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# Upending Anonymity, These Days the Web Unmasks Everyone



Rich Lam/Getty Images

It took just a day for the Internet to identify the "kissing couple" as Scott Jones and Alex Thomas.

By BRIAN STELTER  
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Not too long ago, theorists fretted that the Internet was a place where anonymity thrived.

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Now, it seems, it is the place where anonymity dies.

A commuter in the New York area who verbally tangled with a conductor last Tuesday — and defended herself by asking “Do you know what schools I’ve been to and how well-educated I am?” — was publicly identified after a fellow rider posted a cellphone video of the encounter on YouTube. The woman, who had gone to N.Y.U., was ridiculed by a cadre of bloggers, one of whom [termed it](#) the latest episode of “Name and Shame on the Web.”

Women who were online pen pals of former

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A blogger who claimed to be a Syrian-American calling herself "Gay Girl in Damascus" was revealed as Tom MacMaster, 40.

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Representative Anthony D. Weiner similarly learned how quickly Internet users can sniff out all the details of a person's online life. So did the men who set fire to cars and looted stores in the wake of Vancouver's Stanley Cup defeat last week when they were identified, [tagged by acquaintances online](#).

The collective intelligence of [the Internet's two billion users](#), and the digital fingerprints that so many users leave on Web sites, combine to make it more and more likely that every embarrassing video, every intimate photo, and every indelicate e-mail is attributed to its source, whether that source wants it to be or not. This intelligence makes the public sphere more public than ever before and sometimes forces personal lives into public view.

To some, this could conjure up comparisons to the agents of repressive governments in the Middle East who

monitor online protests and exact retribution offline. But the positive effects can be numerous: criminality can be ferreted out, falsehoods can be disproved and individuals can become Internet icons.

When a freelance photographer, [Rich Lam](#), digested his pictures of the riots in Vancouver, he spotted [several shots](#) of a man and a woman, surrounded by police officers in riot gear, in the middle of a like-nobody's-watching kiss. When the photos were published, a worldwide dragnet of sorts ensued to identify the "kissing couple." Within a day, the couple's relatives had tipped off news Web sites to their identities, and there they were, Monday, [on the "Today" show](#): Scott Jones and Alex Thomas, the latest proof that thanks to the Internet, every day could be a day that will be remembered around the world.

"It's kind of amazing that there was someone there to take a photo," Ms. Thomas said on "Today."

The "kissing couple" will most likely enjoy just a tweet's worth of fame, but it is noteworthy that they were tracked down at all.

This erosion of anonymity is a product of pervasive social media services, cheap cellphone cameras, free photo and video Web hosts, and perhaps most important of all, a change in people's views about what ought to be public and what ought to be private. Experts say that Web sites like Facebook, which require real identities and encourage the sharing of photographs and videos, have hastened this change.

"Humans want nothing more than to connect, and the companies that are connecting us electronically want to know who's saying what, where," said Susan Crawford, a professor at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law. "As a result, we're more known than ever before."

This growing "publicness," as it is sometimes called, comes with significant consequences for commerce, for political speech and for ordinary people's right to privacy. There are efforts by governments and corporations to [set up online identity systems](#). Technology will play an even greater role in the identification of once-anonymous individuals: Facebook, for instance, is already using facial recognition technology in ways [that are alarming to European regulators](#).

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After the riots in Vancouver, locals needed no such facial recognition technology — they simply combed through social media sites to try to identify some of the people involved, like Nathan Kotylak, 17, a star on Canada’s junior water polo team.

On Facebook, Mr. Kotylak [apologized](#) for the damage he had caused. The finger-pointing affected not only him, it affected his family: local news media reported that his father, a doctor, had seen his ranking on a medical practice review site, [RateMDs.com](#), drop after people posted comments about his son’s involvement in the riots. Other people subsequently went to the Web site to defend the doctor and improve his ranking.

Predictably, there was a backlash to the Internet-assisted identification of the people involved in the alcohol-fueled riot. Camille Cacnio, a student in Vancouver who was photographed during the riot and who admitted to theft, wrote [on her blog](#) that the “21st-century witch hunt” on the Internet was “another form of mobbing.”

In the New York area, the commuter who was the subject of online scorn last week shut down both her Twitter and LinkedIn accounts once her name bubbled up on blogs. Though the person who originally posted the cellphone video took it down, other people quickly reposted it, giving the story new life. The original video poster remains anonymous because his or her YouTube account has been shut down.

Half a world away, in Middle Eastern countries like Iran and Syria, activists have sometimes succeeded in identifying victims of dictatorial violence through anonymously uploaded YouTube videos.

They have also succeeded in identifying fakes: In a widely publicized case this month, a blogger who claimed to be a Syrian-American lesbian and called herself “A Gay Girl in Damascus” was revealed to be an American man, Tom MacMaster.

The [sleuthing was led](#) by Andy Carvin, a strategist for NPR who has exhaustively covered the Middle Eastern protests on Twitter. When sources of his said they were skeptical of the blogger’s identity, “I just started asking questions on Twitter and Facebook,” Mr. Carvin [recalled on CNN](#). “Have any of you met her in person? Do you know her at all? The more I asked, the less I learned, because no one had met her, not even the reporters who had supposedly interviewed her in person.”

Mr. Carvin, his online followers and others used photos and server log data to connect the blog to Mr. MacMaster’s wife.

“Publicity” — something normally associated with celebrities — “is no longer scarce,” Dave Morgan, the chief executive of Simulmedia, [wrote in an essay this month](#).

He posited that because the Internet “can’t be made to forget” images and moments from the past, like an outburst on a train or a kiss during a riot, “the reality of an inescapable public world is an issue we are all going to hear a lot more about.”

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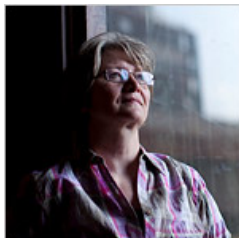
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