

# **Anonymity from Pre-Modern to Contemporary Form**

M. Gokhan Aslan

## **Abstract**

Anonymity is as old as social relationships themselves but with the cultural, economic and technological changes in the society, experience of anonymity has also transformed. Through these changes, developments in media have a key role which may define the conditions of anonymity. The conditions of anonymity are defined in the power relations of the original content creator (author, radio/TV host, user etc.) and the intermediary institution in the communication axis. With emergence of new media and social media, new conditions in anonymous interactions have also been emerged. With the increased volume of user generated content, the power of the original content creator and the possibility of sharing identity information has increased. On the other hand users have different alternatives to enjoy anonymity. In this study, it is aimed to review anonymity with social media. As a case, Facebook is critically analyzed to show how anonymity could be reconsidered with the possibilities Facebook's structure offer.

## 1. Introduction

Medium could be seen as the channel between two parts (at least). Simply, we can define the positions of the parts as sender or receiver. Anonymous communication exists in between these actors: senders and receivers. In this paper, we consider the sender's anonymity in relation to the media through which communication occurs. The sender could be named as author, actor-actress, radio/TV host, journalist or user. The nature (logic) of the medium, the social, economic and technological structure of the media affects anonymity of the sender who uses media to address audience (reader, listener, follower, subscriber etc.). While analyzing sender's anonymity, we investigate the transformation of the media by considering the technological, economic and social change as a whole. One of the key aspects of the discussion is about the position of the sender (who is the original content creator) in relation to the position of other stakeholders, especially the intermediary institution. This intermediary institution could be book distributors, publishing companies, mass-media institutions or new media companies. In our analysis, the position of the sender is considered in terms of the power of the sender in controlling his/her anonymity while he/she is communicating with the audience. We claim that consistently with the technological changes in media, the social and cultural transition from modernity to the contemporary position (could be called as postmodernity) occur together with the economic gravitation to capitalism. Within this macro-level change, the profile of the content creators changes as well as the ways of being anonymity. The user-generatedness of the new media empowers the position of the original content generator. This new media logic, in consequence, liberates anonymity of the sender.

## 2. A Basic Definition

To be counted as the first step of this paper, we can put out the etymological consideration and the basic dictionary definition of the word "anonymous." Firstly, we can note the etymological explanation. Roots of the word, "anonymous" in English dates back to the 16th century. It is composed Greek "an-" which is a negative prefix, and *onyma/onymos* means "noun" ("anonymous," 2010a). Based on this etymological explanation, anonymous/anonymity could be literally defined as being unnamed. Dictionaries add connotations beyond this firsthand meaning. *Oxford Dictionaries* state it as "having no outstanding, individual, or unusual features; unremarkable or impersonal" ("anonymous," 2011b). *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines it

as being unidentified or unknown (“anonymous,” 2011c). By citing the etymological explanation and the definitions in the dictionaries, at this point we can offer a basic definition of anonymity: Being unidentified, unrecognized or unknown by lacking name or any remarkable and identifying feature.

By focusing on three points in the definition, we can expand it to make a broad discussion of anonymity. Firstly, we can focus the meaning of “name” in this definition. Name is the central element to identify a person. But more than being a simple identifier, “name for a person becomes a central feature of the way the individual is presented to others, and contains a personal history and experience that is by itself an *individualizing* feature” (Frois, 2006, p.107). From this point of view, it can be claimed that when referring anonymity as being unnamed, we need to add that this doesn’t only mean having no known name. More than this, anonymous person is the one who can’t be called by others with a name which identifies him/her. However, not having a known name doesn’t guarantee anonymity (Nissenbaum, 1999, para. 9). Hence, with regard to the discussion of anonymity, name could be understood in a broader term and could be counted as the symbol of -informational- identity.<sup>1</sup>

The second point -to be focused in the basic definition- is closely related with informational- identity. The statement, “any remarkable and identifying feature” in the definition indirectly points out -informational- identity which involves any information about the distinctive features which are identifiers of him/her. Various features of a person together constitute identity of him/her. By reference to a person’s “identity” Wallace (1999, s.1) names anonymity as “nonidentifiability.” For Detweiler (1993) it is being without an identity; for Nissenbaum (1999) it is lack of identifying information; all of these explanations imply similar meaning sphere, ultimately refers -informational- identity.

Typological explanations about -informational- identity are made by Marx (1999) and -separately- by Clarke (1994). Both Marx and Clarke state categories of identity knowledge to answer the question: Which type of information could be used for human identification? If we combine Marx’s “7 Types of Identity Knowledge” (1999, para. 10) and Clarke’s “Bases for

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<sup>1</sup> In different words this could be named as “epistemological identity.” (Davis, 2009, p. 213).

Formal Identification” (1994, para. 24), the categories of identifying information could be listed as:

- Name(s) - including pseudonyms
- Location (physical or virtual)
- Pattern knowledge (behavior and usage patterns)
- Social categorization (demographics) and social location (relatives and friendships)
- Codes - including passwords, symbols of authentication or eligibility
- Physiography and biometrics

By gathering the information mentioned in this list, identification of a person can be succeeded so that his/her anonymity disappears. However, it should be acknowledged that this list only offers a “formal” consideration of full identification. During the establishment of social relations between people, some of this information may seem prominent for identification some of them not. Based on the context, bringing some of them may provide us to identify a person appropriately.

By emphasizing the need of coordination of different types of information, Wallace calls anonymity as “noncoordinatability of traits” (1999, p.23). Hence, it can be claimed that based on the context and social relation, one’s giving his/her personal information may not destroy his/her anonymity. The key is whether this information coordinated-combined successfully to identify him/her in that context. Consequently, anonymity may change to the contextual informational positions of the person. It is not total for all contexts, for each condition it should be considered/assessed based on other’s possibility (potential) to coordinate identifying information about him/her to succeed identification.

The third -and the last- point is related about the passive voice used in the definition. When we’re saying “not being identified” the anonymous subject seems in a passive position in this sentence. Here, the subject is anonymous to the other. Hence, the condition of anonymity intrinsically requires the existence of an “other.” According to Wallace, anonymity is “a kind of relation between an anonymous person and others” (1999, p.23). Hence, it can be claimed that,

to consider anonymity there should be a social contact between two people at least. Gary T. Marx clearly emphasizes this:

Ironically anonymity is fundamentally social. Anonymity requires an audience of at least one person. One can not be anonymous on top of a mountain if there is no form of interaction with others and if no one is aware of the person. Compare the solitude of the Beach Boys' song "In My Room", a lonely, introspective, plaintive to unrequited love to Petula Clark's desire to experience the freedom of being "Downtown" where "no one knows your name". While similar, only the latter is an example of anonymity (1999, para.9).

Based on Wallace's and Marx's propositions, we can claim that existence of a social interaction is a "must" for anonymity. Although in theory, we can call "anonymous" a person living in a mountain without interaction with others, in practice this should be named as social isolation more than anonymity.

Consequently, we can call anonymity as a unique form (condition) of social interaction or social experience. . Because, through media people communicate and interact, anonymity as a form of social interaction (and experience) deserves to be analyzed by considering social, cultural, economic and technological changes with regard to the transformations in media. While analyzing anonymity in relation to media and social change, keeping this preliminary discussion (its definition and the third points emphasized in this definition) in mind would provide us a descriptive ground to make a clearer analysis.

### **3. Modern Anonymity**

To make a discussion of anonymous experience from pre-modernity to modernity in relation to media, as a starting point we can simply analyze the transformation in production, publication and distribution of books (texts) and the change in authorship. The change in production and dissemination of the book is one of the traces for us to assess the change from pre-modern to modern era in relation to the media.

The word, “anonymity” was born in text, in books. According to Ferry, “anonymous” was coined at the end of 16<sup>th</sup> century with the increased demand for anonymous books. Ferry (2002, p.194) cites Richard Tottel’s work which includes a selection of English poems in 1557. In this work, the manuscripts of which authors were not known, were signed as “Incertus author, Jncerti Authoris, the autor unsertayn” (p.194). But whether “anonymous” was used or any other word, this indicates that before the invention of the printing press it was common for the writers to disseminate their texts without signing them.

According to Ferry, “anonymous books” as a case, increased with the invention of the printing press. One explanation about this increase refers the dissemination of the books from a small-scale *elite* to the public. Ferry clarifies that “particularly poems that were for the first time offered in print to a public who had not had access to them when they were passed in manuscript among privileged circles of readers who might know their authorship without needing to be told” (p.194). Hence, with the need of a label for the books which are unknown to the public, “anon” or anonymous started to be used in various works. There was an increase in access to books by the public (the mass) so that while for the minority some books were not anonymous but for the majority they were called as anonymous. Another work on anonymity in books is done by Raven (2003); a bibliographic study scans the books in England and Ireland between 1750 and 1830. One of the key results of Raven’s study for our discussion is that while at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century more than 70 percent of the new novels were anonymous but it decreases significantly in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and after (p. 164; Ferry, 2002, 199).

Authors have some incentives to publish their books unsigned: Fear from being punished or stigmatized, to enjoy writing under a male/female name, to follow the anonymous-writing trend, to keep a distance from their own identity and their works, as an aesthetic protest to the exploitation of personalities, as a way of experiencing equality and establishing meritocracy, or as a curtain while mocking someone etc. (Mullan, 2008, 286; Ferry, 2002, 199; Weicher, 2007, p.3). These incentives could be interpreted to explain the periodical increases in anonymous publishing.

When we look to the rationale behind the significant decrease in anonymous books around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can find some traces to be discussed on the transformation to modernity and the anonymous experience for the authors (who are in social interaction with readers through their books). On the commercial-economic side; Griffin (1999) puts out an explanation about the transformation in publishing business with changing regulations in England at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in consequence affects the anonymity of the author:

With all restrictions removed on the number of printers and their location (it had been twenty, confined to London, aside from the presses at Oxford and Cambridge), and with no requirement to register books with the Stationers (so that two books only were registered in 1702), publication mushroomed and authorship became a trade (para. 4).

Griffin's explanation indicates that after years passed over the invention of the printing press, anonymous publishing moves from an upward trend to downward. With the restructurings on regulations, publishing becomes an industry and market activity. In this condition, the book is considered as the intellectual property of the author. The function of the author shifts with this modern condition, it turns out a "profession." Hence, the name of the author became a property. Some books starts to be marketed with the names of their bestseller-author. In this condition, neither for the author nor for the publisher company, not using a name (keeping anonymous) is a profitable choice – for both sides.

In addition to reflecting the increased market activity around the name of the author, this case indicates us that the role of the publisher company is consolidated in decision making process of an author in publishing his/her work anonymously. On the one side, this means there is increased institutionalization of the media. Publishing companies have more rights to control publishing sector. On the other hand, this means the publisher institution (company) has more intervention in the interaction between the author and the reader. This strengthened position of the company threatens the existence of -a potential- author anonymity.

Anonymity of the individuals in “the mass” can be clearly seen in another media too: Mass media. While mass production could be named as the production model of an industrial-modern society, mass media is the media structure of it too. As a characteristic of modernity, mass communication is a part of industrial capitalism and nation-state order (Poster, 1995). In mass media order, content is produced and disseminated in one-way from “top” to “down.” The interference of individual actors in content dissemination is limited by the mass media institutions’ corporate strategies. The media logic of this structure is based on the top-down hierarchy. On the top level, the institution is powerful in decision making. The decision to address audience anonymously for a radio or TV host, or as a journalist could not be made independently. He/She should consult and take the permission of the institution. When we look at the relationship of the mass media institution with the audience in terms of anonymity we can notice the similar one-way direction. In mass media order, the mass audience is anonymous and indifferent. We can call this as mass anonymity. As the receivers of the produced content, individuals have no identifying feature by person according to the content disseminators. Moreover, in mass media, the power of the institution is higher than the times of pre-modernity. It is harder to disseminate anonymous content independently. There is more intervention of the institution in deciding who will interact and what will be communicated. With recruiting professional *elite* (editors, producers, journalists...) the mass media institution operates as *gatekeeper*, hence anonymously interacting is less possible through mass communication devices.

#### **4. Information Society and Contemporary Anonymity**

##### **4.1. Information Society**

The developments in computer and information technologies are considered by several theorists in their analysis on social, economic, cultural and political transformations. One of the prominent thinkers addressing the relationship between information technologies and transformations of the social structure is Manuel Castells. According to Castells (2000), “we have entered a new technological paradigm, centred around microelectronics- based, information/communication technologies, and genetic engineering” (pp.10-11). In this era, the “new set of information technologies” represents a greater change than the changes in the history



of technology, in the Industrial Revolution, or in the prior Information Revolution (printing). (pp .10-11).

The elements which are primary in supporting the productivity in the production process are the elements which characterize each mode of development. In the agrarian mode of development (pre-industrialist), the increasing surplus in the production process was based on the increase in labor and the natural resources (particularly land). In the industrial period (or mode of development), the core source of productivity relied upon the new energy sources and its decentralized use throughout the processes of production and circulation. For the latter, the current situation, the informational mode of development, the core element of the productivity is based on “technology of knowledge generation, information processing and symbolic communication” (Castells, 1996, pp.16-17). Castells acknowledges that information is always critical in all modes of development, because production and productivity need some level of knowledge, the point that makes the informational mode of development unique is the “action of knowledge upon knowledge itself as the main source of productivity” (Castells, 1996, p.17).

Another theorist, Manovich, - particularly - addresses the introduction of new computer and media technologies and names this process as a “revolution” by comparing the previous advancements in media:

This new revolution is arguably more profound than the previous ones, and we are just beginning to register its initial effects. Indeed, the introduction of the printing press affected only one stage of cultural communication – the distribution of media. Similarly, the introduction of photography affected only one type of cultural communication – still images. In contrast, the computer media revolution affects all stages of communication, including acquisition, manipulation, storage, and distribution; it also affects all types of media – texts, still images, moving images, sound, and spatial constructions” (Manovich, 2001, pp. 19-20).

According to Castells, this revolution calls a new social structure, “information society.” Here, “the term ‘informational’ indicates the attribute of a specific form of social organization in which information generation, processing, and transmission become the fundamental sources of

productivity and power because of new technological conditions emerging in this historical period” (1996, p. 21).

The new structure is tied to a new economy. According to Castells, we live in a new economy which has three fundamental features. Firstly, this economy is informational, because “the capacity of generating knowledge and processing/managing information determine the productivity and competitiveness of all kinds of economic units, be they firms, regions, or countries” (Castells, 2000, p. 10). Secondly, it is global that is the “core, strategic activities, have the capacity to work as a unit on a planetary scale in real time or chosen time” (p.10). Thirdly, the new economy is networked. “ At the heart of the connectivity of the global economy and of the flexibility of informational production, there is a new form of economic organization, the network enterprise [...] It is a network made from either firms or segments of firms, and/or from internal segmentation of firms.” (p.10). This is a capitalist economy which is formed through the restructuring around the late 1960s, and 1970s (p.16). Castells refers this “new” form of capitalism as *informational capitalism*, is a new techno-economic system (Castells, 1996, p.18). In this computerized capitalist system, all the human knowledge (information, images, ideologies, symbols, cultures etc.), in forms of data, is a commodity (Toffler, 1990; as cited in Dewdney and Ride, 2006, p. 266). This commodification of the human knowledge is assured via the information technologies which enable the high-speed information flow beyond the geographical borders.

#### **4.2. Social Media and Anonymity**

Anonymity as an experience is affected by the transformation from industrial society to the information society (and informational capitalism).<sup>2</sup> One prominent phenomenon in information society is proliferation of social media in our daily lives. Today, millions of people access social media platforms on the internet to interact with each other especially using social networking sites. Social networking sites are defined by boyd and Ellison as:

[...] web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they

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<sup>2</sup> In different words, it can be called as the transformation from modernity to postmodernity.

share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (2007, para. 4).

Although social media is not limited only to the social networking sites, they have an essential position with their high penetration rate and daily active users. Within numerous social networking sites, Facebook becomes prominent with more than 800 million users and 483 million daily active users (Facebook, 2012). Facebook is a free-to-use system that allows user to create profiles so that can connect with other users. But moreover it “combines the best of blogs, online forums and groups, photo sharing, and much more” (Veer, 2010, p. 1). So it is like a cosmos of the profiles through which people can connect to each other, share content, keep track what others do, think or like etc. Hence, in this discussion we can use Facebook as a meta-case (or metaphor) to reconsider anonymity in relation to social media.

One of the important considerations of Facebook is about its potential to offer rich private content. In a Facebook account, a user may enter his/her personal information. Under “about” tab, a lot of information is categorized to be entered by the user: Name, e-mail address, occupation, age, gender, location, relatives, contact info etc. This area of Facebook could be called as the capture of informational identity of a person. Filling this area appropriately, threatens anonymity of the user.

In actual the threatening feature of Facebook (and social media) is not these categorized areas. For an ordinary user who wants to use social media functionally to interact with his/her friends (or other people) it is common to make daily sharing via writing entries, publishing photos or videos. What makes Facebook is so valuable for human identification is the open-ended area inside it; namely the “news feed.” Through news feed and the comments under entries in news feed, people interact with each other so that social information emerges through this interaction. Consequently, in Facebook, there is huge personal information not only in terms of volume but also in terms of variety.

Another important issue is the increased access points of social media to our daily life. With the integration of mobile devices with social media applications, the user has more access to Facebook. With various extensions, Facebook doesn't only operate as a platform in which friends get in contact. It has pages, various applications, games and so on. Increased synchronization of

different platforms into Facebook makes it a field of total social media experience. For example, by linking their Foursquare accounts to Facebook, users share locational information about them. This means increased synchronization of everyday life with social media life. The borders between the physical and “the virtual” are blurring. As a consequence, it becomes harder to keep his/her anonymity under control for a Facebook user. With synchronization of daily life with Facebook, separate contexts merge on the internet. While, in different contexts a person may enjoy anonymity, now there is a possibility that these contexts may be immersed in Facebook so that anonymity of the person in one context may be harmed by identification of him/her in another context. As a consequence of this convergence between different parts of our lives, there is a potential of total identification of the user.

In Facebook, users are linked to their *friends* and *friends of friends*. These linkages tie millions of people to each other. Hence, it can be claimed that this creates a network map for each user. This network map is identifying information itself. As noted by Marx (1999) and Clarke (1994), social location is one of the categories of identity knowledge. By connecting with others through Facebook, a user locates himself/herself on a point of the networks of users. This information could be considered as coordinates of social location. Hence, this network map of a Facebook user threatens his/her anonymity.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the user has alternatives to manage his/her – online- anonymity. One of the most essential features of social media (and Web 2.0) is its being based on user generated-ness. Here, users can produce their own content independently. This is very far from the case of an author acts in collaboration with a publishing company; or the audience whose voice is filtered by the content managers in mass media institutions. Here, although Facebook (or other social media companies) is a huge business enterprise, instead of directly intervening or producing content, it only provides the platform (and incentives) for users to generate content. In consequence, user has more independency to direct his/her profile (-online- identity). User has power to manage his/her personal information. In Facebook, user, by modifying the privacy settings, he/she can decide who can see which part of his/her profile; who can find him/her by searching and who can write his/her *wall*. Hence, in Facebook (and in social media in general) user has responsibility to manage his/her online anonymity by controlling the flow of information about him/her. Here, controlling doesn't only mean to minimize the personal,

identifying information. In relation to the discussion of anonymity, this case teaches us that: (1) responsibility of user in managing his/her anonymity has increased with social media. (2) in practice, the existence of anonymity now is more based on whether user information is coordinatable rather than lack of information about him/her.

## **5. Conclusion**

The media *zeitgeist* (or logic) in information society is based on the liberation of information, demediation and increased power of the user as “new” major content creators. In this condition the positions of the stakeholders of anonymous communication, as well as the ways to be anonymous are changing. The decision to keep identifying information in secret or to disclose personal profile could be made by the user more independently. While the institutionalization of the media companies reaches to high levels, this does not mean that they are more interfering in decision making process for a user to be anonymous or not. Demediation of the institution liberates the original content creator in communication with his/her audience.

Additionally, the profile of the content creator is changing. Today, anonymity can't be considered as a case only for the professional content creators such as authors, editors, journalists etc. Being user of new media may make all of us original content creator, because the media logic is based on user-generatedness. With using social media applications like Facebook, all of us produce content (social information). We all have audience. Today the media is immersed in our daily lives so that we're all authors and audiences. This paper contributes the discussion of anonymity by emphasizing the increased need to discuss anonymity for all of us because with the proliferation of new media in our daily life, the condition of being anonymous for major aspects of our daily activities are defined based on the nature of new media. In sum, our anonymity in total is being mediatized.

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Modern Art is more self-expressive, while Contemporary Art pays attention to society, thus known for its social impact. Modern Art is primarily made on canvases, while Contemporary Art is on every medium that you can think of – video art, tech-enabled artworks, object design, graphical arts. Modern art focuses on the subjective representation of the chosen themes, while Contemporary Art takes a strong stand on social, political and cultural aspects of the world. A story to be told to explain the difference between modern and contemporary art, so let's understand this in a bit more detail. All of it formed the foundation of Modernism Art. These art movements were influenced by a number of factors like; African and Asian Art, Light, Culture, History, etc. It doesn't seem pre-modern to me. 'Contemporary' is for the more narrow time range you want: the most recent two or three movements perhaps. Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao is contemporary, Tarkovsky's Solaris is probably too old now to be called contemporary. S. Shurupchik. I understand modern and contemporary to mean the same thing in your sentence. You need to check the grammar of your sentence, though. wandle. The term modern and contemporary – which might seem interchangeable in a general sense – have nuances you've probably never picked up on before. Luckily for you, we're here to break down what some of the most popular design terms really mean. But when you pick up a thesaurus and flip to "contemporary," a likely synonym to be listed is "modern." These terms – which might seem interchangeable in a general sense – have nuances you've probably never picked up on before, especially when it comes to design. The distinct style focused on simple form and function, which are valued as equals under this style. Think earthy palettes, natural materials like wood, leather, and stone, and streamlined silhouettes. modern and contemporary period that are neither museum artefacts nor public artworks. As it turns out, this kind of anonymous art is a puzzling category for the art institution and. audience alike. when anonymous art is pre-modern – an ancient sta- tue, or even the products of folk art, for example –. but they are much harder to meet when they concern. modern and contemporary anonymous works of art. for which sufficient information that might be used. to ascribe to them a chronological, cultural, or insti The anonymous artwork and the readymade. A form of art that could be helpful for further inves- tigation into the peculiarities of anonymous art is the. readymade, a form that arguably has permitted the. institution to expand its recognition to include a.