

Chapter 15

On the Condition of Anonymity: Disembodied Exhibitionism and Oblique Trolling Strategies

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ABSTRACT

The ambiguity of identity in disembodied communities poses unique challenges in the flow of digital rhetoric. Online anonymity can lead to disinhibition, enabling the practice of trolling: the effort to derail discussion for attention, mischief, and abuse. This chapter examines this phenomenon in various social media contexts, exploring effective practices in recognizing and harnessing trolling.

INTRODUCTION

Responding to the US National Security Agency's Planning Tool for Resource Integration, Synchronization, and Management "PRISM" surveillance project, Lawrence Lessig (2013) reiterates his longstanding concern about the freedom of computer-mediated communication. He writes of a condition of constant surreptitious monitoring of digital expression that he believes has since come to pass: "Gone would be simple privacy, the relatively anonymous default infrastructure for

unmonitored communication; in its place would be a perpetually monitored, perfectly traceable system supporting both commerce and the government."

Whether or not we ever were or are truly anonymous online, the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE) has posited that our experience of CMC is a performance of our impression that we participate online without direct consequence to our face-to-face identities if we so desire. Certainly the frisson of quasi-anonymous performativity in computer-mediated communication is well-documented. Deindividuated intimations of anonymity in the virtual crowd exhilarate posters unburdened by

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-4916-3.ch015

physical face-to-face identity categorization, language, typography, and chronemic information alone the limit of digital expression (Walther & Parks, 2002). Deindividuation theory proposes that behavior becomes socially deregulated under conditions of anonymity and group immersion, as a result of reduced self-awareness (Diener, 1980; Postmes & Spears, 1998; Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1989; Zimbardo, 1969). Further, the hyperpersonal theory of SIDE posits a concentration of expressive capacity as individuals reallocate cognitive resources from spatial environments to message construction in CMC (Walther, 2007). Feeling like bricoleurs of identity, we shuffle multidimensional roles online in constant simultaneity, leading us to feel more like our “true self” when decked out in an array of virtual masks (Turkle, 1995). This benefit goes both ways, in reception as well as production. As deindividuated posters: “We read in ways that allow us to ignore the privileges accrued by virtue of having a ‘normal’ subjectivity” (Jung, 2007, p. 165).

Yet with the creeping suspicion that no CMC is truly anonymous, the potential for indeterminacy of identity to open spaces liable to provoke miscommunication is exacerbated. We could never take everything online at interface face value, as Sherry Turkle taught us, and it is important to consider to what extent deindividuation coincides with a corollary anxiety that one’s performance of anonymity reflects an impression of potential recording and disclosure. This chapter will review traditional theories of the disembodied disinhibition that accompanies deindividuation, adding speculation that the performance of anonymity may be inflected by presentiments of audience and surveillance as represented by the intensity of insult in online trolling as representing a “scramble for recognition” and in Michael Conley’s novel investigation of the rhetoric of insult. The practical results and application of the potential cross-purposes between anonymity and a scramble for recognition that belies attention-seeking insult will be the focus of the final section of this chapter.

THE JEOPARDY OF ANONYMITY

Judith Donath was among the pioneers in researching the habit of online anonymous trolling. Her 1999 study, “Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community,” is the first to use the term “troll” in serious critical analysis. Status enhancement, she claims, not amusement, motivated early trolls (Donath, 1999). Her study of Usenet chatgroups identifies a poster named Ultimatego, about whom “some readers were intimidated by her intimations of upper-crust social knowledge; others were infuriated by her condescending remarks” (Donath, 1999). Donath introduces the term “trolling” in a quote from a poster regarding Ultimatego’s antics: “Are you familiar with fishing? Trolling is where you set your fishing lines in the water and then slowly go back and forth dragging the bait and hoping for a bite. Trolling on the Net is the same concept – someone baits a post and then waits for the bite on the line and then enjoys the ensuing fight” (Donath, 1999).

As with intention, rank and authority diffuse online, where all anyone “is” is signs on a screen. Couple this cypherality with constant instant updating, oftentimes in several media, under multiple screen names, and the line between informing and performing, porous enough face-to-face, becomes even more tenuous online. Diminished auras of authenticity and presence in digital correspondence approximate absence; the mocking tendency Erving Goffman (1959) labels “The Treatment of the Absent” tends to creep into digital discussion, in a sense, a performance of “real” conversation. Goffman writes:

When the members of a team go backstage where the audience cannot see or hear them, they very regularly derogate the audience in a way that is inconsistent with the face-to-face treatment that is given to the audience. In service trades, for example, customers who are treated respectfully during the performance are often ridiculed, gossiped about, caricatured, cursed, and criticized when the performers are backstage. (p. 170)

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