The Value of Anonymity: Evidence from Wikipedia

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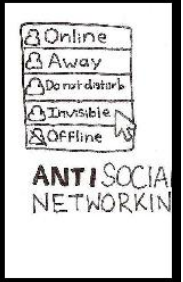
Nazanin Andalibi, Shruti Sannon: University of Michigan
Aaron Shaw: Northwestern University
Nora McDonald: University of Cincinnati

November 12, 2022


Online
Away
Do not disturb
Invisible
Offline
ANTI SOCIA
NETWORKIN


freedom


In the future
everyone will be
anonymous
for 15 minutes


I COULD
LOSE MY
FOR Having
VOICE


nous observe

[“Anonymity and Privacy,” mike (fbobolas). CC BY-SA 2.0. Via flickr.]

Why do people seek anonymity?

1. Violation of Laws and Terms of Service?

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[“Image of Bassel Khartabil (Safadi) taken in Seoul” Joi Ito. CC 2.0. Via Wikimedia Commons.]

[Image of Pavel Pernikau from https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/pavel-pjarnikau. CC By 3.0.]

[Image of Mark Bernstein from https://prisoners.spring96.org/en/person/mark-bernsztein. CC By 3.0.]

Service provider perspective

1. Concerns about harassment

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1. Concerns about harassment
2. Impact of identity policies can be hard to see

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4. Platforms see a "closure = safety" versus "openness = risk" trade-off

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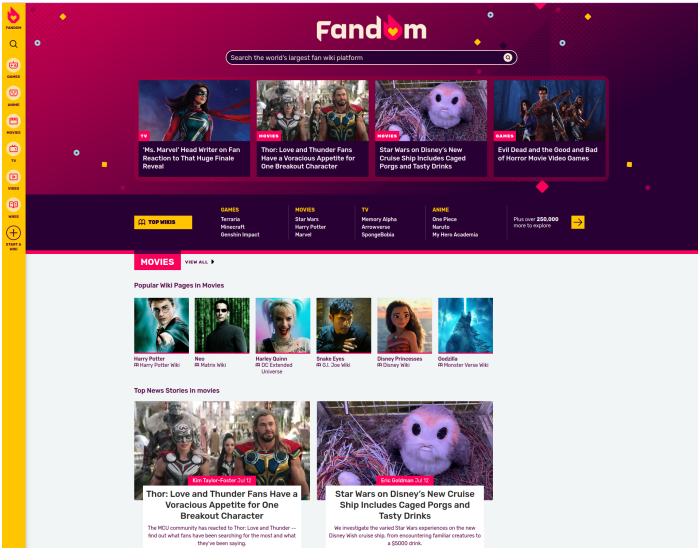
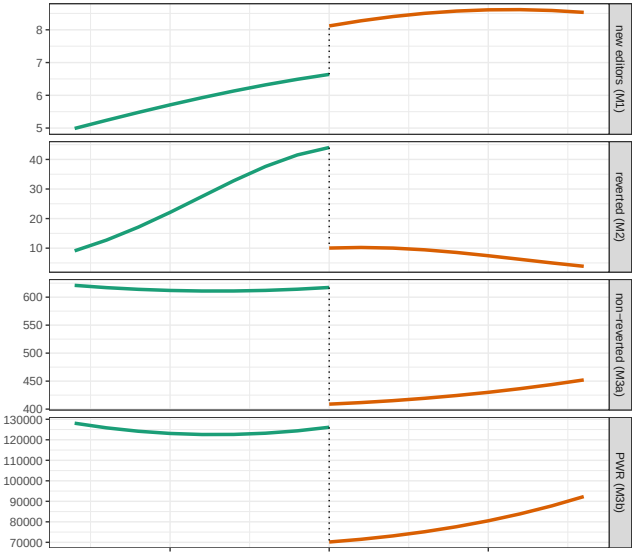
Hidden Costs: Fandom.com Example



Natural Experiment: Enable Account Requirement



Hidden Costs and Spill-over

Identity policy changes can deter positive participation

BM Hill, A Shaw. The Hidden Costs of Requiring Accounts: Quasi-Experimental Evidence From Peer Production. Communication Research. Preprint: `https://arxiv.org/abs/2111.10688`

Wikipedia Example

Welcome to Wikipedia,

the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit.
6,546,853 articles in English

From today's featured article

A hand reaching for the necklace worn by Annabelle West (Laura La Plante)

The Cat and the Canary is a 1927 American silent horror film directed by German Expressionist filmmaker Paul Leni. An adaptation of John Willard's 1922 black-comedy play of the same name, the film stars Laura La Plante, Forrest Stanley and Creighton Hale. The plot revolves around the death of a man, and the reading of his will 20 years later. A woman inherits her uncle's fortune, but when she and her family spend the night in his mansion they are stalked by a mysterious figure *(scene pictured)*. They have also been told that a lunatic has escaped from an asylum and is hiding in the mansion. The film is part of the genre of comedy horror films inspired by 1920s Broadway plays. *The Cat and the Canary* blends expressionism with humor, a style for which Leni was notable. It was influential in the "old dark house" genre of films popular from the 1930s through the 1950s. The film was one of Universal's early horror productions, and is considered to be the "cornerstone of Universal's school of horror". **(Full article...)**

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Did you know ...

Sunsphere at the 1982 World's Fair

- ... that touch-screen technology, pay-at-the-pump, car phones, and Coca-Cola Cherry were shown at the **1982 World's Fair** *(pictured)*?
- ... that **Yosef Shenberger** was inspired to add stained glass and other decorative elements to his synagogues through his study of ancient ruins?
- ... that the software-testing framework **pytest** has been described as a key ecosystem project for the Python programming language?
- ... that **Irving L. Branch** headed the X-15 rocket program and the first test flight of the B-70 Valkyrie supersonic bomber?
- ... that the **Maizbhandari** order of Sufism in Bangladesh is each year host to reportedly the fifth-largest gathering of Muslims in the world?
- ... that Danish-born soprano **Louise Janssen** appeared at the Grand Théâtre de Lyon as Eva in the French premiere of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*?
- ... that **HMS *Chichester*** was designed to carry 44 guns but never carried more than 22?
- ... that **a South Dakota radio station** once played nothing but various recordings of "Amazing Grace"?

Archive · Start a new article · Nominate an article

In the news

Ranil Wickremesinghe

- Amid protests over the economic crisis, Ranil Wickremesinghe *(pictured)* **is elected** President of Sri Lanka by the parliament.
- **Heat waves** across Europe leave more than 4,200 people dead.
- NASA releases **the first operational image** taken by the James Webb Space Telescope.
- Angola's former president **José Eduardo dos Santos** dies at the age of 79.
- Former Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe **is assassinated** while giving a speech in Nara.

Ongoing: COVID-19 pandemic · Russian invasion of Ukraine
Recent deaths: Ángela Abós Ballarín · Larry Jeffrey · Patrick Michaels · José Ramón Balaguer · Sixtus Lanner · Claes Oldenburg

Nominate an article

On this day

July 21: **Belgian National Day** (1831)

Sirimavo Bandaranaike

- 1378 – Unrepresented labourers **revolted and violently took over** the government of the Republic of Florence, demanding that they be granted political office.
- 1952 – **An earthquake** registering 7.3 M_w struck the southern San Joaquin Valley in California, causing 12 deaths and an estimated $60 million in property damage.
- 1959 – The inaugural **International Mathematical Olympiad**, the leading mathematical competition for pre-university students, began in Romania.
- 1960 – **Sirimavo Bandaranaike** *(pictured)* was elected the prime minister of Ceylon, becoming the world's first democratically elected female head of government.
- 1977 – Libyan forces carried out a raid at Sallum, sparking **a four-day war** with Egypt.

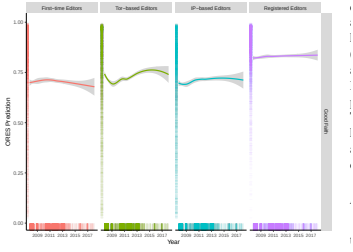
Fiammetta Wilson (d, 1920) · **Louis Vauxcelles** (d, 1943) · **Riwanu Lukman** (d, 2014)

More anniversaries: July 20 · **July 21** · July 22

Archive · By email · List of days of the year

But anonymity-seekers may be a lot like everyone else

- Context: Wikipedia



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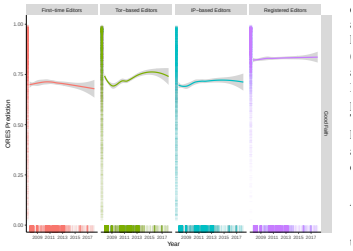

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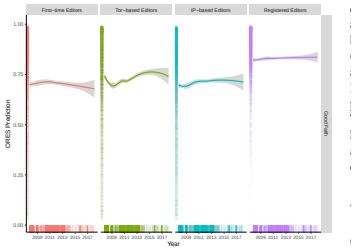

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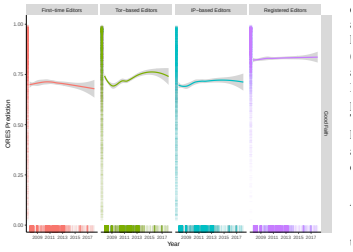
- Different topics (more politics, religion, tech, less American football)



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But the bad stuff!

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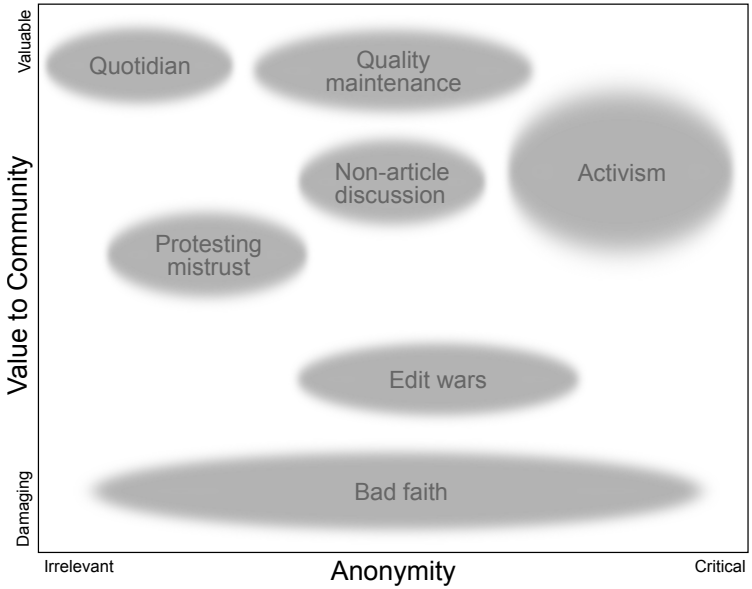
Analyzing contributions



Successful Strategies for Remaining Open to Anonymity Seekers

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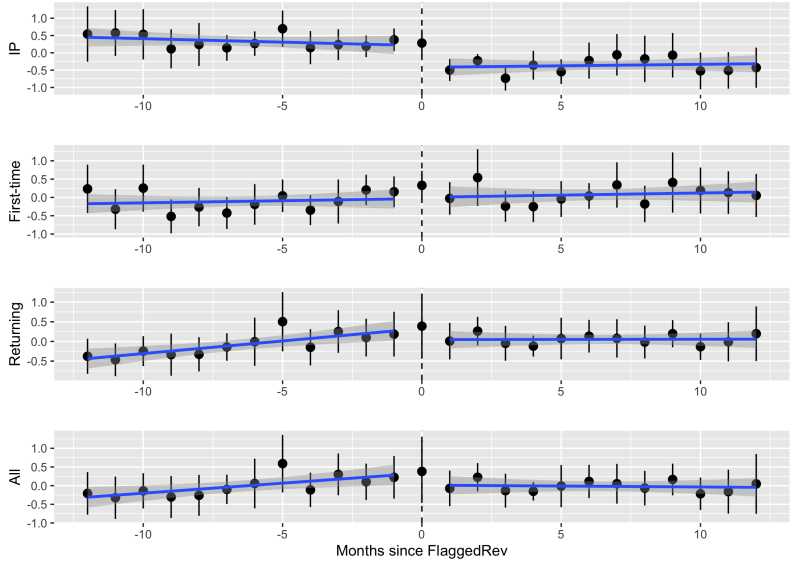
Success Example: Pre-publication Moderation



Forthcoming and Future Work

1. Examining the value of anonymity in handling taboo subjects (Under Review)

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2. Extending pre-publication moderation solutions (In Preparation)
3. Finding new settings and techniques for measuring the value of anonymity

My case to you

People have good reasons to be anonymous online....

My case to you

People have good reasons to be anonymous online....

but platforms and communities may respond to them with suspicion

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but platforms and communities may respond to them with suspicion and not take up their perspective.

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Anonymity-seekers are often comparable to other groups...

like newcomers and casual contributors.

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like newcomers and casual contributors.

They may offer some unique value or tackle riskier types of work.

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When they act badly, it may be similar to bad behavior we see from others...

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although banning them for being an anonymity seeker may make them angry, or trigger a desire to subvert the block....

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When they act badly, it may be similar to bad behavior we see from others...

although banning them for being an anonymity seeker

may make them angry, or trigger a desire to subvert the block....

and there are options for mitigating negative behaviors without banning.

How can we respond?

- Challenge assumptions about anonymity—in policies, platforms, and research.

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- Continue to innovate around anonymity.

How can we respond?

- Challenge assumptions about anonymity—in policies, platforms, and research.
- Continue to innovate around anonymity.
- Build partnerships between platforms, research teams, and communities.

Let's connect!

Curious about these results?

Anticipating changes in identity policies?

Interested in research about anonymity?

Let's talk!

kaylea@uw.edu

@kayleachampion

social.coop/@kaylea

`theanonymityproject.org`

→ executive summary here: `kayleachampion.com`

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