

Mia Li, 17, Saint Kentigern College (Year 12), zqilee1028@gmail.com, Discuss the role of anonymity and how this promotes discriminatory behaviour on social media. Word count: 571

The future of anonymity: is there no return?

The internet, once a land of promise, with little fears about crime or privacy. 10 years on, scammers, thieves and terrorists now reign. Welcome to the digital realm in 2023. This essay seeks to evaluate the delicate balance between the protection and persecution of anonymity.

To what extent then can we 'police' the inequities that drive inflammatory dialogue and overwhelming scale of internet discourse? The underlying assumption here is that uncivil discourse is confined to the 'Big Four' household names, but platforms with features attributed to social media are rarely regulated. Then consider the extreme. Does an absolute ban on anonymity account for the undercover journalist to voice wrongdoing? A transgender advocate belonging to a religious community in fear of exposure? How will we guard against the thousands of such cases?

As an artist, I find calm and strength amidst an uncertain universe in virtual communities. The digital realm is a space where the complex issues of race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation congregate. It comes as no surprise that discriminatory behaviour exists in every corner of the internet, however arcane. Being anonymous behind a screen certainly brings out the worst in human nature. For instance, content creators retain anonymity to perpetuate mysterious illusions, which generates mass recognition, or produce a curated identity, offering only a snippet of the larger picture. But commercial success comes at a cost. The hyper-idealised facade of a god amongst men creates elusive standards. Parasocial relationships which manifest in East Asia reinforce a flawless and impossibly ethereal image idols must tirelessly pursue to retain their fanbase. For many deprived of human connection, the relationship becomes a stimulation within our own head, creating a fantastical illusion of companionship. In each case, we end up stagnated in this dehumanising, reductive one-way thinking. Inevitably, an individual's self-image and outlook on life is compromised when their face is known to millions of followers. Unprecedented attacks on personal life hold significantly more weight than on the persona. Mistrust is cultivated amongst a once loyal following. In any case, anonymity of both sides fosters discrimination. The algorithm response rewards engagement, so long as they are provocative and combative, further allowing the degradation of mental health to proliferate.

One solution may be the answer to many questions posed. Just as 'blue tick' high profile users can block out the non-verified, a defence mechanism which protects public figures from parasocial obsession and harassment could grant every user the right to authentication (and decline those without) so as to assess the legitimacy of the account. Any user who persists would be easily identifiable and traceable. This is in addition to ramping up rigorous verification, cross-referencing information with public databases and third-party validation, without the intrusive oversight some warn of. It is also the platform's responsibility to cultivate dialogue to enhance verification and trust between both parties, starting with better screening and security systems. Equally, the user must bear some responsibility: follow age restrictions, learn to block out hateful content, and for someone with a large following, be especially cautious with private information.

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As artificial intelligence and technologies arise, we find ourselves caught up in this paradoxical world of belligerent factionalism and social cohesion, for better or for worse. Oscar Wilde's witty remark over 100 years ago is now more relevant than ever before: "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth."

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