

“Getting (or Not Getting) to Know You”

– Some Thoughts on the Best Big Book Ever Done on Anonymity

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On this old rock pile with a ball and chain.
They call me by a number, not a name

Doin' My Time, Johnny Cash

In the desert, you can remember your name'
Cause there ain't no one for to give you no pain.

A Horse With No Name, Dewey Bunnell

This luxuriantly interdisciplinary, highly original, provocative, deeply reflective, open access volume is most welcome! It should be in the library of anyone concerned with the sociology of information and communication. The book was edited by Anon Collective (address: “The Anon Collective, Earth, June 2, 2020“). More conventionally, the book is grounded, so to speak, in a Digital Edition published in 2020 by punctum books, Earth, Milky Way, www.punctumbooks.com.

I will describe what the book does and then offer some ideas and questions I was left with. Anonymity is located within a broader conceptual framework of the sociology of information as this involves revelation and concealment and, more broadly, the sociology of knowledge and ignorance.

Anonymity along with its opposite – identification and kindred terms such as publicity, privacy, transparency, confidentiality, secrecy and surveillance all touch aspects of knowledge and ignorance -the presumed known and the unknown. When the possibilities and limits of the physical-natural world are radically upended, as with the current shifts to a world increasingly defined by digitalization and tools that break through the previous, info-protective borders, cracks in the social order deepen. The issues become ever more central to the dignity of the person and to a democratic society.

Accurate, shared knowledge as it is tied to accountability, makes possible the

reciprocity and trust that a decent, enduring social order is based on. With the arrival of new possibilities for knowing, hiding and dissimulating information, the nature of that order becomes more problematic and contestable with profound empirical and ethical implications. Hence this book is most welcome!

Anonymity and identification are central in the new fault lines. The myriad approaches and examples in the book show that to be anonymous or identified is to varying degrees *partial, fragile, temporary and changeable*. Knowledge and ignorance are *contextual, situational, and contingent* on factors that are both controllable and beyond rational control. Being known or unknown involves rules and expectations, rights and obligations and choices. As well, being named both specifically and more broadly, reflects inherent physical or natural factors within environments that determine the kind of information, if any, available apart from rules and tools. The informational contours are often opaque or grey and their consequences vary depending on interests, groups and time periods. As a result, they are subject to different interpretations and invite conflict, depending on who's ox is fed or damaged.

The book draws on a time honored literary and political tradition of authorless texts. As in a murder mystery, readers are not told "who did it" (or in this case "who wrote it") until the end of the book and guessing is part of the fun and educational. Given the pull of careers in our institutions and a bit of residual ego, an appendix "identifies" almost all of the authors. An article on the "collective anonymity" of a 12 step group is an exception.¹

An editorial collectivity of 5 is responsible for the editing the book – social anthropologists, a sociologist, a designer and a curator. The book offers artworks, academic articles and experimental texts from a rich variety of contributors, mostly from Europe and the United States, and includes criminologists, political scientists, scholars of media and culture, computer scientists, philosophers and art theorists. It reports on workshops, events and an exhibition from the broader research project Reconfiguring Anonymity.

Articles are organized under four topics:

- 1) **Reconfiguration.** While not denying continuities, these articles emphasize technical and social changes that require revision and extension of the limited literature on the topic (at least relative to the literature on theoretically more developed forms such as privacy and publicity). Here there are articles dealing with blood donations in India that ignore caste lines; the evolving nature of anonymization and deanonymization; anonymization and big data; famous artists who worked as invigilators²; anonymization in modern and postmodern societies; and hiding individual and organizational identities in offshore financial services.
- 2) **Assault.** Articles here deal with anonymity and sperm donors; "sanitary police" tracking the identity of endocrinal disruptors³; anonymity and networked neighborhoods; the challenges of internet regulatory strategies for content moderation involving Yik Yak⁴; art projects intended to provoke thought on anonymity; and on police whose identity is not apparent because they are hidden or in plainclothes.

- 3) **Weapon.** Included here is a poem that uses familiar info technology icons to imagine workers joining with bots and AI against what computers generate; the complexities of distance and proximity in policing; a manifesto for invigilator-friendly artworks; the dual reality of invigilators and software developers sustaining some dignity within their own personal networks, while simultaneously being in the company's purview; anonymity, care and control in policing juveniles; and photos of unmaintained, mass, anonymous graves of dissidents in Iran.
- 4) **Delight.** Here anonymity is a factor in pleasure, fun, and recreation. There are articles on sexual encounters in public restrooms and interacting through internet image boards such as 4chan and Chatroulette⁵; a poem and images reflecting the discovery as an adult that one was donor conceived⁶; articles on authenticity; the ambivalences of anonymity in self-help groups; on naming and its complexities; and achieving anonymity within Bitcoin. A final article describes an art workshop in which students created projects anonymously (with implications for the kind of feedback received).⁷

The universality of the topic across settings and role players makes it difficult at times to cleanly locate a form as either assault, weapon, or delight. The reason for placement of some articles was not always clear. Is anonymity the solution or the problem? When is anonymity an assault and when a weapon? And then, assault against whom and a weapon for who? There is no single group that exclusively uses it as a weapon, nor that is free from potential assault. This is part of the paradoxical quality of almost any tool, whether in material or cultural form. For example, offshore companies using the tools are a major form of assault against national laws and taxes, but also serve as corporate weapons. Anonymous whistle blowers exposing a company's predations reverse this. Specifying the role played by a given person, group or organization in the information food chain is necessary before it is labeled.

The book's initial withholding of authorship makes the reader aware of how much gets "read" into a communication via the assumptions and unreflective inferences we make when identifying information is provided. In framing the meaning of texts readers bring their own social, cultural, experiential, psychological and physical elements. This reflects personal factors, as well as the shared context and time of the communication. Such factors, conditioning the presumed meaning, go beyond the clarity of the content and what identifying information the communicator consciously and/or unreflectively offers.

For those inspired by Whitehead's observation that every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing and those attentive to dynamic life conditions amidst static continuities, the complexity of the analysis the book offers is most welcome. The multiplicity of approaches and contradictory and evolving strands (nicely reflected in an introductory article on the need for a kaleidoscopic understanding of the topic), make it difficult to reach general conclusions. This breadth is a virtue in an age of specialization and can educate the reader stuck with only one way of understanding and judging.

Seven turns of the kaleidoscopic are offered in the opening article. The first offers a catalogue of anonymity techniques through case studies—whether involving uncoupling

a name and other personal data from a computer record, or simply not naming a person. Anonymity as a calculated endeavor is *produced*. But much more is involved than tools. A second roll of the kaleidoscope sees anonymity as a social form –a mode of being and knowing involving forms and relations. A third aspect looks at potential consequences, intended and unintended, utopian, or dystopian, or more modestly, good or bad, given the values of a democratic society. Anonymity may also be approached as a pattern of living within—an assemblage or configuration. This alerts us to historical changes in patterns across types of society.

Still another perspective notes how situated anonymity's presence or absence can be. It may simply involve an actor experiencing it because of the setting –as “being” a foreigner or stranger when away from home. But increasingly its' production is undercut by being in a connected world ever more submerged in data traces – from DNA to keyboard typing. While new protections and counters (techniques of neutralization) often emerge in response, these tend to be temporary, fragile and reversible. Rather than a clear binary presence or absence, the book's case studies offer a mapping of anonymity's gray areas and the struggles to produce and protect it, as well as to undo it.

The kaleidoscope can be further turned to consider how the absence of something ironically also produces something. This is most clear in art and typography where negative space (the white space surrounding letters) is a condition for their legibility. Also consider the pauses (silence) in music. Anonymity can make us aware of what is usually unseen –the enduring paradoxical presence of what is absent. The authorless introduction suggests the nifty concept of anonymity as creating “active absences.” A final view from the introduction considers figuration –it foregrounds anonymity as a relational topic. The topic involves various roles – at a minimum the anonymizer and the anonymized (whether different or as played by the same person). In a computerized world we also see the identifier –as with the many sensors built into smartphones, along with traditional roles such as detective from criminal justice to public health researchers.

Consistent with the book's theme, I considered writing this anonymously, although the editor who requested the review knew my name. Having been retired for several decades, I do not need to advance my career via another publication. If offered as an anonymous review, the interested reader would have had to work a bit harder inferring the characteristics of the author and might have had increased awareness of the presumptions we bring to a work. Unnamed, I might have taken advantage of anonymity's freedom to say whatever I thought, unmoderated by tact, civility, fact, logic, or concern over damage to my reputation. As a scholar and writer, have you ever felt very negatively about a work, but held back out of decency, professional codes, deference, or for fear of hurting another person? Have you ever wished that your unsupported prejudices could be public without fear of recrimination? It is fun to fantasize about what one might say without the accountability brought by being identified and potentially locatable. On the other hand, when the reviewer is unnamed, the reader has no standard for judging the reliability and objectivity of a review, let alone the slanting, non-objective personal and social factors that can shape what was said.⁸ In addition, in being identified as an author, one can learn from the ideas and counters of critical colleagues in

response to what was written.

Some Conclusions and Questions

The richness and variety of contexts, examples, approaches, ideas, and kinds of data that the book offers make finding any common threads difficult, beyond seeing that the tent is enormous, and the topic is complex, complicated, changeable, paradoxical and conceptually impoverished. That poverty is further seen when comparisons are made to the extended family of terms such as publicity, privacy, secrecy, and confidentiality. As noted, the conditions under which data of various kinds are, can or and should be concealed, revealed, or distorted and by whom, from whom, when and why are also potentially contestable and conflictual.

The varied articles in this book make clear what is needed and call out for parsimony, integration, and systematization in analytic thinking relative to the many diverse examples, ideas and approaches the book offers. To facilitate that, I offer some conclusions, some conceptualizations and some enduring questions drawn from the book and prior work on aspects of the topic explored over many decades (e.g., Marx 1991, 1999, 2001, 2015, 2017, Marx and Muschert 2007).

But What Is It?

There is nothing like this book given its breadth, currency and interdisciplinarity. It must be read by anyone interested in the topic. But what is the topic? Ostensibly it is just anonymity and for most of the articles what this means is the absence of any, or accurate, personal information about the responsible agent. However, that term standing alone and unelaborated is woefully deficient. It conveys the idea that something is missing –most usually aspects of personal identification involving a name.⁹ This needs to be joined by situations where personal identification is to varying degrees present. What should those be called?

What is the opposite of anonymity¹⁰ or anonymous? The archaic term “nomified” denotes a specified area of knowledge and logically fits (in most cases of the book this would be the presence or absence of knowledge about a person). But that term is awkward. The dictionary is of little help here regarding contemporary usages. Non-identifiability is defined as synonymous with anonymity. But identifiability is not listed as an opposite of anonymity as it would seem logically it should be. The antonyms shown in dictionaries are various terms for being noticed such as famous or a celebrity¹¹, with no implication regarding being unnamed or other missing personal information. Anti-anonymity or non-anonymity are a better fit, but cumbersome. I prefer identifiability as the opposite. Anonymity and identifiability are polar values of the broader variable of *identity knowledge* (information about the person) as unknown or known, – whether or not the latter is accurate raises other issues. Ten dimensions of descriptive identity knowledge and various analytic attributes of information about individuals varying from the most personal, sensitive and core to the most public and impersonal are considered in Marx (2017, pp. 88-109).

Further distinctions are needed. Anonymity shares with pseudonymity the hiding (or at least withholding) of actual agent identity. A text, graffiti, or vandalism encountered without identifying marks is by definition anonymous. Pseudonymity differs in offering some information, if fallacious or restricted. In the original Greek it meant alias. It is distinct because deception is often present, not only omission. Both keep secret the actual identity of the responsible agent. Pseudonymous agents are not nameless. They are in a sense also identifying agents, the issue however being their deception in offering false identification.

Of less analytic use is “pseudo-anonymity”, a misperception in which the unknowing subject assumes that a communication or action is anonymous when it isn’t. This can involve computer media that don’t require any direct information from the user for posting or reading but gather meta and other data via cookies and other means. It can be seen in hidden audio, visual and tracking devices. Until it became widely understood, phones with caller-id also were a form of pseudo-anonymity to the unsuspecting. This category is of particular interest in assessing the public’s knowledge of the degree to which they can be remotely monitored and their knowledge about the vulnerability of their communication activities. This is conditioned by what media operators reveal about their tracking potentials and privacy practices.

The validity of assumptions about the presence or absence of anonymity depends on whether an outcome involves a human agent or group who hides identification. For pseudonymity it depends on whether specious identifying information is offered relative to what the agent who offers the information knows to be correct. Motives will of course vary greatly.

In using the terms, it is useful to separate out what the agents and subjects/audience for the withheld knowledge believe. For subjects unaware that a human agent was responsible for an act, anonymity is irrelevant. Of course, for the agent who caused an outcome, anonymity is central.

To be anonymous or identified reflects a type of ignorance or knowledge involving empirical outcomes. Settings vary greatly with respect to their susceptibility to anonymization and identification. The cognate terms to anonymize and to identify involve actions (means) intended to hide or provide information. They can be viewed as dependent variables whose prior correlates we seek to understand.¹²

The knowing or not knowing who it did, what happened and whether those questions are meaningful, and when they are, whether available knowledge is accurate, connect to broader questions involving the sociology of knowledge/ignorance¹³ and forgetting/remembering. Anonymity–identifiability are grains of sand within the infinite sand box of knowledge.

Two kinds of anonymizing agents can be seen, or perhaps better, two aspects of the role may be seen. The *production agent* responsible for the acts or behavior in question whose identity is hidden. Sometimes this also involves a *source agent* who transmits or delivers information leading to the conclusion that the act entails anonymity.¹⁴ While the same person may play both roles, the anonymous source may be different from the anonymous agent responsible for the action.

Conventionally that meant the “author” of a communication. But as examples in the book suggest, the idea of authorship as the person responsible for an outcome, needs to be extended to the identity of agents responsible for any human caused, or contributed to action, not just communication. The term “author” needs to be seen expansively to cover human constructors and perpetrators, as well as literati. In the book’s examples that would include money laundering, egg and sperm donating, and water polluting, not only the sending of love or poison pen letters or the identity of black listed authors.

Science and Emotions

The authors raise questions, offer new insights, and provoke thought and feeling. Drawing from the sociology of knowledge and science, the book reminds us to examine assumptions about the neutrality and objectivity of science. We must ignore the admonition of the Wizard of Oz to pay no attention to the person behind the curtain. Tools to promote or destroy anonymity are politically and culturally situated, not given in nature, even if some are available to all. Furthermore, impersonal, objective social SCIENCE does not offer the whole story, the emotional impacts need consideration. A fuller understanding may come from imaginatively and intuitively engaging the subjectivity of anonymizing and identifying experiences.

Understanding the multi-faceted topic requires attention to feelings and the subjective experiences of engaging the topic for all those involved in it, whatever their chosen or imposed role. The emotional component and surprise are pronounced when secrets covering dastardly deeds are exposed or the lifting of the anonymous or (unrecognized pseudonymous) mask, show evidence of the violation of trust. Like a sudden punch in the gut, we may gasp at the error of taken for granted assumptions and beliefs. The feelings generated can be harrowing, as with the book’s anonymous images of unkempt, mass grave sites of murdered dissidents, or the discovery that one’s parents are merely one’s “social”, not one’s nameless biological parents.

The anonymizer may feel some of the power of the secret noted by Simmel, (Levine, 1971) being in the wise and set apart from those who don’t know. Where the anonymization is illegal, or in violation of policy, there may be anxiety about being found out and relief at pulling it off, particularly when the risks are high, as with fugitives. When the motive is to help as with anonymous donations to charity, virtue becomes its own reward and the individuals may feel doubly righteous in their unselfishness and in not seeking appreciation. In the case of anonymous whistle blowers and leakers there is likely to be positive feelings about doing the right thing and relief at avoiding punishment.

It’s Social!

Anonymity and identifiability are social phenomenon with major implications for social ordering and disordering as these involve trust, authenticity, justice, power, and reciprocity.

They are examples of what Simmel (Levine 1971) called social forms involving patterned connections among individuals and groups.¹⁵ The terms are relational –they involve *interaction* among role players guided by rules and expectations and/or the anticipated responses of others. That connection to others is distinct from what the individual may experience independently of others such as a dream or a fantasy.

We need to study the structures – the roles played and accompanying norms, map the social relations and networks present and identify social processes, including following the careers of instances over time. Apart from observing behavior, the accounts actors offer for their behavior, in particular as this involves motives, legitimations and strategies require attention.

The need for elaborating the abundance of types is illustrated by a variety of police-citizen settings. Police in uniform with badges and identification are not anonymous in citizen encounters. Even a police officer in plainclothes whose first name or nickname is known, or whose face is recognized, without attaching a name to it, is not anonymous. But what should we call situations where officers secretly observe from the shadows when those observed are unaware of their presence? Conceptually how does this differ from the pseudonymous setting of an undercover officer infiltrating a criminal group?¹⁶

When an audience is unaware that things are not as they appear, can we still speak of anonymous forms as being present? Yes, but with a qualification. The anonymous author is aware of it and his/her goals may be served. It is present in an objective sense (as seen by the anonymizer and perhaps an outside observer), although not in a fully social sense.

Can there be anonymity if only one person is in the game and there is no interaction? Of course, anonymity as the motive is present, and it can be social within the subjectivity of the agent as observer who is aware of the other(s) and takes steps to be unnoticed. But, in its full social sense, the presence of anonymity must involve at least two parties –the person or group responsible for the withholding (or withholding and creating via deception in the case of pseudonymity) and the person(s) who are the audience for the agent’s actions. When the recipients of anonymous works are unaware of this (whether they are targeted subjects or perceived audiences) there can be no social anonymity. This situation shares something with a tree falling in the forest when no one is there to hear it.¹⁷

On his desert island Robinson Crusoe had no one to be anonymous to. He might *feel* lonely or anonymous in being unseen given the circumstances, but he did not produce an act of anonymization. What he experienced is different from feeling and being anonymous among a large crowd, whether from blending in or being not personally identified (at least before facial recognition and cell phone recognition technology).

When social anonymity is present and audiences know this (whether as dupe, victim, or benign or disinterested subject) will they seek to know the real identifying information (or things associated with it)? Why and how does this matter? The question who is there to *potentially* know, brings the questions who wants to know?” and “Who wants to avoid knowing?”

In extreme cases involving personal identity when the subject is also the agent, the

desire to know is strong. That is the case for persons with severe amnesia, such as the man who came to be called “Benjamin Kyle”, after being found semi-conscious in a dumpster. His true identity is a mystery in spite of many efforts to determine it. (Forsyth, 2010) In such cases where self-knowledge is sought, the subject seeks de-anonymization even as he produces his own anonymization. In the condition known as transient epileptic amnesia (TEA), persons may lose memory of events and their own actions. Callahan (2013) offers a personal account. Another analytic cubby may nest for those showing Dissociative Identity Disorder (multiple personalities).

The fit between the agents seeking to de-anonymize or anonymize information and its subjects needs consideration. An organization’s rationale for wanting information to better serve its ends may conflict with the ends of the individual, who views this very insatiability as a reason for wanting anonymity. This suggests a fourfold typology involving agreement or disagreement between suppliers and consumers of the information with respect to the desirability of identity information being available or unavailable.

The topic needs to be analyzed with respect to its basic forms and connections to other forms. Among the major roles are: the perpetrating or *causal agent*, the *source agent*, the *recipient/audience/subject*, *third party intermediaries*, and *unwitting agents/facilitators*. Also in the mix are anti-anonymity roles such as *identifying* and *preventive agents*. The massive growth of the identification industry from detectives to facial recognition, DNA and public health surveillance specialists are illustrative. These role players are linked in evolving networks. All will not necessarily be present in a given case, and they may overlap, as when the causal or identifying agent is also the source agent.

Various actors have different degrees of information (including knowing or not that a name is a pseudonym and in turn the real information). Several possibilities can be noted. There may be *mutual anonymity* (writers and readers of graffiti, most economic exchanges; blind journal reviews, impersonal sexual encounters, media chat rooms, blood donors and receivers) or *singular anonymity* (targeted crimes, hate mail) where the unidentified agent knows the victim or where a student knows the teacher is grading but for fairness the teacher does not look at student’s name while grading). Or consider *third party intermediary anonymity* as with kidnapping or ransomware situations which may involve a-go-between responding to the unknown (but locatable/reachable) agent and a victim not knowing anything about the agent. That is also the case for blind judgements, as with persons trying out for an orchestra who are heard behind a curtain. Those managing the system know, but withhold, the true identities of the judges and players, at least initially. The intermediary’s information remains confidential.

Degrees of Anonymity

There is unlikely to be anything like pure binary anonymity or pseudonymity. Efforts at full anonymity are limited, just as is full knowledge of a person.¹⁸ There are usually mixtures of the hidden (in the case of anonymous or disingenuous pseudonymous information) and the

“real”¹⁹. If nothing more (the former communicates the agent’s intention of being unknown).²⁰ With authorship hidden, inferences may still be drawn. As Erving Goffman observed, data are often involuntarily communicated (“tells”) and what is voluntarily offered may provide clues, in spite of an author’s intention to conceal.²¹

Some pseudonyms are chosen in a playful fashion and/or are intended as giveaways, not as shields. Others involve secrecy protecting a conspiracy to deceive. Still others have correspondence to actual identification elements, as when undercover officers are advised to use a first name close to their actual name and claim backgrounds reflecting their actual experiences (place, skills). Some are simply nicknames or abbreviations with no intention to mislead or hide true identity. The referent may be known to insiders. Consider a radio listener’s request for a dedication to accompany a song to be played, –“from Rice Paddy Daddy to Yokohama Mama” or an inscription carved within a heart shape on a bench, “Paco loves Pollita”.²² Others names such as “Merry Christmas”, “Dick Schmuck”, “Dr. Butcher” (a surgeon), Trade Marx sound pseudonymous, but are names of real persons.

Beholder’s Eyes and Ears

The degree of anonymity is often in the eye of the beholder. Experts in identification involving handwriting, printers, photo-copies, voice, DNA, forensics, psychological profiling and writing or artistic patterns (e.g., claims about a play attributed to Shakespeare or the authenticity of a painting), often “see” or read meaning into data that does not communicate to non-specialists. Apart from that, contingent developments involving natural or unplanned unfoldings may spread the news.

It is Often Temporary

The shell of hidden identity is fragile and can fall from the nest at any moment. Anonymity is often dynamic rather than static and unchanging. Many factors can contribute to a short shelf life. Some recurrent career patterns can be observed. Thus, in some cases, as with games, mysteries, con games and frauds, the presence of an anonymous or pseudonymous offering and the actual identities they shield become known through “natural” (as in commonly occurring and thus expectable/predictable sequences). Socially elapsed time periods may be present. In other cases there are bureaucratic and legal procedures that might make this possible, as with discovery of biological parents as a result of adoption or sperm and egg donors.²³ These institutionalized revelation patterns need to be contrasted with unplanned revelation. For example, uncontrollable contingencies such as coincidence, whistle blowers, leakage, errors, accidents, and a clever reader-as-detective can frustrate the best of anonymizer plans.

The ratio of the known to the unknown can shift over longer periods of time. This may involve more becoming known as new tools appear to reveal aspects of identity and context previously unavailable. The identity of the painter of an unknown artwork may be revealed by peeling away layers of paint hundreds of years later,²⁴ undecipherable DNA may be stored

until improved techniques make it legible and improved cyber security trails may eventually reveal perpetrators. There are endless searches for other plays that Shakespeare may have written, or efforts to show he did not write some of the plays attributed to him. That also holds for classic painters.

But the ratio of known to unknown can go in the other direction as well. With respect just to narratives, in pre-literate settings the originator of a story was known to those immediately present, but across generations the story lives, but the author is forgotten. The same holds for cave painting artists from 40,000 years ago and folk songs, folk lore and expressions that get passed on over generations. This uncoupling may also occur with the presence of written records and later printing. Authors may fraudulently claim earlier work as their own. Printing or transcription errors may leave a name off, time or environmental decay may destroy identity information and even much of the product. That is the case for the very large number of books in library catalogues (the largest single entry!) written by “anonymous” persons who, at the time of writing, likely were not acting as anonymizing agents. Consider the dead sea scrolls and other archaeological finds. Much human thought, whether scientific or humanistic, let alone detective work, goes into trying to figure out the links between the known and the unknown and the varieties of the known and the unknown.

Causes: Who or What Did It?

Identifying information is under the canopy of a broader question involving who or what is responsible for a given outcome –humans, animals, insects, natural organic or inorganic forces, combinations? To label an outcome of interest the work of an anonymous person is to presume a human cause and in principle a locatable agent. With respect to personal identity knowledge, there are situations where a causal role is clearly played by a human, – graffiti, vandalism, theft, letters, phone calls (at least before robo calls).²⁵ There, the question raised by Sesame Street that those of a certain age may remember, “Whooo is it?” applies. The absence of information may or may not involve a clear intention.²⁶

Anonymity in social terms is of particular interest when it involves intention to withhold the identity of the responsible agent. In the case of a crime, a victim’s identity and the type of activity involved may also be hidden, disguised or simply unknown. We need to ask anonymous with respect to what?

If your car is stolen or hit, or you see graffiti, you know it. The events of the situation lead to only one conclusion. There is a person(s) who did it. But what about the cause of a forest fire? Better still, imagine remnants of a decomposed body found in a crevice beneath a cliff.²⁷ Who is it? Is the death a result of natural causes, an accident, a murder, a suicide, an animal? If an animal -what kind and which one? It would be interesting to study the discovery roles and identification procedures of animal control officers in search of anonymous beasts. If there was a human perpetrator, who is it? In this case both the deceased and the responsible factors are unknown. That directs attention to the consequences of anonymity for different roles or subjects and these may change over time if more is learned about the identities and if they can be connected to a unique identity or social category. If so, is what is learned valid

and by what standards? Finding who is responsible and locatable is central in political and organizational conflict and more broadly in group life.

In situations where it makes sense and is necessary to ask about the identity of an unknown agent, we see *strategic anonymity*. This is anonymity with a purpose that may or may not be obvious to observers. Here there is intentionality, and we can ask about motives and justifications offered.

If interested parties are unaware of the trickery that make it erroneously appear that an event was beyond human actions, there is no search, and the perpetrator remains unknown and unsuspected. What is hidden is that there is a responsible agent and the identity of the agent.

In situations where a human agent is responsible and one is identified, is this the “real” agent or is it a pseudonym masking the identity of the responsible agent and even casting blame on an opponent? Do recipients (the audience for the information) know that an alias is present?

In a reverse situation when there is no human agent responsible for an outcome, yet the anonymizing agent manipulates the situation to make it appear that there is, we see bad faith – false records and framing and large or small injustices. That also would apply to blaming the wrong person or organization in cases where a human agent *is responsible* for an outcome. Some accidents resulting from natural causes may none-the-less be deceptively claimed as human caused for insurance or other purposes.

In other situations, when information is not available, rather than intentionality to conceal, it can be an unintentional result of the setting. The strategic anonymity considered above contrasts with a second major form – *situational anonymity*. Here there is no intention to withhold, but the default, natural order simply limits, or hides all together, identifying personal information. The lack of knowledge is a given or side effects of the situation.

Settings are always partial in what they “naturally” reveal. There are degrees and types of anonymity. Prior experiences and events that occurred beyond the purview of the observer/subject will often fit here, as will information about the body (tattoos, scars, having a pace maker or one kidney) that is hidden by clothes or skin. Erving Goffman (1962) gives many examples in discussing stigmas that are unseen.

In an age of rampant computerization, it is easy to forget that the materially dependent surveillance techniques that produce knowledge or hide or deny it, can also involve non-material means such as omission and lying as well as voluntary revelations. People can overcome the default ignorance in the situation by volunteering information, or rules may specify when it must be revealed. In contrast reassurances may be offered that what might be there in fact really isn't – whether or not it is.

The Paradoxes of Anonymity in Post-Modern Society

Some paradoxical aspects were noted above such as how the absence of something ironically also produces something. This is the case with art, typography and music regarding negative space or silence. In addition anonymity exists as an objective, fixed fact –as with graffiti. Yet it is also illusive in being relational –as with persons well

known and “seen” by their neighbors when sitting on their front porch, even as they may be anonymous in a large crowd. If they travel abroad, they are likely to be both anonymous and unseen (certainly in their cultural depth) and yet to be noticed/identified in their foreignness.

The meaning and specifics of anonymity and identifiability have changed significantly, even as their core elements of the absence or presence of knowledge, particularly as this involves naming who is responsible for events or who a person is, are constant. The changes with respect to the conditions impacting knowledge and evaluations in pre-literate, farming, urban and urban-industrial societies are a well-traveled road, – a road still under turbulent construction in post-modern society. The situation is much more muddled now than in recent centuries.

Anonymity was implicit in the work on mass society of Simmel (Levine 1971) and others such as Park and Redfield but was not highlighted. It was under analyzed and conceptualized, and subsumed under, or overwhelmed, by explicit attention to the stranger, the metropolis, mobility, the secular and secondary relations. These factors saw the diminution of shared standards and understandings and increased conflict in heterogeneous city environments.

Guardedness and interdependence of the differentiated persons within a society, not their sameness became the new basis for social order. The size of the urban area and geographic mobility meant that little could be known about most of those encountered. Inferences were drawn not from personal experiences with, or knowledge about, the other, but from roles performed, identifying symbols such as uniforms and from distanced validating organizations such as licensing boards. This social (if less physical) distancing from fulsome, direct encounters with others encouraged anonymity and pseudonymity.

Nor did the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Fromm, Arendt, Habermas) directly deal much with the topic. Rather, their emphasis was on what was lost in mass society. With the loss of individuality we see the reappearance of aspects of the *gemeinschaft* society of the pre-industrial city. This offered an alternative to the rampant individualism and heterogeneity of the city with residents plunged into anomie and isolation, even amongst the crowds. This was anonymizing in the sense that the individual’s distinctiveness was lessened in becoming part of a society that involved strong reciprocal bonds presumed to be based on common origins and traditions (if often exaggerated or invented) and fellow feelings. It was a form of naming based on a communal identity.

The greater size and density both of large crowds and of the city offered a related form of hiding in plain sight. Individuals of course kept their names and for bureaucratic record keeping much more personal data started to be gathered. Yet being among an unknown mass of individuals, whether on a busy street or in a crowd, offered the individual a degree of anonymity not seen in small towns and rural areas where a stranger would be noticed.

The small town setting nicely illustrates *situational anonymity* as it involves being indistinct, a sameness, not standing out or being noticed from others. This can involve shared skin color and facial features, being within average heights and weights, wearing conventional, commonly worn clothes (jeans, hoodies, baseball hats), an all-female or male

gathering, or one with people of about the same age. To share such attributes with others in the group is to be indistinctive in being characterized by what is shared. This is different or can change in an instant if a person not sharing the same attributes is present or enters (e.g., a white person in a black group or a woman in a group of men).

In contrast to the homogeneity-heterogeneity of small towns and mass societies, the situational type is not dependent on the rise of cities or mediated communication and is ahistorical. It is always relative to the composition of the group and whether an individual stands out and is therefore likely to be noticed and perhaps remembered. Anonymity is gained or lost not by the usual motives, but by merely being present in such a group. Of course, when there is a choice, the individual in being in, or avoiding, such a group may be volitional in being there apart from seeking notice or avoiding it.

The topic offers a classic example of the contradictory needs within the individual and between the individual and others, as well as of the contradictory potentials and uses of new information technologies. It is not just that in different settings and times that withholding information will be seen as right or wrong, but that conflicting desires can be simultaneously present in the same individual and situations. Consider those in the public eye, such as celebrities, who both need to be seen and furiously protect their privacy. Their flirtatious relationship with paparazzi is illustrative. Those wanting to sell or buy contraband have a similar interest in selectively revealing and concealing.

The individual needs down time, apartness, personal space and to be unnoticed and unrecognized (i.e., to be anonymous). That is signified in the song, “A Horse With No Name” at the start of the paper. The Beach Boys song, “In My Room” also well captures this:

Here’s a world where I can go and tell my troubles to
In my room In my room In this world I lock out
All my worries and my fears

Yet at other times, the individual may want very much to be with others, to be seen and viewed as a distinct person—a name, not a number as the Johnny Cash song also at the start of the paper expresses. This is the dehumanizing herd quality of being seen and treated only as a member of some broad, restricted status position such as in a total institution or socio-demographic category presumed to have certain stereotypic characteristics. We want to receive personal, not impersonal treatment and to be judged as unique individuals with the deference and privileges associated with our particular status and attributes. This reflects the classic tradition of western individualism and the discomfort of being undifferentiated in the crowd.

Yet at other times the individual needs to belong, not be buffered from others and to revel in the identity shared with the crowd. Following Durkheim, consider the uplifting, impersonal feelings of solidarity in a church when the choir sings or in a stadium when the home team scores.

Belonging to a group may come with a sense of entitlement to the prerogatives that come with membership (e.g., the right of all citizens to vote regardless of gender or race).

What matters is being judged as a member of a broad category and not differentiated.²⁸ In such cases, categorical labeling as one of many among privileged persons with the same desired rights and status associated with the category is less likely to cause displeasure. That contrasts with among those included in categories of stigmatic labeling. The leveling seen with equality of labeling is welcomed and not viewed as impersonal or degrading as in an institution.

There is also lack of symmetry and consistency between the individual wanting privacy/anonymity from government and large organizations, while wanting transparency to see what government and organizations are doing and why and who is responsible. The same holds, if to a lesser degree, in wanting others to reveal information about themselves to us, while being more reticent to reveal it to them.

As many observers have noted, the technology itself offers contradictory possibilities. It makes finding, creating, protecting and revealing information vastly easier, apart from who is using the tool and the goals pursued. New surveillance means offer windows into communication and other activities on an unimaginable scale, busting through previous borders of distance, darkness, time, facial expressions, mind and the body that previously protected information. This may bring both wanted and unwanted attention. In addition, finely enough tuned and with vast data, AI can offer a high degree of statistical rationality with attention to both broad categories yet also with unprecedented attention to what is unique about the individual. This brings something new relative to the clumsy, less efficient efforts to de-anonymize of the past steeped in injustice and broad categories (“round up all the usual suspects”). Yet it also offers an undreamed of (other than by prescient dystopians) targeting of the innocent.

Yet the technology with encryption and other cyber security protections, and remote, inexpensive, immediate world-wide communication possibilities also offers unprecedented, if rarely total, anonymity and communication possibilities beyond government and the more powerful. None-the-less the tilt clearly favors the more powerful. Yet some caveats ala the need to see with the empirical beyond one’s intuitions and passions and social location can be proffered.

In analyzing historical changes in behavior, five broad questions about anonymity and identification need to be ask:

- 1) What do rules and expectations say about anonymizing or de-anonymizing various kinds of information (required, prohibited or optional)?²⁹ This applies to rules for subjects having to reveal or withhold, as well as to agents being expected to anonymize or de-anonymize. How does this vary across types of society historically and settings within these?
- 2) What are the default or de facto environmental situations with respect to conditions that make various kinds of information automatically (“naturally”) available or unavailable to the senses (e.g., day vs. night, proximity vs. distance). Attention here is to the “givens” apart from human interventions to alter environments and ways of living. Of course a major

goal for those in the info business is to alter, whether by rules or technologies, the conditions that make information more or less available. How do environmental and social situations vary within and across types of society historically and settings?

- 3) What technologies for compelling disclosure or for discovery, or for protecting information are available? How does this change with the type of society and context?
- 4) How do people actually behave with respect to the rules? Whatever the rules say re compelling or protecting, or offering or not offering information, are they honored or breached and when and where? How do societies and settings compare with respect to the fit or gaps between the rules and behavior?
- 5) To what extent are de-anonymizing and anonymizing technologies actually applied relative to their potential across settings and historical periods?

Answers to these can provide data needed for social science understanding and for empirically informed ethical and policy analysis. I doubt that any single researcher will have the energy, resources, or chutzpa to fill in the boxes for the major historical epochs of human societies with respect to changes in anonymity and identifiability. However, a better understanding of whether anonymity is truly on its death knoll and, “allows no hermits” as D.H. Lawrence³⁰ and so many observers claim. As it roils and churns through the intersections noted above, is it simply being endlessly reconfigured? Of particular interest is how the political process continually plays catch up in trying to restore through new laws and policies what was lost through hungry technologies of de-anonymization.

Neither Good nor Bad

Whether self-consciously chosen as a tool or merely resulting from the elements in a situation, *anonymity is neither good nor bad, but context, setting and contingency make it so.*³¹ New tools for anonymizing and de-anonymizing make clear the need for new approaches and shed light on the multiple meanings of the terms. Three of the book’s articles can serve as examples of this.

In noting how police use distance and proximity in their work, Nils Zurawski in several articles shows how degrees of revelation of the agent’s identity and those dealt with can be factors in either enhancing trust and legitimacy or in hiding accountability.

Thiel Thorsten, in an article tracing the changing conditions of anonymity in western liberal democracies similarly observes its’ Janus-like qualities. A compelling normative position can be put forth arguing that anonymous outcomes permit, indeed are necessary for authenticity, free speech and behavior, and ultimately for the pluralism of democracy itself. Equally compelling is the position that accountability and justice are only possible when actions come with an address.

Jacob Copeman and Dwaipayan Banerjee show how anonymity in blood donation and receipt with respect to characteristics such as caste and religion might help support caste reform

and national integration and the human as transcendent over the communal identities that so separate. Their analysis shows how fraught the effort is with fragility, ambivalences and contradictions.

Many of the other articles also show how the shield of anonymity can hide the dense entanglements of power, exclusion, inequality, injustice, dissimilitude, corruption, aggression and repression. Yet they also show how the sword of anonymity, along with its double-sided blade of identifiability, can challenge these. Anonymity may offer protection by supporting freedom of expression, association, movement and experimentation. Being able to seek and offer truth without fear of retaliation is central to societal justice, as is reciprocity in personal relations. Anonymity in communications and other behavior can counter the frequent tendency of privilege to illegitimately beget itself, even as accountability via identifiability can engender trust and legitimacy. It is necessary to look at specific kinds of anonymity and identification in context.

If you have ever been confused about what anonymity is/means, this volume will add to the confusion. But it is good confusion in helping us better see the need for greater conceptual and moral clarity in an issue so central to our time of profound social and technical change.

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¹ The author of this article choice not to be identified out of respect for the privacy of others in the collectivity and because their products are collective.

² It was not clear why those watching museum patrons are in a book about anonymity. Perhaps this is because they are in the background and are perceived as anonymous by patrons, even as they play the role of the *identifying agent* relative to the initially anonymous patrons.

³ An endocrine is a disrupting substance, whether natural or synthetic that interferes with the hormonal system of living organisms.

⁴ Yik Yak is a small social media group that failed to get its users to self-moderate.

⁵ 4chan is "geared toward ephemeral and random encounters with anonymous others". Chatroulette is a random video-chat portal permitting interactions between strangers. Mary Virnoche (2001) considers the "stranger making" qualities of the internet reflected in such examples.

⁶ Presumably hardly a source of delight for those who discover this at an older age, rather than being informed of it as young children.

⁷ An interesting experiment of the social quality of behavior could be seen in comparing 4 groups with both the artists and the critics as anonymous or identified. In the experiment here the artists were anonymous, and the critics identified.

⁸ This comes from a sociology of knowledge perspective. I would have used "biases" but that word packs assumptions of prejudice and unfairness, even when intended to be neutral. Truth in reviewing: I am an 82-year-old, pretty conventional, male, husband, father, grandfather, white, athletic, social studies, bi-coastal scholar from an upper middle class, secular Jewish background, with ancestors from the Netherlands, Germany and Eastern Europe, who first encountered these questions in a class from Erving Goffman in Berkeley in 1961.

⁹ But given how common many names are, standing alone name is rarely sufficient. Just enter your or your friends name into any search engine. The deeper expectation is a unique entity, whether person, group, or object and if not that, at least connection to a category that narrows down who it could be. Also often folded in is a "where" question re reachability to permit interactions, or at least actions directed to the unknown person, whether in their immediate or mediated presence.

¹⁰ Anonym is shown as a synonym of pseudonym. What is an anonym? According to the dictionary it is "a false or fictitious name, especially one used by a person so they can remain anonymous". Logically the "an" prefix suggests that anonym would mean anti-nomified or unnamed, rather than falsely named. The defining characteristic of anonymity is that no name is offered at all.

¹¹ The terms here almost uniformly imply something positive or desired. But anonymity has a more neutral meaning. Depending on the context and observer, what is absent may be positive or negative.

¹² When that is done and with empirical data we can look for patterns, explore hypothesis and suggest criteria to inform judgements. Marx and Muschert (2007) offer some hypotheses. For example the more personal and sustained the interaction, the stronger the expectation that information will be revealed.

¹³ More accurate than knowledge-ignorance would be the awkward knowledge-no knowledge. Here there are fascinating issues beyond erroneous or factually unsupported "knowledge", such as knowns and unknowns. Consider the interesting categories of the "known unknowns" (things

that we know we don't know –unanswered questions) and the illusive “unknown unknowns”.

¹⁴ In the case of text this can be further complicated by whether the text itself is “real” or faked, beyond whether the author is correctly identified or even known. A sixfold table is needed here categorizing whether a document is authentic (holding apart whether what it depicts is accurate) against whether the author is correctly, pseudonymously, or anonymously identified.

¹⁵ While he did not use the term directly, he danced around it in discussing secrecy, urban areas, and strangers.

¹⁶ This differs from the related setting of the informer in a political group whose identity is known to the group, although not the role played. Both the infiltrator and the informer are deceptive, but only the former is more likely to be pseudonymous.

¹⁷ It remains the dirty little secret of the anonymizer.

¹⁸ Even with personal knowledge, what can be known about another person is always limited and often has a shelf life (holding apart limits on the person fully knowing about themselves). Simmel (Levine 1971) in observing the stranger and the metropolis stresses how little we know about any person. Similarly Mark Twain (2010) in his autobiography writes, “what a wee part of a person's life are his acts and his words! His real life is led in his head and is known to none but himself.... His acts and his words are merely the visible thin crust of his world...and they are so trifling a part of his bulk! A mere skin enveloping it. The mass of him is hidden.... Biographies are but the cloths and buttons of the man -biography of the man himself cannot be written.”

¹⁹ Real that is from the perspective of outside observers who can agree on an objective standard or real with respect to what the actor believes to be true.

²⁰ However this need not involve intention if we assume all will know who the author or person responsible is, or that it may have been mistakenly deleted or not added.

²¹ Even in the presence of information, we may miss it or choose not to see it or go beyond what is there based on prior perceptions, personal needs and social categorizations and contexts. Reading into is not the exclusive property of omitted information. There may be reading out of offered information. Consider folklore's instruction, if not always wisdom, in expressions such as, “you, don't want to know” and “that's more than I need to know”. While it sounds heretical, there are social functions of ignorance (whether as absence of any knowledge by anyone, as against knowledge unavailable as a result of secrecy. (Moore and Tumin, 1949) But as always with any talk of function, one must ask who is it functional for.

²² These nicely illustrate how meaning depends on the audience. Anyone hearing or seeing these knows the information is incomplete, but only a few locals in the vicinity know the names behind the limited information. Over time, as Rice Paddy Daddy and Paco move on and away the linkage ends, even as the names remain.

²³ But even that is often muddied. See the recent novel by Shapiro (2019) and the challenges of untangling what is tangled.

²⁴ Reverse examples are also present. Consider paintings attributed to, but not done by a famous artist. The actual painter uses as a pseudonym the name of the famous painter. Or there can be correctly identified people offering inauthentic products. Consider Clifford Irving's hoax in writing a fake biography of Howard Hughes. A white journalist, John H. Griffin (2011), traveled throughout the South in black face in 1959 and wrote about his experiences. The book was “real” in that he wrote honestly about what *he* experienced and he was correctly identified as the author

of a nonfiction book. Yet in spite of the truths in presentation, there is something disingenuous about it. Those he interacted with were deceived by his pseudonymous presentation of aspects of himself. His is not the “authentic” account that might be written by a person who didn’t need blackface to experience what Griffin did (e.g., books by Malcolm X or Claude Brown, – that authenticity has a different connotation from whether or not such a work is representative and truthful). The film “BlacKKKlansmen”, a true story, shows some pseudonymous parallels. In acting as a discovery agent, Ron Stallworth (2014) a black police officer in the Colorado Springs intelligence unit poses as a white racist and uses his real name. However, he did not need whiteface, as he only interacted over the phone with KKK members. A white officer using Stallworth’s name infiltrated the group.

Another example is in the film, “Can You Ever Forgive Me?” where both the generating and source agents are correctly identified but provide fake documents. More commonly pseudonyms and cutaways may be used to cover the made up documents to avoid accountability. In a related type, a correctly identified person may pass off the “real” work of a deceased writer as in the film, “The Plot” as his or her own. More commonly, pseudonyms are used to shield the identity of the author of a “real” document. The problem is with the multiple connotations and overlaps of words such as “real” and “genuine”.

²⁵ Even then in a major techno-fallacy there is a “guy behind the guy” or better a “guy behind the software program”. The topic also connects to concerns over the deep state (or any) bureaucracies’ diffuse, layered, hidden, buffered one-way mirrors with respect to why, and who, is responsible for outcomes. This planned and unplanned fog gives moderns disquietude over just who is guiding the ship. Joseph K – we hear you and wish we could help. Some mileage may lie in viewing a term such as “false class consciousness”, as yet another variant of pseudonymity in causal naming. There are lot of miles to go before we sleep.

²⁶ There may be causal factors present that go beyond the seemingly obvious. Consider a driver in a hit and run accident. He runs away to hide his identity in order to escape responsibility for the accident. But as the tv series, “Hit and Run” suggests was it merely an accident or a homicide? Thinking about the broad topic of discovering information needs to be expanded to include situations about cause.

²⁷ An interesting contrast case involves all the questions about identity and purpose and reality that can be asked about the brief case of a deceased “real” body that washed up on a Spanish beach during WWII (Montague, 2001) as part of a British counter intelligence operation.

²⁸ At least for those included within the category. Categories by definition exclude, as well as include. Thus citizenship rights exclude non-citizens.

²⁹ Here I refer to normative expectations rather than what is anticipated based on prior experiences and the reputation of those interacting.

³⁰ Lawrence (2010) wrote, “The industrial noises broke the solitude, the sharp lights, though unseen, mocked it. A man could no longer be private and withdrawn. The world allows no hermits.”

³¹ That also holds for surveillance, privacy, publicity, confidentiality and secrecy (Marx, 1988, 2017).