

Silencing the Clatter: Removing Anonymity from a Corporate Online Community

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As we assess the impact of various forms of arrangements in online settings, one crucial question is how anonymity impacts the discussion. This chapter describes a closed intra-corporate message-board community, which upon establishment allowed anonymous participation, but at a certain point, following a managerial decision, enforced identity exposure. The policy change is analyzed through an examination of participation and discussion style, workers and management attitudes, and employee-employer relationships. The case illuminates issues of privacy in the face of both managers and coworkers, revealing the power of online anonymity policy to facilitate or inhibit open discussion in a community.

1 Privacy in the Information Age

Privacy encompasses a wide range of beliefs as to what this concept means in different contexts. In terms of personal information exposure, the definition of privacy has developed over many years from 'the right to be let alone' (Warren and Brandeis 1890), to the right to control one's information disclosure, 'with only extraordinary exceptions in the interest of society' (Westin 1967). In the recent years, intricate variations of information privacy ideas have evolved, regarding individuals' expectations for:

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fairness of use and control over personal information; anonymity when surfing the web; and confidentiality of communicating parties (Berman and Mulligan 1999).

The evolution of the definition of information privacy implies how charged this issue is, caused in part by constantly increasing surveillance capabilities. Present communication systems are no longer private: from cell phones to electronic messaging systems, transactional data is collected, stored, and can later be accessed, analyzed, and shared (Dempsey 1997). Berman and Bruening suggest that privacy today means the protection of the individual's autonomy as it relates to collecting and using personal information, particularly by the government (2001). As surveillance tools become pervasive and standard practices involve personal data collection, keeping individuals unreachable is a great challenge and requires a change in public awareness (Nissenbaum 1999).

One way to consider authority-individual relationships referring to privacy is by looking at a workplace setting, translating this relationship to that of employer-employee. While it is important to protect employees' privacy, the employer also has the right "to do what is necessary to earn profits" (King 1994). Employers are armed with tools capable of collecting information about their employees' web surfing and email transactions, and there are different views as to whether employers should use these tools (Koprowski 1997). Even employees share diverse views regarding the types of information they tolerate their employers to monitor or prefer to keep private (Edmonds and Braasch 2001).

2 Online Anonymity

Whether in an organization or in the World-Wide-Web, online privacy refers to individuals' control over the degree to which their identities are exposed. The two extremes of exposure are complete identification versus complete anonymity. Providing complete anonymity allows communicators to decide which pieces of their identity to expose. Alternatively, knowing the identity of one's interlocutor not only is essential for understanding and evaluating the interaction, but also plays a role in motivating people to participate in the discussion (Donath 1999). Consequently, when identity is concealed, people learn about their interlocutors from such cues as writing style and the ways they interact with others in the online environment.

The value of online anonymity is by providing a safe basis upon which individuals feel free to participate and express thoughts, and at the same time lessening ridicule and embarrassment (Nissenbaum 1999). This perspective suggests that the Internet as a communication medium must allow its users the right to remain anonymous online (Oakes 1999). Conversely,

online anonymity might as well result in detrimental consequences. The main risk of anonymity is the loss of accountability, so that those responsible for any misconduct cannot be identified and brought to justice (Wallace 1999). The price may be, as Davenport suggests, an incremental breakdown of the fabric of society (2002). In discussing the tradeoffs of anonymity and accountability, scholars suggest that the online context should be carefully analyzed for making decisions about anonymity policy (Teich et al. 1999).

To understand the role of anonymity, an empirical approach requires identifying online discussion venues, and analyzing the effects of their anonymity policy on various aspects of the discussion. However, real settings often deviate from the stereotype of an online site with a stable policy and participants from all over the globe. The case described in the following section deviates from this ideal in two ways. First, it presents an online community within a workplace, meaning that online discussants may actually be colleagues. Second, the online anonymity policy was changed at a certain point of time, requiring the community to adjust accordingly. These deviations highlight the role of anonymity policy in facilitating online deliberation.

3 The Young and Fresh Community

Located in a high-tech corporate intranet, *The Young and Fresh* is a message-board-style website, comprised of various discussion boards called *forums*. The forums are all non-work related topic threads, discussing topics such as items for sale, recipes, sports, and so forth. Unlike other communities in the company targeting subsets of workers on a professional basis, this community aims to meet the needs of a few thousand company workers distributed across a few campuses. Workers use the forums to publish announcements, ask questions and receive answers, and share thoughts and opinions. A worker who accesses a forum sees on a webpage a listing of all the recent messages with their responses, including title, content, poster name, and posting date and time.

One factor that impacts *The Young and Fresh's* activity is that the company's intranet is an isolated network: Workers cannot access the Internet from their desktops inside the company's sites, and the intranet cannot be accessed from outside. This makes *The Young and Fresh* a closed community, and the only venue to communicate online with others about non-work issues during the workday.

The Anonymity Policy Change

The Young and Fresh community was launched in December 2002 with all its forums being anonymous. Each message included a text field into which

writers could type any name, or leave it blank. The typed name was then attached to the message displayed in the forum. However, postings were not truly anonymous. All postings were saved in a database server with their posters' logged-in user names. The community moderator and few system administrators had direct access to the posters' identities. Despite this caveat, I use the term 'anonymous forum' to indicate this form of communication, in which anonymity existed in the face of the majority of workers who accessed the forums as ordinary members.

During the second half of 2003, following a series of personal defamations, sexual allusions, and blatant commercial advertisements, the company's management began deliberating on ways to cope with the new troubling phenomenon, not observed before in any of the online communities in the intranet. They considered alternatives such as leave the community as is, hoping for it to quiet down by itself, or shut down the community entirely. The final decision, led by the Chief Knowledge Officer, was to remove anonymity from newly posted messages in the forums. With the new practice, administered in October 2003 on eleven forums, the name of the poster is automatically attached to every message, consisting of the worker's first and last name, retrieved from the database according to the login user name.

Only one forum, titled *Just Talking*, remained anonymous. The management chose to permit anonymity in *Just Talking* as it frequently carries political debates and complaints against the management. The management decided that this would allow workers to safely expose their opinions, but that the anonymity will remain only as long as language is properly used.

Before and After: Participation Patterns

Immediately after the anonymity policy change, posting frequency dropped in an average of 25% messages per month. Conversely, workers accessed the forums 20% per month more frequently than before the change. The increase in the visiting frequency can be explained by considering the time frame of the study: The first year of the community was a launching period, in which workers discovered the forums and a critical mass of use was established (Markus 1987). Furthermore, forums were added over time, before as well as after the change, attracting new audiences. Along these lines, one could predict an increase in the posting frequency, whereas the opposite was observed.

The decrease in the posting frequency was observed in all the forums that turned identifiable after the change. For instance, the *Recipes* forum dropped from being one of the most popular forums before the change to one of the least popular after the change. The only exception was the *Just Talking* forum, which remained anonymous after the change, and increased

in its posting frequency. This implies that the new policy had an impact on reducing participants' desire to post messages.

Before and After: Discussion Style

Not only did workers post fewer messages after the change, the manner in which discussions were held changed as well. First, excluding *Just Talking*, discussion threads turned flatter after the change: While before the change a posted message was likely to initiate a hierarchic chain of messages deliberating on an argument, after the change messages often remained solitary with no responses.

Furthermore, conversations in the newly identifiable forums turned from small-talk style dialogues, often straying away from the forum's topic, into narrowly focused discussions. For example, the *Restaurants* forum hosted several conversations about a specific seafood restaurant. In the anonymous period these conversations typically started with general information about the restaurant and then often drifted toward anecdotes of visits to that restaurant, and zealous exchanges between seafood detesters and ardent fans. In contrast, conversations about the same restaurant in the identifiable period were short and conveyed only dry information about the restaurant location, menu, and prices.

Standpoint of Employers

After the change several conversations about the anonymity removal were held in the *Just Talking* forum. The enduring anonymity along with this forum's theme made it the only venue that tolerated such discussions. Messages discussed issues such as the decreased traffic in the other forums, opinions regarding the new policy, and speculations about reasons for it. The following message thread is part of a conversation held two weeks after the change:

Did you notice that since there is no anonymity, most of the forums, except this one, are empty?

I am not in favor of the anonymity. Whoever wants anonymity either wants to hide something or did something illegal... he'd better not talk at all...

The anonymity issue is important and undoubtedly influential, otherwise how can you explain the situation before and after? It may be that people just don't want everybody to know that they asked/answered/referred to something in the forum, concerned that their boss is noticing their postings...

This piece of conversation exemplifies the kind of concerns employees had about the anonymity removal. Interestingly, some of these discussions emerged as a result of messages posted by the moderator, reminding mem-

bers to use the *Just Talking* forum appropriately. The moderator participated in the discussions that arose, not explicitly expressing his opinion about the change, but noting that keeping the *Just Talking* forum clean is important so that *they don't cancel our anonymity in this forum as well'* (bolding added by author). With this wording, he staged himself as an ordinary community member rather than as one of the managers, and implicitly signaled his adverse stance toward the change.

One issue that emerged was a concern that the community is dying out. The employees believed that people's willingness to post messages was a direct consequence of the policy change. The primary explanation was the new opportunity for surveillance introduced by the exposed identities, mainly by direct managers and colleagues. The identifiability allows others to judge posters according not only to the contents of their messages, but also to the amount of messages they post. Workers whose names appear frequently in the forums are considered loafers, spending time in writing messages instead of doing the work they are paid for.

Second, workers felt various satisfaction levels from the new policy that compels disclosing their identity. Some felt disappointment, anger, and cynicism, expressing loss of interest and attractiveness of the community, and feeling that their mouths were shut. In contrast, others welcomed the new policy they believed introduced honesty and accountability, appreciating the reduction in idle talk and inappropriate language use.

Third, workers held a variety of speculations regarding the reason for the policy change, as it was not publicly announced by the management. Some conjectured that the reason was improper language use. Others speculated purposes as cutting down irrelevant messages, limiting criticism against the management, and reducing spending time at work on non-work activities. These opinions suggest that when the new policy is introduced, visibility of the motivations and the process may facilitate acceptance by the community participants that are influenced by it.

Management Standpoint

According to the management's official position, they were not concerned about misusing the forums for idleness, time wasting, criticism, or small talks. Instead, they respected the community participants as responsible workers who know how to manage their time and workload. Realizing the importance of the community in the workplace, they were looking for a solution to keep it working, eliminating only inappropriate expressions in messages. They were not interested in *who* is saying *what* and *how much*, but more concerned about *how things are said*. Deciding on removing anonymity, however, had further effects beyond controlling language use.

The CKO, representing the management, believes the change defeated the community's illnesses and raised its level. On the contrary, the moderator feels that the decision was too extreme, and that other ways to confront misbehavior could be used. In fact, he occasionally used his ability to identify posters, sending emails to those who posted extreme expressions. These emails adopted a personal worker-to-worker rather than supervisor-to-subordinate style, reminding the recipient of the ability to identify posters, and that there is no guarantee that the management will never want to use this ability. The moderator believes that these emails were effective and that the impact of the change was too powerful for the community to endure its earlier and more open form.

4 Conclusions: The Effects of Online Policy Change

The management of the company stated a single purpose upon deciding on removing anonymity: to eliminate inappropriate language use in messages posted to the forums. The results exemplify how this simple policy change had a wider range of influences on participation behaviors, discussion structures and content, and workers' attitudes toward the workplace. Removing anonymity increased accountability, the effect that the management sought to achieve, and that some of the workers appreciated. But, this act also affected responsible workers, taking away their sense of protection from gossip by their coworkers.

This understanding stands in accordance with the claim that careful contextual analysis should be carried out to balance between the benefits and detriments when making a decision about online anonymity policy (Teich et al. 1999). The decision on *changing* online policy, however, should involve even more comprehensive consideration, as the change is likely to have further effects beyond decisions made at the establishment of the community. For instance, the management's intervention in a venue considered to be the workers' property was deciphered by some community members as a means to remove any democratic attributes in the community and to control their voices.

Studies of online anonymity typically refer to Internet communities, referring to identity exposure toward the authorities (Davenport 2002) and the public (Donath 1999). Narrowing the discussion to the workplace often moves the discussion to employee-employer relationships in terms of privacy (Westin 1996). *The Young and Fresh* case study provides us with insight into the effects of online anonymity policy changes on a larger range of aspects: the online setting, the participating individuals, and their relationships with each other and with the policy makers.

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