Anonymity

Sean McDonough & Matthew Rogge

What is anonymity? What counts as anonymous?

- Facebook?
  - Your friends know who you are - but what about your friends-of-friends and your friends' families?
- An online forum?
  - You have a username, which you use to interact. Is it really anonymous if anyone can see your post history?
  - What about re-using usernames across different sites?
- A forum without usernames? (E.g. 4chan, yik yak)
  - No way to know who said what… is that a good thing?
- What about browsing websites?
  - Websites can keep track of your IP, or use "cookies".
  - Advertisers use this to keep track of your browsing history, and show ads you might click.

General anonymity is hard to analyze…
Let's focus on a *Moral Dilemma*:

You're in BSG, and want to have an online forum for discussing diversity on campus. **Should you allow anonymous users to participate?**

Before we start, how do we define "anonymous"?

- Anonymous as Separate
  - Individuals can be identified, but are not immediately. For example, you can see the names on Facebook comments, but you don't necessarily know who they are if they're friends-of-friends.
  - Facebook, Twitter, Skype, etc.
- Anonymous as Unaccountable
  - Relies on usernames/aliases separated from offline identification.
  - Online forums, IRC, Reddit, etc.
- Anonymous as Amorphous
  - Total lack of distinction between people. No username, chat history, or identifying features.
  - 4chan, original Yik Yak, etc.

Before we start, how do we define "anonymous"?

- Anonymous as Separate
- Anonymous as Unaccountable
- Anonymous as Amorphous

For our example dilemma, let's suppose we're choosing between
full names being shown (Anon. as Separate) and
usernames being shown (Anon. as Unaccountable).

For the rest of this presentation, we will use the term "Anonymous" to refer specifically to **anonymous with aliases**.
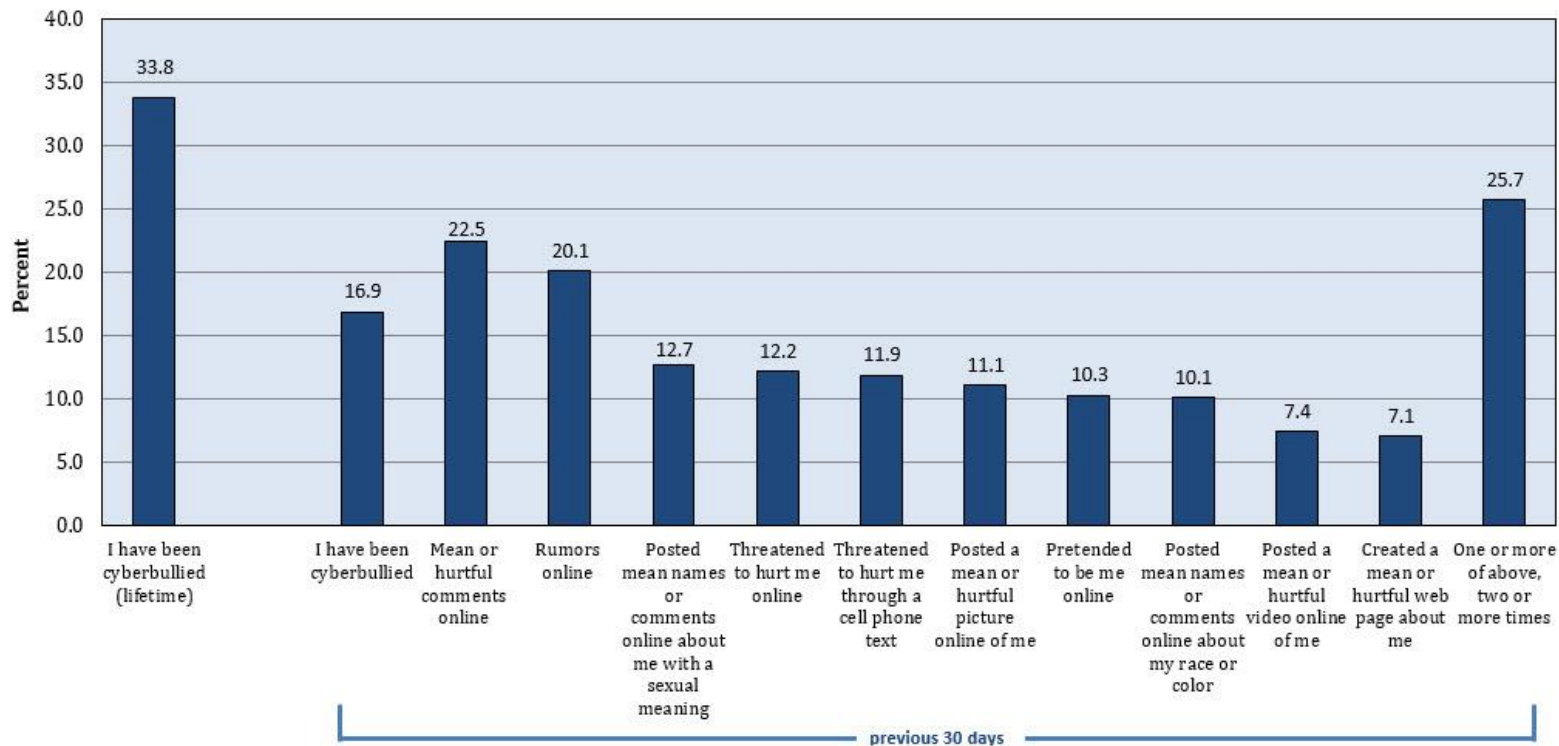
Anonymity and Self-Image

- Equalization Hypothesis
    - Removing visual/auditory cues can enable an individual to escape the effects of implicit biases
    - *Equalization may allow for more objective discussions in the diversity forum.*
- Support
    - Expressing thoughts/emotions without fear of being judged by friends/family
    - Anonymous support groups, accessible anywhere with a computer
    - *Support may help create a "safe space" for discussing sensitive topics*
- Cyberbullying
    - Freedom from consequences can increase both the potential for and degree of cyberbullying
    - *Cyberbullying may be an obstacle when trying to have a constructive discussion*

Cyberbullying Research Center
www.cyberbullying.org

Anonymity and Discussions

- Anonymity encourages opinions contrary to the majority opinion
  - Anonymous groups will spend more time exploring consequences and weighing options than identifiable groups.
  - *An anonymous discussion is more likely to touch all the salient issues in a diversity discussion, rather than just focusing on one or two.*
- Anonymity increases participation
  - Anonymous discussions encourage a lot more responses and back-and-forth conversation between members.
  - However, it has been shown that people put less "weight" on each response; people are much harder to persuade when the source of the argument is anonymous.
  - *There is a definite trade-off in the quality of the discussion when considering anonymous users. This study used groups of 5 members; how many people do you expect to participate?*

(Haines, 2004)

Ethical Analysis

We've framed the discussion in the form of a question, and we've shown you some of the research that's been done. Break into groups, and use the provided ethical theory to analyze the dilemma.

You're in BSG, and want to have an online forum for discussing diversity on campus. **Should participants' comments be tied to their names, or should they be able to comment under an alias?**

Sources

City Depression:
>   Olson (2002). *Depression in Inner-City Children*.
>   http://search.proquest.com/psycinfo/docview/619945217/15B44E683E41C1PQ/7?accountid=9784

Online Discussion:
>   Haines, et. al. (2004). *Anonymity in Computer-Mediated Communication: More Contrarian Ideas with Less Influence.*
>   http://search.proquest.com/psycinfo/docview/1551033810/74E8C91BE45C4755PQ/10?accountid=9784

Equalization Hypothesis, Support :
>   Christopherson (2006). *The positive and negative implications of anonymity in Internet social interactions: "On the Internet, Nobody Knows You're a Dog".*
>   http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563206001221

Cyberbullying:
>   Moore, et.al. (2012). *Anonymity and roles associated with aggressive posts in an online forum.*
>   http://search.proquest.com/psycinfo/docview/941023665/440BD54AC31C4D7DPQ/1?accountid=9784

Cyberbullying data: http://cyberbullying.org/statistics
XKCD - Wikileaks: https://xkcd.com/834/
XKCD - Listen to Yourself: https://xkcd.com/431/,

Closing Thoughts

There are several parts of Anonymity that we couldn't fit into this discussion; these are a couple of the bigger issues:

- Feeling anonymous in a big city
  - Reduces the likelihood of calling 911 ("the witness's dilemma")
  - Criminals can expect to run through the streets without anyone recognizing them; that doesn't work in a smaller town or community
  - Sometimes increases depression and loneliness (Olson, 2002)
- Anonymous sources in journalism
  - The importance of protection of sources, when those sources may be talking about illegal things.
  - Allows employees to report on things without facing repercussions from their managers.