

The Spectre of Anonymity – Seda Guerses

"Anonymity is our first line of defence."

Professor Xavier, *XMEN: First Class*

Anonymity is a powerful concept and strategy. It transgresses concepts like authorship, the original, and the origin, and presents itself across important elements of our lives like songs, poems, oral histories, urban legends, conspiracy theories, and chain mails. For centuries anonymity has been a strategy used by communities to articulate their collective voice. This definition is linked to an understanding of anonymity as it relates to individual autonomy, and yet, it shifts the focus from its individual use to its collective effect. Anonymously produced statements or artefacts have expressed the cultural practices, beliefs and norms of the past, while creating a space in which future collectives can manifest themselves.

Anonymity allows the individual to melt into a body of many, to become a pluralistic one, for which communicating a message is more important than the distinction of the participating individual(s). Whether at a demonstration or a football match, the power of the anonymous collective produces a field of protection and cohesion around its participating individuals. And yet, the seemingly unbreakable bond can be fragile, since participation is fluid; individuals and groups enter and leave as they please; and, the organisation of the anonymous collective is distributed. The anonymous perseveres only as long as the common line is held. This volatility is also what distinguishes anonymous groups from other collective bodies.

Anonymity is always a means, never an end in itself. Hence, it can be utilised in multiple ways for a variety of purposes. For example, a centrally organised form of anonymity can be found with the uniformed soldiers of a brigade or managers of a corporation -- the latter also known as the "anonymous limited".[2] In organised anonymity, participation is mandatory and actions are heavily controlled. The objective is still to protect, but not necessarily the participating individuals, who are often consumed in the process. Control mechanisms are there to utilise the anonymous group to reify existing power hierarchies, e.g., the state, the nation, or the shareholders, and to render divergences from this goal impossible.

Anonymity, in its more fluid, and in its more centrally organised form, when used as a strategy in networked systems like the Internet, operates similarly. As in the physical world, it manifests itself in various mechanisms for a multitude of ends and hence, has different potentials and limitations.

The Internet and Anonymity

The power of anonymity in Internet communication has long been recognised by computer scientists and hackers. 'Anonymous communications' technologies -- of which Tor is a popular implementation -- strip messages of any information that could be used to trace them back to their senders, so that individual communication partners are not distinguishable within a set. Observers can see that members of the set are communicating, but cannot distinguish who is communicating with whom, so that individuals in the set are protected against any negative repercussions resulting from disclosure.

Anonymous communications are designed to circumvent the traceability of interactions on the Internet. Its architecture makes it possible to trace all messages, online actions, and other 'data bodies' to their origins, their individual authors in physical space and time; and also to collect, scrutinise, dissect, reconfigure, and re-use these data bodies. By masking the origin, anonymous communications channels protect the individuals who author (be it intentionally or unintentionally) these data bodies.

Despite the diversity of the groups and communities using anonymous communications, such technologies are usually cast in a negative light in policy papers and in the media. Anonymous communication infrastructures are generally perceived as providing channels for criminal activity or enabling deviant behaviour. It seems, what bothers authorities the most is not anonymity as such, but rather the characteristics of the user base and the distributed nature of anonymous communications. This becomes evident in the keen interest that data miners and regulators have in a centralised form of anonymity applied to large databases, a strategy that fits squarely with the interests of the growing data economy.

The Market, Governance and Anonymity

We are currently in the midst of an economic hype driven by data. The ideology behind this hype suggests that the data collected is going to make the behaviour of populations more transparent, easier to organise, control, and predict. Data collected en masse is expected to reveal to their collectors ways of improving the efficiency of markets as well as their systems of governance. Improvement comes through mastering the application of statistics to the gathered data sets.

Massively collected, all-encompassing data sets are expected to reveal ways of improving market efficiency and systems of governance, by applying methods of statistical analysis to these data sets and inferring knowledge from these statistics. According to behavioural advertisers and service providers, these data sets are becoming 'placeholders' for understanding populations and allowing organisations to provide them with refined individualised services. In the process,

elaborate statistical inferences replace 'subjective' discussions, reflections or processes about societal needs and concerns, as the data has come to speak for itself.

Hence, in this ideology, the promise of control and efficiency lies in data and the processing power of its beholders. However, the collection and processing of such mass amounts of data about consumers or citizens is historically and popularly coupled with a 'privacy problem'. It has been commonly understood that addressing this issue requires limiting the power these organisations can exercise when using this data. These constraints need to hold as long as the people to which the data in a given database relate are uniquely identifiable. It is in this series of reductions of the problem that the data players discover anonymity for their own ends. The database is to be manipulated in such a way that the link between any data body included in the data set and its individual 'author' is concealed, while the usefulness of the data set as a whole is preserved. If this is somehow guaranteed, then the dataset is declared 'anonymised', and it becomes fair game. Inferences can be made freely from the data set as a whole, while ideally no individual participant can be targeted.

This approach of massaging data before it becomes mature for release is not only endorsed by data miners, but also reinforced by regulation. The European Data Protection Directive excludes anonymised data sets from its scope [1]. If the database is anonymised, then the data is set free. This free flow of data is then only constrained by the markets, in line with one of the principle objectives of the same Directive.

The Surrogates to Anonymity

What is common to anonymity on the Internet and elsewhere is the breaking of the link between the original author(s) and the message. This is an important element of anonymity as a communication strategy. Once the message is released, it is likely to be subverted and reclaimed by others. This is one of the charms of the fluid anonymous message: any individual or group can claim it as their own. But when a group subverts the message to negate all other linkages and continuities, monopolising the interpretation of the message's senders, destination, and content, the relationship between 'the anonymous' and the message can become vulnerable.

An example of this kind of dynamic at work, can be seen in Adela Peeva's film "Whose is this song?" [2]. In the documentary, Peeva searches across the Balkans for the origins of an anonymous folk song. In each country or region that she visits the song changes, becoming a love song, a song of piety, a song about a girl from the village behind the hills, or even a war song. However, with every variation, the question about the song unravels a chorus of claims about its authentic origins. In each claim, the song is cut anew from its traveling past. It is

extorted and burdened with carrying the truths of a national past and with shaping the future identity of the referred community in barely subtle archetypes: from the young Turks to amorous Greeks, from proud Albanians to pious Bosnians, from debauch Serbians to superstitious Gypsies, all the way to unwincing Bulgarians.

Peeva's film captures a dilemma that can be associated with any anonymous action or artefact. Anonymity allows for the articulation of a collective message that can travel without the burdens of authorship and origin. However, this void is easily filled when a group, community, or organisation claims and bends the message to suit its own interpretation of the past and future. The message is then fixed, and its interpretation is monopolised. This happens because anonymity frees the message and, hence, inevitably leaves it up for grabs.

If this is the case, the message could even be used to shape the story of the anonymous community that created the message. The anonymous message may boomerang back to hit its authors, often as a collective. The hijacking of popular uprisings by a few that establish their power, the re-writing of folk songs into chauvinistic hymns, the utilisation of anonymous cyber- actions to introduce draconian security measures are examples of such de-contextualised anonymous messages.

In the data economy, the anonymised data set is fashioned as a digital mirror of populations' activities and tendencies. The organisations that hold a monopoly over these data sets get to assert their own categories of desired and undesired activities as it is seen fit to improve the markets and forms of governance. Since the data in such data sets cannot be directly linked to individuals, privacy is claimed to be intact. Since the data sets are anonymised, the targeted populations cannot expect answers to their questions about the quality, intensity, and use of this data for or against them.

Continuity, Articulation and Anonymity

Given its historical persistence, anonymity appears to be here to stay. It is hence not surprising that this viral strategy replicates itself on the Internet. In its most powerful and at times even heroic moments, it is used to counter targeted surveillance by creating collective protection around individuals. Yet, we also need to recognise that the same strategy is concurrently used to create discrete, de-contextualised, and yet linked data sets, which are imminent to the data economy.

This economy based on data fetish leads to bizarre collections. We now have gargantuan databases of "friends" who "rate" information to their "like"-ing from which our interests, desires, opinions, and soft spots can be inferred. The anonymisation of these databases is not done to protect the participants of these

data sets -- never mind that even in their sophisticated forms these anonymisation techniques provide no formal guarantees [3]. Rather, the strategy is used to disempower their subjects from understanding, scrutinising, and questioning the ways in which these data sets are used to organise and affect their access to resources and connections to a networked world. While we should continue to savour anonymity as a strategy to protect individuals on the Internet, we should reject its reincarnation as an instrument for creating discontinuity between the context in which these data sets were authored and the contexts in which they get used, with the intention to manage and manipulate our lives.

Anonymity will remain a powerful means to achieve political objectives and disseminate collective messages. Hence, the technical instantiation of anonymous communications, must be a fundamental function of our networks. However, especially in political contexts, the vulnerability of the anonymous requires that multiple strategies are available. Different communication channels can be used to create a continuity with activities that are initiated anonymously: these can be political statements that are explicit, precise, courageous, and authored that build on the power of anonymous messages.

[1] European Union (1995). Data Protection Directive (Directive 95/46/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 October 1995 on the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data).

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[lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:31995L0046:en:HTML](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:31995L0046:en:HTML)
(accessed March 15, 2012)

[2] A recent article in *The Economist* states, "In dozens of jurisdictions, from the British Virgin Islands to Delaware, it is possible to register a company while hiding or disguising the ultimate beneficial owner."

The Economist, "Corporate Anonymity: Light and Wrong", Jan 21st 2012:

<http://www.economist.com/node/21543164> (accessed March 15, 2012) [name of author not given in on-line issue]

[2] Adela Peeva, Dir. *Whose Is This Song?*, film, 2003

[3] Arvind Narayanan and Vitaly Shmatikov "Myths and Fallacies of 'Personally Identifiable Information'", *Communications of the ACM* vol.53, issue. 6, 2010