to eliminate them from power. Indeed, Trump, acting out in the open, is perceived to be "transparent" because he is an individual who doesn't hide behind a mask and, for some, an honest politician for having the bravado to say anything, no matter how offensive. (For some, the more offensive the better.) As sociologist Erving Goffman suggested long ago, humans—so adept at the art of deception—deploy cunning language and at times conniving performance, rather than hiding, for effective misleading.

LESSON 2: THE SHIELD OF ANONYMITY

Transparency can be achieved through existing institutional frameworks, whether by accessing public records, such as using the Freedom of Information Act, or by using the watchdog function of the Fourth Estate. But when these methods fail, anonymous whistleblowing can be an effective mechanism for getting the truth out. Support for this position is cogently articulated in the 1995 Supreme Court case *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission*, which argues that anonymity safeguards the voter, the truth-teller, and even the unpopular opinionator from government retribution or the angry masses of the body

DATA % of Voters in April 2018 Who Believed that Trump Tells the Truth All or Most of the Time MCS54 0209

REPUBLICANS ▶

76%

INDEPENDENTS ▶

22%

DEMOCRATS ▶

5%

4,229

◀ Number of false or misleading claims Trump made during his first 558 days in office. At least 122 of those claims have been repeated three times or more.

Average number of false or misleading claims per day. ▶

7.6

politic. The judges of said case wrote, “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... at the hand of an intolerant society.” To signal their awareness of and contribution to this tradition, Anonymous participants are fond of quoting Oscar Wilde: “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.”

One of the most striking and effective examples that bears out the Supreme Court’s rationale and Oscar Wilde’s aphorism involves a face mask donned by a medical doctor. In 1972, a psychiatrist presenting at an American Psychiatric Association meeting concealed himself with a voice distorter, pseudonymous name, and rubber mask. Going by Dr. H. Anonymous, and serving on a panel called “Psychiatry: Friend or Foe to Homosexuals?” the doctor opened by confessing: “I am a homosexual. I am a psychiatrist.” At the time, homosexuality had been classified by psychiatry as an illness, making it particularly impervious to critique. This bold and gutsy revelation accomplished what Dr. H. Anonymous and his allies had set out to do: re-embolden ongoing efforts to de-pathologize homosexuality. Only a year later, the APA removed homosexuality from its diagnostic manual and Dr. H. Anonymous, who had feared he would not receive academic tenure if his employer found out he was gay, remained protected (and employed), only making his name public twenty-two years later as John E. Fryer.

Many other individuals and groups have spoken and acted truthfully undercover in an attempt to expose some abuse or crime and used anonymity to shield themselves not only from peers, colleagues, or employers, as Dr. Fryer did, but from government retribution. Anonymous, Antifa, Chelsea Manning (during her short tenure as an anonymous leaker), Deep Throat (the anonymous source in the Watergate scandal), and the Citizens’ Commission to Investigate the FBI—all of whom have commanded some measure of respect from their words and actions alone, not their legal identities—have delivered transparency that was deemed valuable regardless of their perceived unaccountability or opacity. In the exposure of egregious government wrongdoing, anonymity

has the potential to make the risky act of whistleblowing a bit safer. Such was the case with the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI, a group of eight anti-war crusaders who broke into an FBI field office in 1971 and left with crates of files containing proof of COINTELPRO, a covert surveillance and disinformation program levied against dozens of activist movements. The program was eventually shut down after being deemed illegal by the United States government and the intruders were never apprehended. Had these citizens been caught—the FBI dedicated two hundred agents to the case but, failing to find even one of the intruders, gave up in 1976—their fate would have most likely included a costly legal battle followed by time behind bars.

Tragically, people who have spoken unveiled have, at times, been exposed to grave harm and mudslinging. Being honest and transparent, especially when you lack supporters and believers, puts you at risk of a traumatic loss of privacy and, as in the case of Chelsea Manning, physical safety. After being outed by a hacker, Manning was tortured for one year in solitary confinement for her whistleblowing. Former American gymnast Rachael Denhollander, one of the first who dared to call out Larry Nassar, the medical doctor for the U.S. Olympic gymnastics team who sexually assaulted over 260 young women, explained in an op-ed that her life and reputation were ruined for speaking out until the tide began to shift: "I lost my church. I lost my closest friends as a result of advocating for survivors who had been victimized by similar institutional failures in my own community. I lost every shred of privacy." All these examples call to mind the adage "privacy for the weak, transparency for the powerful." Anonymity can fulfill a prescription for transparency by protecting truth-tellers from retaliation.

LESSON 3: EGO CONTAINMENT AND THE HARMS OF UNBRIDLED CELEBRITY

The rejection by Anonymous of cults of personality and celebrity-seeking is the least understood driver for anonymity, yet one of the most vital to understand. The workings of anonymity under this register function less as a truth-telling device and more as a method for social leveling. Unless you followed

Anonymous closely, this ethos was harder to glean, as it was largely visible only in the backchannels of their social interactions—in private or semi-private chat rooms with occasional bursts on Twitter, such as this tweet by @FemAnonFatal:

• FemAnonFatal is a Collective • NOT an individual movement
NOT a place for self-promotion NOT a place for HATE BUT a
place for SISTERHOOD It Is A place to Nurture Revolution Read
Our Manifesto... • You Should Have Expected Us • #FemAnon-
Fatal #OpFemaleSec

Of course, it's much easier to utter such lofty pronouncements about solidarity than it is to actually implement them. But Anonymous enforced this standard by punishing those who stepped out into the limelight seeking fame and credit. In my many years of observing them, I've witnessed the direct consequences for those who violated this norm. If a novice participant was seen as pining for too much praise from peers, he might be softly warned and chided. For those that dared to append their legal name to some action or creation, the payback was fiercer. At minimum, the transgressor was usually ridiculed or lambasted, with a few individuals ritually "killed off" by being banned from a chat room or network.

Along with punctuated moments of disciplinary action, this norm tended to mostly hum along quietly in the background, but no less powerfully—mandating that everything created under the aegis of Anonymous be attributed to the collective. It's worth stating that, in contrast to their better-known outlaw-hacker compatriots, most Anonymous participants were maneuvering in unambiguously legal territory; those who conjured up compelling messages of hope, dissent, or protest through media like video, snappy manifestos, images, or other clever calls to arms engineered to go viral were not incentivized to anonymity by legal punishment. Moreover, the ethical decree to sublimate personal identity had teeth: participants generally refrained from signing their legal names to these works, some of which surged into prominence, receiving hundreds of thousands of views

on YouTube. While a newcomer may have submitted to this decree out of fear of punishment, most participants came to embrace this ethos as a strategy necessary to the broader goals of minimizing human hierarchy and maximizing human equality.

Observing this leashing of the ego was eye-opening. The sheer difficulty of living out this credo revealed itself in practice. As an anthropologist, my methodological duty mandates some degree of direct participation. Most of my labor with Anonymous consisted of journalistic translation work, but on a few occasions I joined small groups of media-makers to craft punchy messages for videos designed to rouse people to action. As an academic writer estranged from the need for pithiness, I recall glowing with pride at the compact wording I once cobbled together to channel the collective rage about some gross political injustice or another. Resisting even a smidgen of credit for the feat was difficult at the time, but in the long run it was satisfying, providing grounds on which to do it again. Still, it not only went against what I've been taught by society, but also the mode of being an academic—someone whose livelihood depends entirely on a well-entrenched, centuries-old system that allots respect based on individual recognition. As the self-named author of this piece, I'd be a hypocrite to advocate a full moratorium on personal attribution. But when a moral economy based on the drive for individual recognition expands to such an extent that it crowds out other possibilities, we can neglect, to our collective peril, other essential ways of being and being with others.

One of the many dangers of unchecked individualism or celebrity is the ease with which it transforms into full-blown narcissism, a personality trait that most obviously forecloses mutual aid, as it practically guarantees some level of interpersonal chaos, if not outright carnage in the form of vitriol, bullying, intimidation, and pathological lying. Trump, again, can serve as a handy reference, as he comes to stand for an almost platonic ideal of narcissism in action. His presidency has demonstrated that an unapologetic solipsism can act as a sort of distortion lens, preventing the normal workings of transparency, truth, shaming, and accountability by offering an aloofness

so complete that it seems almost incapable of contemplating the plight of others or admitting a wrong. And in Trump's ascendancy lies a far more disturbing and general lesson to contemplate: that landing one of the most powerful political positions in one of the most powerful nations in the world is possible only because such celebrity-seeking behaviors are rewarded in many aspects of our society. Many dominant cultural ideals enjoin us to seek acknowledgment—whether for our deeds, words, or images. Although celebrity as an ideal is by no means new, there are endless and proliferating avenues at our disposal on the internet to realize, numerically register (in likes and retweets), and thus consolidate and further normalize fame as a condition of everyday living.

To be sure, narcissism and celebrity are far from unchecked. For instance, Trump's conceited, self-aggrandizing traits are subject today to savage critique and analysis by a coterie of pundits, journalists, and other commentators. Even if celebrity is a durable, persistent, and ever-expanding cultural ideal, humility is also valorized. This is true in religious life most obviously, but a bevy of mundane, everyday ethical proscriptions also seek to curb the human ego's appetite for glory and gratification. Something as minor as the acknowledgments section of a book works—even if ever so slightly—to rein in the egoistic notion that individuals are entirely responsible for the laudable creations, discoveries, or works of art attributed to them. After all, it's an extended confession and moment of gratitude to acknowledge that such writing would be impossible, or much worse, if not for the aid of a community of peers, friends, and family. But tales that celebrate solidarity, equality, mutual aid, and humility are rarer. And scarcer still are social mandates where individuals are called upon to hone the art of self-effacement. Anonymous is likely one of the largest laboratories, open to many, to carry out a collective experiment in curtailing the desire for individual credit, encouraging ways to connect with our peers through commitments to indivisibility.

While anonymity can incentivize all sorts of actions and behaviors, in Anonymous's case it meant many of the participants were there for reasons of principle. Their principled quest to right the wrongs inflicted on people

embodies the spirit of altruism. Their demand for humility helped to discourage, even if it did not fully eliminate, those participants who simply sought personal glory by joining the group's ranks. Volunteers, compelled into crediting Anonymous, also kept in check a problem plaguing all kinds of social movements: the self-nomination of a rock star or leader, propelled into stardom by the media, whose reputational successes and failures can often unfairly serve as proxy for the rise and fall of the movement writ large. If such self-promotion becomes flagrant, strife and infighting typically afflict social dynamics, which in turn weakens the group's power to effectively organize. The already limited energy is diverted away from campaigns and instead wasted on managing power-hungry individuals.

It's dangerous to romanticize anonymity as virtuous in and of itself. Anonymity online combined with bad-faith actors—pathological abusers, criminals, and collective hordes of trolls—enables behavior with awful, sometimes truly terrifying consequences. Anonymity can aid and abet cruelty even as it can engender nobler moral and political ends—it depends on context. Taking stock of Anonymous's fuller history illustrates this duality. Prior to 2008, the name Anonymous had been used almost exclusively for the purpose of internet trolling—a practice that often amounts to targeting people and organizations for harassment, desecrating reputations, and revealing humiliating or personal information. Having myself been a target in 2010 of a (thankfully unsuccessful) trolling attack, I was thrilled—even if quite surprised—at the dramatic conversion process Anonymous underwent between 2008 and 2010 as they began to troll the powerful, eventually combining the practice with more traditional vocabularies and repertoires for protest and dissent.

As they parted ways with pure trolls, what remained the same was a commitment to anonymity, used for different ends under different circumstances. Still, a number of Anonymous's operations serving the public interest, such as the wholesale dumping of emails that breached people's privacy, were carried out imperfectly and are worthy of condemnation. These imperfect

operations should not nullify the positive aspects that the group achieved through anonymity, but should nevertheless be criticized for their privacy violations and used as examples for improving their methods.

Preventing the state from stamping out anonymity requires strong rationales for its essential role in safeguarding democracy. In defending anonymity, it is difficult to simply argue, much less prove, that the good it enables outweighs its harms, as the social outcomes of anonymity are hard to tally. Notwithstanding the difficulties in measurement, history has shown that nation-states with unchecked surveillance power drift toward despotism and totalitarianism. Citizens under watch, or simply under the threat of surveillance, live in fear of retribution and are discouraged from individually speaking out, organizing, and breaking the law in ways that keep states and corporations accountable.

Unequivocally defending anonymity in such a way doesn't make all uses of anonymity by citizens acceptable. When assessing the social life of anonymity, one must also ask a series of questions: What is the anonymous action? What people, causes, or social movements are being aided? Is it punching up or down? All of these factors clarify the stakes and the consequences of using the shield of anonymity. It invites solutions for mitigating some of its harms instead of demanding anonymity's elimination entirely. Technologists can redesign digital platforms to prevent abuse, for example by enabling the reporting of offending accounts. Recognizing anonymity's misuse is why we also ensure limited law enforcement capacity to de-anonymize those who are using cover for activities society has deemed unconscionable, like child pornography. As it stands now, the state commands vast resources, in the form of money, technology, and legitimacy, for effective law enforcement. To additionally call for ending strong encryption, adding back doors for government access, or banning anonymity

Tor Addresses for Sending Anonymous Tips
 △ DATA
 The New Yorker icpozbs6r6yrwt67.onion
 The Guardian 33y6fjyhs3phzfjj.onion
 The New York Times nyttips4bmquxftzw.onion
 The Intercept intrcept32ncblef.onion

tools—something the FBI often does—is to call for the unacceptable elimination of the many legitimate uses of anonymity.

In spite of these justifications, it is difficult to defend anonymity when some people have only an inchoate sense of anonymity's connection to democratic processes, or see no need for anonymity at all, and others see it only as a magnet for depraved forms of criminality, cowardice, and cruelty. I was reminded of this very point recently after running into one of my former students while traveling. Surprised to recognize me in the group with whom she was about to go scuba diving, she gleefully identified me by subject of study: "You're the hacker professor!" A few hours later, as we climbed out of a small skiff, she asked me unprompted to remind her of my arguments against the common dismissal of privacy and anonymity on the grounds of the speaker "having nothing to hide." I chuckled, given that my mind was occupied with these very questions as I was puzzling through this article, and rattled off a number of the arguments explored here. I'm unsure whether the precise arguments escaped her because years had elapsed, because my lecture was boring, or because the merits of anonymity are counterintuitive to many; likely it was some combination of all three. Regardless, I was pleased that she even had the question on her mind.

It was a reminder that, at a time when examples of anonymous actors working for good aren't readily available in the news, as they were during the days of Anonymous, those of us attempting to salvage anonymity's reputation need to put forward compelling tales of moral good enabled by anonymity, rather than exploring it only as some abstract concept, righteous on its own, independent of context. Anonymous remains an exemplary case study to that aim. Aside from using the shield for direct action and dissent, for seeking truth and transparency, Anonymous has also provided a zone where the recalibration of credit and attribution has been not just discussed but truly enacted. In doing so, Anonymous provided asylum from the need to incessantly vie for personal attention, becoming notorious while tempering individual celebrity, and yet still managed to fight injustice with spectacle, all while standing anonymously as one. ●

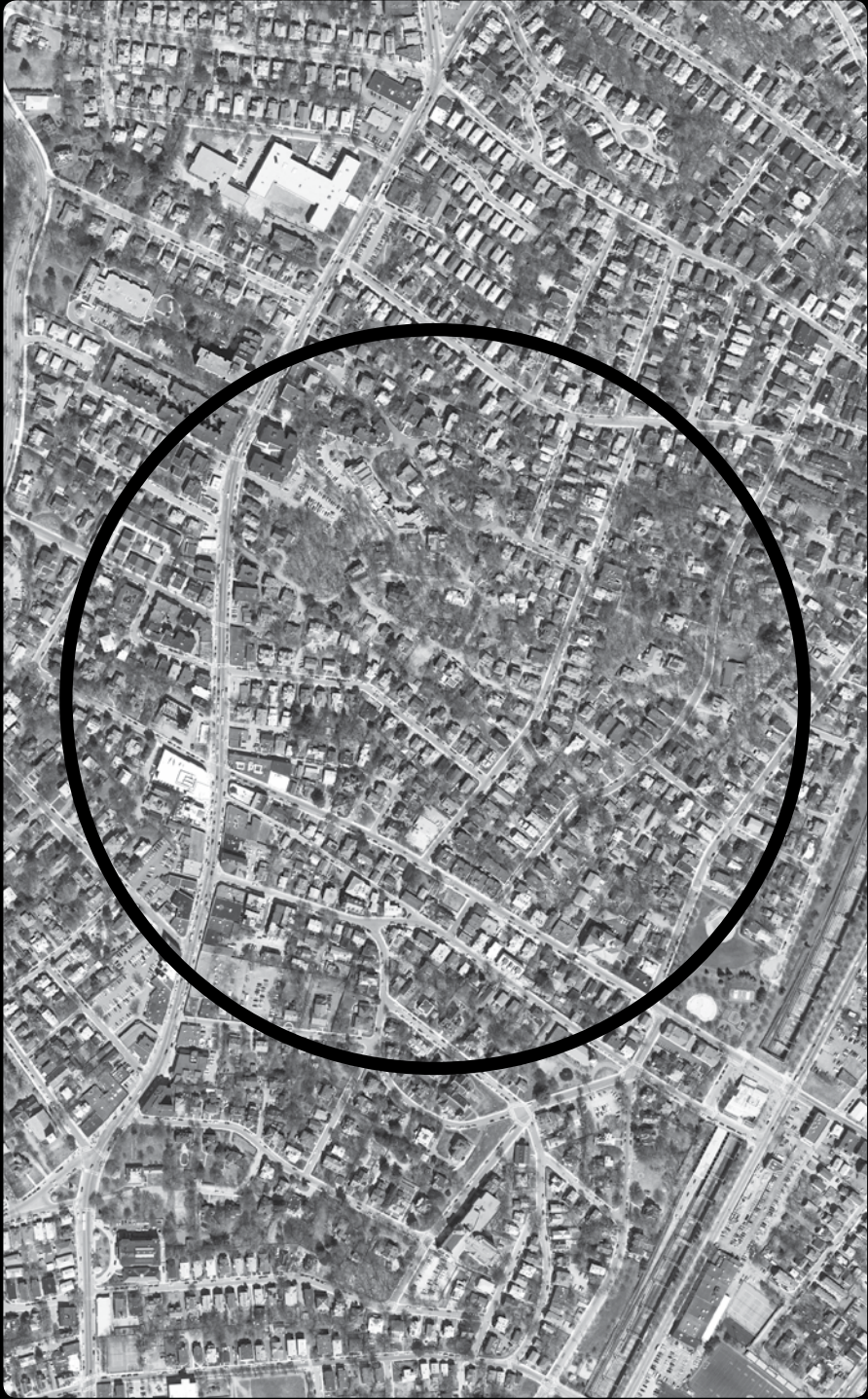


Photo: USGS

Jamaica Plain, MA.