

# What's Anonymity Worth?

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

- Anonymity and privacy are sometimes used interchangeably

Westin, A. F. (1967). *Privacy and Freedom*. Atheneum.

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# Privacy and Anonymity

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- Anonymity and privacy are sometimes used interchangeably
- Privacy has multiple “substates”:
  - solitude
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  - intimacy (and community)
  - anonymity: the degree to which identifiable details are known or can be known by those receiving communication from us

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# Why do people seek anonymity?

## 1. Criminality?



A Forte, N Andalibi, R Greenstadt. Privacy, Anonymity, and Perceived Risk in Open Collaboration: A Study of Tor Users and Wikipedians in *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW 2017)*. <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2998181.29982733>

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2. Principle?



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3. Safety?



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# Service provider perspective

## 1. Concerns about harassment



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>

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# Service provider perspective

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



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3. Perspective of vulnerable populations may be unknown



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4. Platforms see a “safety—risk” trade-off



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2. Impact of identity policies can be hard to see
3. Perspective of vulnerable populations may be unknown
4. Platforms see a “closure = safety” versus “openness = risk” flavored trade-off



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# Hidden Costs and Spill-over

1. Identity policy changes can deter positive contributions



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# Hidden Costs and Spill-over

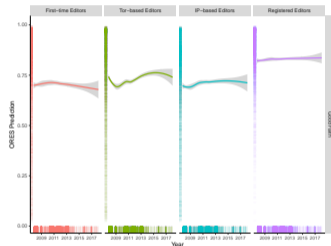
1. Identity policy changes can deter positive contributions
2. Negative behaviors may have some positive spill-over



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# But anonymity-seekers may be a lot like everyone else

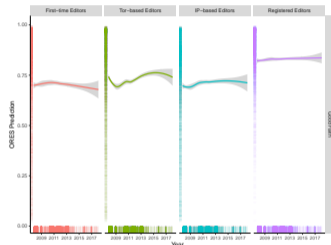
- Context: Wikipedia



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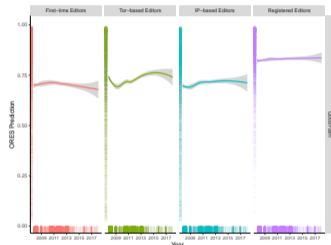
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  - Newcomers
  - Contributors without accounts
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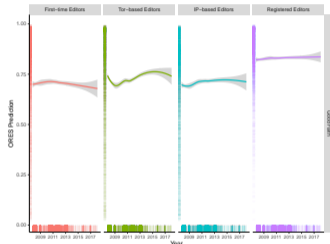
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- Different topics (more politics, religion, tech, less American football)



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## Deep Dive: What were those contributions?

- Many typical edits:
- typo fixes
- fact updating –

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- Some contributions that suggest vulnerability:
  - activism
  - removing conspiracy theories

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# But the bad stuff!

- Same four groups:
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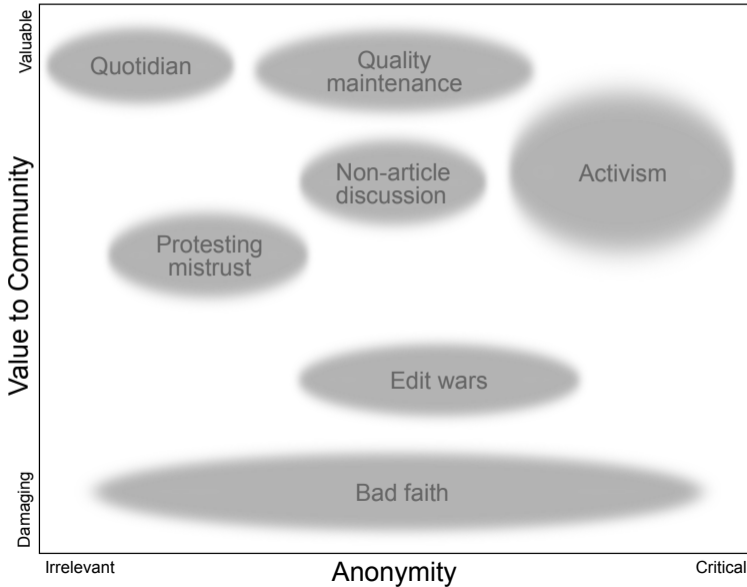
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- Lower rates of vandalism from Tor than those without accounts
- Tor users challenged attempts to block them



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# Analyzing contributions



# Successful Strategies for Remaining Open to Anonymity Seekers

1. Incorporate anonymity-seekers into the operational model

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## Forthcoming and Future Work

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2. What would it take to bring anonymity-seekers back into the community?
3. Finding new techniques for measuring the value of anonymity

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

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

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



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

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and **there are options** for mitigating negative behaviors without banning.

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- Keep participation barriers low – it helps newcomers and casual users, not just anonymity seekers
- Collect data and do research about the impacts of policy changes around identity

# Let's connect!



Curious about these results?

Interested in research about  
anonymity?

Let's talk!

kaylea@uw.edu

@kayleachampion

social.coop/@kaylea

[theanonymityproject.org](https://theanonymityproject.org)

[kayleachampion.com](https://kayleachampion.com)

Looking for more research on privacy? Check out PoPETS:  
<https://petsymposium.org/popets> – it's Open Access!