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Silencing the Clatter: Removing Anonymity from a Corporate Online Community

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1 Introduction

As we evaluate various arrangements in online communities, one crucial question is how anonymity impacts 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, worker and management attitudes, and employee-employer relationships. This case study illuminates issues of privacy in the face of both managers and co-workers, revealing the power of online anonymity policy to facilitate or inhibit open discussion in a community.

2 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 so-

ciety' (Westin 1967). In recent years, intricate variations of information privacy ideas have evolved, regarding individuals' expectations for 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 reveals 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 and stored, and can later be accessed, analyzed, and shared (Dempsey 1997). Berman and Bruening (2001) 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. 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 privacy relationships involving authorities and individuals is by translating this relationship to that of employer-employee and examining the workplace setting. While it is important to protect employees' privacy, the employer is generally able '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). Employees have diverse views regarding the types of information they tolerate their employers to monitor or prefer to keep private (Edmonds and Braasch 2001).

3   Online Anonymity

The scale of online privacy runs from complete identifiability to complete anonymity. Providing complete anonymity allows communicators to decide which pieces of their identity to expose. Alternatively, knowing the identity of one's interlocutor is not only essential for understanding and evaluating the interaction but also plays a role in motivating people to participate in the discussion (Donath 1999). 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.

Online anonymity helps individuals feel free to participate and express thoughts and, at the same time, lessens ridicule and embarrassment (Nissenbaum 1999). This suggests that the Internet as a communication medium must allow its users the right to remain anonymous online (Oakes 1999). Conversely, online anonymity might also be detrimental. The main risk of

anonymity is the loss of accountability. Those responsible for any misconduct cannot be identified and brought to justice (Wallace 1999), as in Dibbell's (1993) 'rape in cyberspace' where the real user behind 'Mr. Bungle' was not punished for his online misbehavior. The price may be, as Davenport (2002) suggests, an incremental breakdown of the fabric of society. In discussing the tradeoffs of anonymity and accountability, the online context should be carefully analyzed for making decisions about anonymity policy (Teich et al. 1999).

The role of anonymity can be analyzed empirically by observing the effects of an online venue's anonymity policy on various dimensions of the discussion. The case described in the following section presents an online community within a workplace, meaning that online discussants may actually be colleagues. Further, the online anonymity policy was changed at a certain point of time, requiring the community to adjust accordingly, and providing an opportunity for pre- and postchange analysis of the consequences of anonymity policy for online deliberation.

4   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, covering topics such as items for sale, recipes, sports, and so forth. Unlike other communities in the company targeting professional subsets of workers, 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 nonwork issues during the workday.

The Anonymity Policy Change
The Young and Fresh launched in December 2002, featuring anonymity on all of its forums. Each message included a free text 'name' field into which writers could type any name, or leave it blank. The typed name (if any) was then displayed with the message in the forum. However, users were aware

that postings were not truly anonymous. All postings were saved in a database server with their posters' logged-in user names. The community moderator and a few system administrators had direct access to the posters' identities. Despite this caveat, I use the term 'anonymous forum' to indicate that anonymity for a poster existed with respect to 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 these troubling phenomena not observed previously in any of the online communities on the company's intranet. Management considered alternatives such as leaving the community as is, hoping for it to quiet down by itself, or shutting down the community entirely. The final decision, led by the Chief Knowledge Officer, was to remove anonymity from newly posted messages in the forums. Administered in October 2003 on eleven forums, the new practice automatically attached the name of the poster 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 anonymity would remain only as long as language was properly used.

Before and After: Participation Patterns

Immediately after the anonymity policy change, posting frequency dropped by an average of 25% 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 during 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 of discussion changed as well. First, excluding *Just Talking*, discussion threads turned flatter after the change: whereas 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.[1]

Furthermore, conversations in the newly identifiable forums turned from dialogues with small talk 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 drifted toward anecdotes of visits to that restaurant with 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 generated 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

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[1] In the twelve forums that existed both before and after the change, there was a decrease of an average from 0.69 responses per message (SD=0.13) before the change to 0.50 responses per message (SD=0.21) after the change (t(11)=5.39, p<0.001).

emerged as a result of messages posted by the moderator, reminding members to use the *Just Talking* forum appropriately. The moderator participated in the discussions that arose, not explicitly expressing his opinion about the change but also noting the importance of keeping the *Just Talking* forum clean 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 for the death of the community. The employees believed that people's willingness to post messages was a direct consequence of the policy change. Direct managers and colleagues introduced new opportunity for surveillance of the exposed identities. The identifiability allows others to judge posters not only according to the contents of their messages but also to the volume of messages they post. Workers whose names appear frequently in the forums are considered loafers, 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 disappointed, angry, or cynical, 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 put forward a variety of speculations regarding the reason for the policy change, as management did not publicly announce the reason. Some conjectured that the reason was improper language use. Others speculated about purposes such as cutting down irrelevant messages, limiting criticism against the management, and reducing time spent at work on nonwork activities. These opinions suggest that when a 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 talk. 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 looked for a solution to keep it working, eliminating only inappropriate expressions in messages. The management was not interested in *who* was saying *what* and *how much* but rather concerned about *how things were said*. Deciding to remove anonymity, however, had further effects beyond controlling language use.

The chief knowledge officer, representing the management, believed the change defeated the community's ills and raised the level of discussion. On the contrary, the moderator felt that the decision was too extreme and that other methods to confront misbehavior could have been applied. 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 believed that these emails were effective and that the impact of anonymity was too powerful for the community to endure its earlier and more open form.

5 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 on the forums. The results exemplify how this simple policy change had a wider range of effects on participation, discussion structure and content, and workers' attitudes toward the workplace. Removing anonymity increased accountability, the effect that the management sought to achieve, and some of the workers appreciated that. However, it also affected responsible workers, taking away their sense of protection from gossip by their coworkers.

This understanding accords with the claim that careful contextual analysis should be carried out to balance between the benefits and costs when making a decision about online anonymity policy (Teich et al. 1999). The decision to *change* 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' territory was understood by some community members as a means to remove 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 (Westin 1996). The case of *The Young and Fresh* provides us with insight into the effects of online anonymity policy changes on a larger range of variables: the online setting, the participating individuals, and their relationships with each other and with policy makers.

Acknowledgments

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