Anonymity, pseudonymity, and the agency
of online identity: Examining the social practices of r/Gonewild
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Abstract

A debate is currently raging regarding the value of anonymity online. On one side of the debate is Facebook, the world's largest social network site. Facebook demands that people use their real names and is one of the leading forces behind the push towards a "real name" Internet. On the other side of the debate are scholars such as danah boyd and Bernie Hogan and sites such as 4chan and Reddit that view anonymity and pseudonymity as important to how people construct identity online. While much has been written about the benefits of anonymity and pseudonymity, there is a lack of published research examining specific practices enabled by pseudonyms. This article provides a detailed account of the behaviors enabled through pseudonymous identity construction through a case study of the subreddit r/gonewild. The main contribution of the article is to provide a specific account of the costs of a totalizing embrace of the "real name" Internet.

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Introduction

The debate between people who embrace what has been called the "real name" Internet and those who see the value in the flexible identities of pseudonymity and anonymity has come to a head. Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg is the current face of the "real-name" movement. He is certainly not alone; Google+ was originally designed so that people had to sign up using real names. The news site *Huffington Post* changed its commenting function so that people could only comment through their Facebook identities (Kirkland, 2014). Blizzard embraced the "Real ID" to force gamers to tie their accounts to their offline identities (Blizzard Entertainment, 2014). On the other side of the debate, online activists such as Chris Poole and scholars such as danah boyd (2011) and Bernie Hogan (2013) have argued for the benefits of pseudonymity and anonymity. As these sources argue, pseudonymity can protect users' security while enabling them to participate freely online without the fears of "context collapse" that come with using "real names."

While researchers have recognized the value in the identity construction enabled by social practices of pseudonyms and anonymity, as Bernie Hogan argues, "there is much work to be done both academically and politically" [1]. Research still must fill gaps that "provide greater nuance to identity practices online" [2] by examining specific contexts in which pseudonymity or anonymity enable social practices that would be rendered difficult, if not impossible, with a totalizing embrace of the "real name" Internet. This article begins to fill that gap in the literature through a case study of a specific site of pseudonymous identity practice: the subreddit r/gonewild, which enables women (and occasionally men) to post nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves. The pictures then receive upvotes or downvotes from the Reddit community, and popular pictures also receive comments from other Redditors. As we argue in this article, r/gonewild

is an exemplary case of how the embrace of pseudonyms allows for certain identity practices that could be lost as sites increasingly attempt to tie all online activities to a singular “real” identity.

The goal of this article is to do more than to shed light on the identity practices of a single site; instead, our goal is to show the value of a case study approach to online identity that examines how different identity practices are shaped by specific contexts of use. There is value in discussing identity in broad terms, but there is also value in focusing attention on individual practices of a single site. To make our case, we begin by examining anonymity debates through a focus on social theories of the self, specifically the concept of the “presentation of self” popularized by Erving Goffman (1990). We then discuss anonymity debates that focus on arguments about how online safety and security are impacted by anonymous and pseudonymous practices. We conclude with our case study of r/gonewild. Our examination of r/gonewild examines the practices of users and links these practices to concepts of the construction of self and debates about whether anonymity either promotes or harms the security of individuals online. We show why it is important to contextualize discussions of identity while also arguing that much of the richness — even if that richness can at times offend certain sensibilities — of online communities may be lost in a rush to embrace the singular identities of the “real name” Internet movement.

Beyond the ‘anonymity continuum’

Anonymity is not a binary or a simple switch between being completely identifiable or completely anonymous: practices of anonymity are highly complex. A useful starting point from which to consider these complexities is the idea of an “anonymity continuum” to represent the many shades of identification possible online. Judith Donath argued before the popularization of contemporary social media that “full anonymity is one extreme of a continuum that runs from the totally anonymous to the thoroughly named” [3]. This is echoed by Jessica Beyer (2012), who struggled when categorizing sites into “anonymous” and “not anonymous”: “instead, I ended up with a continuum.” The “anonymity continuum” becomes problematic when a flat line between two binary opposites is assumed to account for all the nuances within anonymity practices. Hua Qian and Craig Scott (2007) also refer to the anonymity continuum, but argue that it is complex continuum that is shaped by the affordances of communication technology. This article moves beyond a continuum into thinking about anonymity practices, which include pseudonyms (Lewis Carroll and John Le Carre), mononyms (Madonna), stage names (Buck Angel), anglicized names (“Michael” instead of the Slavic “Mykhailo”), usernames or handles that either play on a given name (grassisleena) or avoid mentioning a given name at all (labcoatman), and the interplay between these malleable identities. On r/gonewild, women are most often revealing their own bodies, but not the identity markers of their name or face.

Social media sites vary as to whether their users are allowed to communicate through an identity that does not include their “real”, “legal”, or “common” name. Facebook explicitly states in its user policies that people are expected to have one identity (Facebook, 2013), and use legal names and photographs of their own body in their profile. The site even recently took down profiles of drag queens who were using their stage names instead of their legal names (Buhr, 2014). Other social media sites encode different identity practices into the structure of the site. For example, online dating site OkCupid does not allow people to use real names but requires people to post pictures of their face. The popular social news site Reddit relies on pseudonymity in which users must create a screen name that follows them across the site. 4chan and other sites like Yik Yak do not use pseudonyms: instead, all posts are completely anonymous.

Anonymity and pseudonymity are not neutral states. When anonymous Internet users are the subject of mainstream news articles, it is often in the context of either large-scale political protests, or hacking, trolling, deceiving, or abusing others on the Internet through inflammatory posts. A few examples include calling for harassment laws to be enforced more thoroughly, justified with an example of child exploitation material posted on the Facebook pages of two murdered children (Stafford, 2012); blaming anonymity for the “explosion of cybercrime that has swept across the Web” (Markoff, 2010); proposing uniform online identities that would function like a “driver’s license” to increase trust online (Geist, 2014); and describing “hackers’ collective” Anonymous’ sabotage of the official Web site and Twitter account of North Korea (Alexander, 2013). Taken together, articles like these link anonymity and pseudonymity with criminality and chaos, perpetrating mistrust of those who do not wish to reveal their “real” identity online. But while extreme cases such as these do exist, this article argues that both anonymity and pseudonymity allow people to enact specific, and arguably valuable, identity practices online.

Anonymity, authenticity, and the search for the self

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg famously claimed that “having two identities for yourself is an example of

a lack of integrity" [4]. His sister Randi, Facebook's marketing director, argued that anonymity on the Internet should be eradicated altogether and that antisocial behavior is a product of anonymity: "People behave a lot better when they have their real names down [...] people hide behind anonymity and they feel like they can say whatever they want behind closed doors" (R. Zuckerberg in Galperin, 2011).

Another Facebook employee — product design manager Julie Zhuo — also argued in the *New York Times* that online anonymity leads to antisocial behavior, which "pollutes" online conversations (Zhuo, 2010). To make her case, she drew upon Plato's parable of the ring of Gyges, which gave its owner the power of invisibility. Plato observed that any man who put on the ring would become a thief because he could not be apprehended for his crimes. According to Plato:

"No man is just of his own free will [...] he will always do wrong when he gets the chance. If anyone who had the liberty [of the ring of Gyges] neither wronged nor robbed his neighbour, men would think him a most miserable idiot." [5]

Understanding anonymity as the cause of such deviant behavior is an attractive prospect, as this also identifies a simple solution to combatting incivility online: get rid of anonymity. Implied in the Zuckerbergs' arguments is that sites requesting users to display their names will attract well-behaved users; of course, one such site is Facebook.

It is not an exaggeration to argue that Facebook, and by default Mark Zuckerberg, has become a synecdoche for the "real-name" anti-anonymity movement. Facebook is the largest social network site in the world and by the end of 2013 had 1.23 billion active users (Sedghi, 2014). But to understand Facebook as a standalone site is a mistake, as argued by José van Dijck (2013) in her analysis of the political economy of social media sites. As van Dijck argues, Facebook's goal is to tie its data to many sites across the Internet through its API that adds "like" buttons to pages and enable users to "share" pages with their Facebook network directly from the external site. Most importantly for discussions of online anonymity, Facebook has also begun to grow its "Facebook Connect" service that gives people the option of logging in to external sites through their Facebook account. This, in effect, means that people are tying a diverse set of online practices back to the singular identity crafted on their Facebook page. It is also a reminder that "real name" debates online cannot be divorced from the political economy of the Internet; no one has more to gain from the "real name" Internet than does Facebook.

What the Zuckerbergs' comments ultimately reflect is a view that identity can be singular, that authenticity equals complete openness. Similar arguments have been made by former Google's CEO Eric Schmidt, who argued that "if you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it in the first place" (Schmidt in Esguerra, 2009). What Schmidt's quote and Zuckerberg's discussion of authenticity represent is a misunderstanding of both privacy and how identity is enacted both online and offline. Instead, as Erving Goffman's (1990) influential work on the presentation of self has shown, identity is not a singular thing; identity is a role people play that shifts as audience and other contextual factors shift. The "self" people present is never a full representation of who someone is, nor is it a fixed identity that cannot shift as other factors shift. After all, most people would act one way on a Friday night out with friends and another way on a Sunday dinner with family.

The difference between the offline situations Goffman analysed and the online situations discussed by Zuckerberg and Schmidt is that the presentation of self offline is more territorially bounded. A woman out with friends has her friends as an audience; her family is a different audience located in a different physical setting. In this way, the bounding of social situations works as an identity practice that is not dissimilar to the activity of creating different pseudonymous identities online.

Related to the idea that context influences how people present their identity, Louis Althusser (2008) argued that identity is culturally constructed by the ongoing process of people being interpellated into social roles: for example, the woman out on Friday night would be hailed with an affectionate greeting, therefore interpellating her into the role of "friend," ready to share intimate details about her life and to listen closely to her companion. No one would ever take Schmidt's statement and apply it to offline life. It would be akin to telling someone they should not have sex with their partner if they do not want coworkers to know about it. That obviously does not work as a view of social life offline, in part because of the boundedness of social contexts. Of course, even offline the contexts of social situations do occasionally collapse. As Marwick and Ellison (2012) point out, social situations such as weddings and graduation parties may throw an individual's previously segmented social networks into contact, but in offline life, that kind of collapse is the exception, not the norm.

This removal of the territorial boundedness of identity construction that occurs on social media has been labelled "context collapse" by Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011). Context collapse refers to the tendency online for people to have to interact and construct identity in front of their entire social network, not the segments that are typical offline. For example, whereas it is unlikely that a woman would rarely be in a room with different groups of friends, her co-workers, her ex-partners, her new partner, and her immediate and extended family, that situation becomes the norm on social network sites like Facebook and Twitter that merge previously discrete groups. That kind of context collapse becomes even more

pronounced with services like Facebook Connect that carry identity across a variety of very different sites that enable very different practices. This type of singular identity that merges social groups and previously unrelated practices may represent the kind of “authenticity” Zuckerberg supposedly values, but it is inaccurate to say that type of authenticity is truly found in our offline lives.

Of course, Zuckerberg and his colleagues represent only one side of the online anonymity debate. Possibly the most public figure who represents the other side is Chris Poole, the founder of the anonymous image board 4chan. Poole (known publicly only as “Moot” until 2010) disagrees with the Zuckerbergs, stating that, “Mark [has] said that identity is authenticity, that you are online who you are offline, and to have multiple identities is lacking in integrity. I think that’s nuts” (Poole in Krotoski, 2012). Poole argues that rather than online identity being like a mirror that reflects one true idea of self, people are instead more like diamonds: their identity is prismatic (Poole in OreillyMedia, 2011).

Poole’s arguments share some commonality with many of the studies that have applied Goffman’s theories of the presentation of self to social media sites (see Marwick and boyd, 2011; Murthy, 2012; Livingstone, 2008; van Dijck, 2013; Vitak, 2012). These articles tend to analyse impression management online as a practice rather than the representation of a “true” static identity. Most pertinently for this article, Bernie Hogan (2013) has used Goffman to explore the benefits of pseudonymity and anonymity in the context of social media. As he argues, people are interested in exploring different identities in different parts of their social life, similarly to how Poole argues that we are diamonds who look different depending on the angle. Hogan’s examples include a woman who wants to write ideologically on a blog but may not want her role as a supposedly objective Wikipedia editor to be damaged by her other, less neutral writings. This is one small example, but it shows the value of eschewing the totalizing control of the “real name” Internet and why claims to authenticity are inaccurate. Someone can be both a liberal writer and a neutral editor who follows Wikipedia’s rules; one aspect of the self is not more “authentic” than another. But for the separation of those identities to be possible, individual sites must allow for the freedom of pseudonymous identity construction. For that reason, we examine the practices of the women of r/gonewild to show how the use of pseudonyms allow these individuals to segment their r/gonewild behaviors from the other parts of their online identity. First, however, we examine the anonymity debate through the lens of security to examine a different part of the debate about identity online that is relevant to the social practices of r/gonewild.

Anonymity and security

Much of the popular debate about anonymity versus real names focuses on two related areas: trolling and safety. Trolling, and the related concept of flaming, has been around at least as long as people have been communicating using the Internet (Sternberg, 2013). Early Internet sites relied almost solely on textual cues, so there was little attempt to fix identity to corporeal bodies. Instead, as Donath and others argued (Lessig, 1999; Turkle, 1995), the presentation of self was more fluid online because people were freer to switch identities on a whim and construct a new identity through text. Of course, with that freedom came the associated practices of flaming and trolling. Flaming refers to hostile comments that often involve profanity and personal attacks. Likely the most famous description of flaming is Godwin’s Law, which only half humorously states that “as an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches 1” (Godwin, 1993). Trolling involves posting content designed to incite an emotional reaction in its audience. The comment might be presented in an innocent way, but the “troll” intends to anger or frustrate a group. For example, someone who goes to an Internet Movie Database message board to post about how terrible a beloved movie is intends to upset other users. Much of the research on trolling and flaming examines how the practices are enabled, and sometimes encouraged, by the anonymity of certain sites (Bergstrom, 2011).

Flaming and trolling have been widely studied in academic literature. They have been linked with masculinity, the lack of social cues of textual media, critique of the tragedy-obsessed media (Phillips, 2011), affective provocations that vitalize online participation (McCosker, 2014), and the asymmetrical relationship between people online. In fact, as Nancy Baym (2010) explains, flaming and trolling were two frequent topics that arose in much of the popular press discussions of the Internet in the 1990s. And they continue to be relevant to discussions of discussions of civility online, as can be seen by the Zuckerberg quotes discussed earlier and some prominent sites’ decision to ban anonymous comment posts, such as the Huffington Post, whose founder Arianna Huffington justified her decision by claiming that it will stop “trolls” from “hiding behind anonymity” (Kirkland, 2014).

Now, in the age of the hacker group Anonymous and other social activist groups, a related phenomenon has arisen: doxing, which involves groups of anonymous or pseudonymous users researching an individual and then publishing identifiable facts about that person. Doxing has been used for supposed social good, as in the case of the Anonymous offshoot KnightSec exposing the identities of people involved in the Steubenville rape case (Almasy, 2013), but anonymous and pseudonymous Internet users have also “doxed” people such as Zoe Quinn, a female video game developer who did little more than allegedly

cheat on her boyfriend and hold views of gender that offended some male gamers (Romano, 2014).

Flaming, trolling, and doxing are all negative consequences related to anonymity and pseudonymity online. As many people have argued (see Zhuo, 2010; Postmes, *et al.*, 1998; Christopherson, 2007), the ability to comment under disposable identities, or even under no identity in the case of anonymous comment sections, can encourage people to act in uncivil ways. Jaron Lanier (2010) even argued that the design of these anonymous systems “make people — all of us — less kind” [6]. Our argument is not that these points are wrong and not that there are no viable reasons for encouraging people to post under real names. The consequences of trolling, flaming, and doxing can be serious. Online commenters have practiced widespread sexual harassment on various sites against women (Hess, 2014; Baker, 2013); anonymous Twitter users have threatened athletes’ lives for making mistakes in games (Laird, 2012); and anonymous activists have doxed people by releasing potentially dangerous personal information such as home addresses and telephone numbers. For example, one police officer was doxed and threatened after pepper spraying a protestor in an Occupy protest in New York (Martin, 2011). So the arguments of people in support of the “real name” Internet do have merit, but as others have claimed, the embrace of real names can also negatively impact how people practice identity online.

One of the most prominent academic critics of the argument that the “real name” Internet makes online activity safer is danah boyd. When Google+ was originally released with a totalizing real name policy that forced users to sign up with their “real” names she came out against the policy, arguing that “real names policies aren’t empowering; they’re an authoritarian assertion of power over vulnerable people” (boyd, 2011). She was part of a backlash against the policy, which became known as the nymwars and resulted in large groups of people fighting to keep pseudonyms an option online. For example, protest site My Name Is Me (2011) featured stories from people who believed that Internet users need freedom to choose their name on social networks. Google+ has since rescinded its real name policy, three years after the nymwars, claiming the change will make Google+ “the welcoming and inclusive place we want it to be” (Google+, 2014). Facebook encountered a similar backlash when in 2014, drag queens and transgender people were having their accounts shut down for not using their “real” name on their profile. The hashtag #MyNameIs was circulated on social media and accompanied by an infographic listing reasons why they would want to use an alias, reasons that included being transgender, being stalked or harassed online, being a sex worker, or being a whistleblower (Stevenson, 2014).

As boyd points out, there are many viable reasons to segment one’s identity online that have nothing to do with harassing people or acting uncivilly in comment sections. Gay youths who cannot come out to their offline community may want to find people to talk to on various sites; teachers often want a public-facing profile but also want privacy as they interact on other sites; individuals may want to engage in niche communities on sites like Reddit without their Facebook friends knowing; and many people want to share political views without impacting their careers. While safety concerns about anonymity are real, it is also true that real names can make people feel less safe and can inhibit behaviors they engage in online.

In effect, pseudonyms and online anonymity can provide people with the safety and security to manage issues of context collapse online. As discussed in the previous section, the ability to interact using different identities allows people to operate within the type of bounded social situations that are typical in offline life. People are able to present one part of their self to one group of people while presenting another part of the self to other groups. As Hogan argues, “Pseudonyms are both an antecedent to this situation and also a partial solution. We may live in a global village but our huts still need curtains” [7].

Much research exists on identity online, including the presentation of self through social media, the dangers of anonymity, the benefits of anonymity, and individual protests such as the nymwars. However, as Hogan points out, understandings of anonymity and pseudonymity online can benefit from analyses of specific practices of identity on individual sites. For that reason, the final section of this article uses r/gonewild as a case study. In this final section, we examine how the women of r/gonewild use their Reddit pseudonyms to segment their actions on the site from other behavior online. We also examine how pseudonyms on the site enable people to protect their safety and security by exerting agency over their social situation. After all, as boyd argues, there are many practical reasons people do not want to share their identity online. R/gonewild is an exemplary case, but as we argue later, far from a unique one.

Reddit’s r/Gonewild

On Reddit, a social media site in which users post and vote on content in themed subreddits, identity appears simple but actually involves a range of practices that occupies much of the space in between being fully anonymous and fully identifiable. Unlike 4chan, on which most people post under the generic username “Anonymous”, or Facebook, which requires “people to provide the name they use in real life” (Facebook Help, 2014), people can browse Reddit without creating an account and sign up with just an e-mail address, username, and password. Although most people choose a pseudonym to use on Reddit, some use their legal name and even provide proof of their identity, for example when interacting with an

audience during an “Ask Me Anything” question and answer session. Others create temporary or “throwaway” accounts to use for one specific contribution, then abandon the account so the content is not linked back to their regular pseudonym.

On the subreddit r/gonewild, which describes itself as “an amateur exhibitionist community” (xs51, 2014), Redditors submit nude or semi-nude photos of themselves, accompanied by varying amounts of personal information. Posts to r/gonewild that include a face and real name are extremely rare: it is much more common to see images of bodies on the subreddit without faces, posted by a pseudonymous account. R/gonewild was established in 2009, four years after Reddit was founded, and is the most popular of all the NSFW (meaning “not safe for work” or adult content) subreddits, with almost 700,000 subscribers as of November 2014, a figure that does not capture all the visitors to the site, as it is possible to view the images without subscribing to the subreddit or even creating an account. According to one moderator, the site gets over one million visits every day (xs51, 2014). However, the most engaged visitors are the ones commenting and voting on the posted photos.

Content on r/gonewild is sorted by both algorithms and user votes: Redditors can give each post one upvote or one downvote, which gives points to both content and the individual users’ pseudonymous account. The system means that the most popular posts rise to the top of the page while less popular posts sink. The points also give the Redditors who create the posts “karma” points, so they function as both a symbol of quantitatively oriented content curation (Richterich, 2014) and a reward for popular content, signalling that the user is an active, contributing member of the site (Bergstrom, 2011). Redditors can become attached to their pseudonyms because the user accounts contain past accumulations of karma.

Posts on Reddit are not ranked, however, solely based on what receives the most karma points. Instead, Reddit uses a proprietary algorithm that attempts to display the best new content on the default r/gonewild page. The subreddit ultimately features six main homepages that represent six different algorithms that sort the content: “hot” (the default), “new,” “rising,” “controversial,” “top,” and “gilded.” The subreddit’s audience consistently upvote photos that fit the conventional pornography images of young, white, slender, female bodies (van der Nagel, 2013), meaning those bodies tend to dominate the “hot” section. On the other hand, the “controversial” page features content that has received many upvotes and downvotes, inevitably meaning that bodies that do not conform to the ideal, including males, are relegated to this section of the site. This complicates the idea of participation: the subreddit values those who willingly submit to the site and those who interact with the images, but not everyone gets the chance to have their photos featured prominently, meaning their submissions go ignored.

For the audience, a large part of the appeal of r/gonewild is that they are viewing, commenting and voting on photos that are submitted consensually for an exhibitionist thrill. This is formalized by r/gonewild’s process of verification: people must prove they have taken the photographs willingly, specifically for the site, by posting a picture that includes a handwritten sign with their Reddit username, a mention of r/gonewild, and the date. A moderator explains the verification process as one that is meant to protect those who submit: “We care about the person in the photographs and want to make sure he or she is not being exploited” (xs51, 2014). Those who browse the subreddit have referred to it as “ethical porn” (Redditor, 2012), as the verification process is meant to ensure the consent of those participating. Another Redditor elaborates:

“The thought of the boobies and behinds belonging to normal people really does it for me. Porn stars don’t really tickle my fancy (anymore). And they’re not random amateurs on the net, they’re redditors who share my interests, sense of humor, etc. [...] there’s a sort of intimacy that’s arousing” (Redditor, 2012).

This sense of intimacy is a key part of the pleasure of the subreddit: the audience feels connected to the people in the images, while those submitting are able to enact a playful, sexual identity while preserving their safety in ways that would not be possible on the “real name” Internet. Managing context collapse (Marwick and boyd, 2011) in this way then becomes a form of agency: these women are taking control of their behavior, choosing the content they want to share and their audience for it. The following sections provide more detail about how pseudonymous practices are central to social practices of r/gonewild, first by examining how these practices relate to the prismatic self, and then relating these practices to issues of security and safety surrounding online identity.

Authenticity on Reddit Gonewild: The construction of the prismatic self

The r/gonewild subreddit can obviously be criticized for the way it objectifies women and celebrates the male gaze in which Redditors who are typically male rank and comment on female bodies. However, the subreddit also enables women to exert some control over their sexuality by choosing to consensually post

material, as evidenced by the verification system, and respond to commenters. The point of this article is not to criticize or praise the types of amateur pornography found on r/gonewild; rather, we are interested in how the site's pseudonyms allow for the playful sexual expression of the women who create and share the content consumed by the mostly male audience.

For those posting, pseudonyms provide a way to publicly share representations of a sexual self, without having the posts connected with the rest of that person's life. Using pseudonyms that emphasize various characteristics of the person posting instead of containing their real name, r/gonewild Redditors appeal to a sense of intimacy between themselves and their audience. Although in all likelihood those posting will never meet the people browsing their images, titles often specifically address the imagined audience as though they were in the same room: flirting, requesting validation of their sexual appeal, inviting sexual attention, asking for and responding to photo requests.

Susanna Paasonen (2011) claims that amateur pornography exists within "the social and material textures of everyday life" [8], which can be seen in many r/gonewild posts, as they often depict domestic locations such as the bedroom, bathroom, or kitchen, turning mundane activities such as homework, showering, or preparing meals into opportunities for sexual play. These are not photos to be connected to a social media profile with a real name, such as Facebook or LinkedIn; these photos are shared on a public platform, but with deliberate measures taken to keep the identity of the poster private. To return to Eric Schmidt's point that if you have something to hide, you should not be doing it, the people who post naked photos to r/gonewild are perfectly happy to take and share their photos — to a selected audience, in a specific context. If Schmidt insisted upon an approach in which everything shared on the Internet was shared under real names, avenues such as r/gonewild for sexual identity play would be eradicated.

R/gonewild does recognize the limits of pseudonymity and explicitly encourages its users to not reveal information that will tie their posts to their offline identity. The site's guidelines encourage people to post photos taken against a plain background, blur out identifying tattoos and birthmarks, and not include faces in images. These guidelines put the onus on the people submitting the photos to remain unidentifiable. There are warnings for posters in the "frequently asked questions" section of the site: one moderator cautions contributors that "even if you delete your content, it may already be in someone's personal collection and who knows what they might do with it later" (xs51, 2014). With this warning, r/gonewild alludes to the phenomenon of naked photos being published to a wider audience than originally intended. It also reinforces the idea that the people posting are amateur content producers, adding weight to the site's claims of authenticity. There is significant appeal in this, as explained by someone who browses r/gonewild:

"The real eroticism is that these are actual, genuine people, who are deciding, for their own thrill, to secretly expose themselves in a way that is impossible and taboo in daily casual life. It's not someone else's airbrushed concept of what women are: it's a carved out window into a specific person's actual secret life" (Redditor, 2013).

These remarks allude to the idea that each person has multiple, or as Chris Poole (in OreillyMedia, 2011) describes it, "prismatic" selves: calling the r/gonewild posts "secret" and a "window" into someone's life implies that these posts exist separately from the poster's everyday life, that the photographs must be submitted anonymously because they are sexual, and are therefore separate from the posters non-sexualized aspects of the self.

Bernie Hogan (2013) argues that pseudonyms are a way to manage the tension between context-specific impression management and persistent content online. On r/gonewild, this identity management can be seen in the posters' strategies of keeping their faces out of the photos, and their "real" names out of their pseudonyms. To describe this behavior as "taboo" suggests that if the posts on r/gonewild were not kept within that bounded space, the poster could be at risk.

Anonymity on Reddit Gonewild: Being seen while keeping safe

There are concerns for those who post to Reddit Gonewild, mostly framed in terms of negative consequences that can arise from the failure to segment this sexual identity away from other parts of online life, such as posts being taken out of context, embarrassment when friends, relatives, or colleagues see the images, reputation damage, or job prospects being diminished (xs51, 2014). These assume that the person posting would be adversely affected by the discovery that they post naked photographs of themselves on the Internet; people who work in the adult industry, are open with their body, or come from a cultural context in which nudity is not shameful may not find it so inhibiting. What can be more damaging is the targeted abuse that can follow if r/gonewild posts are linked with identifying information. Trolling and flaming on r/gonewild can occur whether a real name is given or not, but abusive comments and messages to pseudonymous accounts do not present the same amount of potential harm as being

able to contact someone in a space where physical attacks are possible. According to a Pew Internet survey (Duggan, 2014), young women are disproportionately likely to experience online harassment, and there are numerous cases of targeted, repetitive online abuse levelled at women online, such as journalist Amanda Hess (2014) going to the police after receiving death threats, or feminist pop culture critic Anita Sarkeesian being forced to cancel a talk at a university after threats that she would be shot to death (Hern, 2014). Keeping safe from harassment online is not simply a case of removing anonymity from both the harassers and the harassed, but part of a new digital literacy that involves knowing both the opportunities and the risks of posting to social media sites like Reddit. On r/gonewild, this is communicated through the Frequently Asked Questions document, written by moderator xs51 (2014), which outlines not only the sex-positive and mutually consensual aim of the subreddit and how to post, but some of the potential safety consequences of posting naked photos there.

As previously discussed, there is no shortage of arguments that trolling abounds on the Internet and that many people equate anonymity and pseudonymity with incivility, particularly in online spaces where this is the norm. But rather than ban anonymous comments in the hopes that this will curb antisocial interactions, it may be more helpful to foster a respectful culture within the site itself, which is the aim of the sidebar rules and Frequently Asked Questions document on r/gonewild. In another reminder that identity debates are crucial to the political economy of the Internet, it is in Reddit's commercial interests to aim for the kinds of interactions that will attract more users, and therefore more user-contributed data they can sell to advertisers to profit from. Therefore, Redditors are allowed to present the identity they choose, but this does not mean they exist in an unregulated space: there are Reddit-wide and subreddit-specific rules about what content can be posted, and what kind of conduct is accepted. Reddit-wide rules about behavior can be summed up by the first rule: "remember the human" (Reddiquette, 2014), which amounts to being respectful of others and contributing meaningful content. People on r/gonewild are asked to be courteous by not being an "asshole," or making "creepy, threatening, or malicious comments" (xs51, 2014); those who do not comply are reported to the moderators, who are able to delete comments or ban the users' pseudonymous account as punishment.

While these codes of conduct do not guarantee that no offensive or abusive comments are ever posted, neither does demanding "real" names: accountable or not, inevitably, some people are going to act outside of the rules. Instead, policing the site helps to create a space in which the norm is for those posting to be rewarded for their contributions, not harassed or made uncomfortable.

Conclusion: What would be lost in a move to the "real name" Internet?

As this case study of Reddit Gonewild has shown, practices of anonymity and pseudonymity may be complex, but they add texture to being social on the Internet. The option of not using real names online allows people to control what they reveal about themselves and who they reveal it to, opening up possibilities for identity exploration, exhibitionism, and connections with people who share different interests without being limited by the social factors that routinely shape everyday life. When social media site Google+ was announced, the identity policy claimed that using a "common name" on the site "makes connecting with people on the Web more like connecting with people in the real world" (Google+ Page and Profile Names, 2011). But using the benign term "connecting" belies the way that human interactions work: in the "real world," people often communicate without their "real" name attached, in situations like shopping, dining, catching public transport, and partying. Offline, people can be privately sexual by locating their actions in the specific, bounded context of a time and place. Online, pseudonyms evoke this private, bounded context, while restructuring sexual encounters in terms of persistence, visibility, spreadability, and searchability [9].

Certainly, there is room for negativity and antisocial behavior in spaces that allow people to interact without showing their faces or "real" names. But, as the case of r/gonewild suggests, to take away, or even stigmatize, anonymous communication by moving towards a "real name" Internet is to shut off important avenues for productive identity play, self-exploration, and behavior contextualisation online.

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Notes

1. Hogan, 2013, p. 304.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Donath, 1999, p. 51.
4. Zuckerberg in Lovink, 2011, p. 41.
5. Plato, 2007, p. 44.
6. Lanier, 2010, p. 61.
7. Hogan, 2013, p. 304.
8. Paasonen, 2011, p. 98.
9. boyd, 2014, p. 11.

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