**Anonymity**

Anonymity, long a hallmark of communication on the internet, is a promoted feature of applications (Whisper, Secret) and forums (Reddit) allowing users to share information secretly.

**How It’s Developing**

Social media provides a platform to share information broadly with friends, family, and the public.  However, many of the most popular applications, notably Facebook, Twitter, and Google, connect communications to an authenticated and traceable individual profile.

The development of apps and forums that specifically market anonymity as a feature offer users a similar platform for sharing information, but limit the potential for those communications to be connected to any single individual. In many ways this is a return to early online culture (“no one knows you’re a dog”) that offered users a space with few restrictions and where people could do and say things with little consequence, but updated to an era with even more users and in a mobile environment. [[1](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/anonymity#Notes and Resources)]

Information shared via anonymous apps includes a range of content including emotional confessions, workplace secrets, personal boasts or bragging, and inspirational sentiments. Comments, as most do, range from the positive and affirming to the negative and critical, but many of the platforms actively discourage negative posts and comments, with one of the more popular applications, Whisper, reporting that negative comments and posts make up a “single-digit percentage” of the application’s total. [[2](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/anonymity#Notes and Resources)]

Anonymous content has proven popular among users within a given network and has also become valuable fodder for news organizations. Whisper developed a strong relationship with Buzzfeed, wherein BuzzFeed curated related content from Whisper posts ([19 Brutally Honest Teacher Confessions](http://www.buzzfeed.com/ariellecalderon/brutally-honest-teacher-confessions#.omm4Po3j2X)) and Whisper alerted BuzzFeed to trending content. [[3](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/anonymity#Notes and Resources)] Even more newsworthy is content provided by insiders in business, entertainment, government or the military, which can appear by anonymous post before reporters might otherwise be able to break a story. [[4](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/anonymity#Notes and Resources)]

Anonymous applications may capitalize on a public increasingly weary of being tracked. Several recent stories have brought to light the limited anonymity these applications actually provide. Anonymous social networks likely still track user data location, including for those who have opted out of geolocation services, even if they do not collect “personally identifiable information (name, phone, email, address).” [[5](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/anonymity#Notes and Resources)] Social networking apps, which utilize GPS coordinates, connect to app store accounts and phone numbers, and rely on password chains, challenge any potential for absolutely true anonymity and reveal something of the challenge for privacy in our mobile connected world. [[6](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/anonymity#Notes and Resources)]  In light of the newsworthy nature of some posts, some applications have even devised systems to monitor the most newsworthy users (business insiders, military and government personnel) through their mapping tools. [[7](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/anonymity#Notes and Resources)]

**Why It Matters**

Anonymity, wherever it occurs and for whatever reasons, may be easily used to promote racist, sexist, offensive, and horrible sentiments. [[8](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/anonymity#Notes and Resources)] Libraries and librarians may fill a growing need for open dialog and reputable information.

The rise of anonymity and the vulnerabilities it exposes, especially for governments and businesses, may lead to a movement against it. [[9](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/anonymity#Notes and Resources)] Understanding the role anonymity plays in free speech and intellectual freedom may become increasingly important for libraries and librarians.

For some users, anonymity provides opportunities for deeper discussion and personal revelation. If anonymity can help build community, it may take on a more significant use than simple secret sharing. [[10](http://www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/future/trends/anonymity#Notes and Resources)]

**Notes and Resources**

[1] "Sign of the Times – The Intimacy of Anonymity." Tim Wu. *T Magazine* (*The New York Times*). June 3, 2014. Available from [http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/03/oversharing-facebook-insta...](http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/03/oversharing-facebook-instagram-whisper-secret/)

[2] "Confessional in the Palm of Your Hand." Rachel Metz. *MIT Technology Review*. October 1, 2014. Available from[http://www.technologyreview.com/review/531211/confessional-in-the-palm-o...](http://www.technologyreview.com/review/531211/confessional-in-the-palm-of-your-hand/)

[3] "BuzzFeed Teams Up With Ex-Gawker Traffic Guru at Whisper." Jason Abbruzzese. *Mashable*. March 24, 2014. Available from [http://mashable.com/2014/03/24/buzzfeed-teams-up-with-ex-gawker-traffic-...](http://mashable.com/2014/03/24/buzzfeed-teams-up-with-ex-gawker-traffic-guru-at-whisper/)

[4] "Revealed: How Whisper App Tracks ‘Anonymous’ Users." Paul Lewis and Dominic Rushe. *The Guardian*. October 16, 2014. Available from [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/16/-sp-revealed-whisper-app-tr...](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/16/-sp-revealed-whisper-app-tracking-users)

[5] "Whisper: The Anonymous App That Isn’t So Anonymous After All." John McDermott. *DigDay*. October 16, 2014. Available from [http://digiday.com/platforms/whispers-publisher-outreach-strategy-backfi...](http://digiday.com/platforms/whispers-publisher-outreach-strategy-backfires/)

[6] "Your Favorite Anonymous App is Not Anonymous At All." Adam Clark Estes. *Gizmodo*. December 9, 2014. Available from [http://gizmodo.com/your-favorite-anonymous-app-is-not-anonymous-at-all-a...](http://gizmodo.com/your-favorite-anonymous-app-is-not-anonymous-at-all-an-1668745165)

[7] "Revealed: How Whisper App Tracks ‘Anonymous’ Users." Paul Lewis and Dominic Rushe. *The Guardian*. October 16, 2014. Available from [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/16/-sp-revealed-whisper-app-tr...](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/16/-sp-revealed-whisper-app-tracking-users)

[8] "Sign of the Times – The Intimacy of Anonymity." Tim Wu. *T Magazine* (*The New York Times*). June 3, 2014. Available from [http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/03/oversharing-facebook-insta...](http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/03/oversharing-facebook-instagram-whisper-secret/)

[9] "Why the World Needs Anonymous." Gabriella Coleman. *MIT Technology Review*. November 7, 2014. Available from<http://www.technologyreview.com/view/532381/why-the-world-needs-anonymous/>

[10] "Anonymous Apps Are So Scary, They May Just Help Us Discover Ourselves." Mat Honan. *Wired*. May 21, 2014. Available from <http://www.wired.com/2014/05/anonymous-apps/>