

The New York Times

Room for Debate: A Running Commentary on the News

[« Room for Debate Home](#)[« Back to Discussion](#)

You're Mad! You're on YouTube!

Will the inability to remain invisible stop people from losing their tempers and inhibitions in public?

The Virtues of Anonymity

Updated June 22, 2011, 12:23 AM

Daniel J. Solove is a professor at George Washington University Law School and founder of TeachPrivacy. He is the author of "Nothing to Hide" and "The Future of Reputation."

Anonymity on the Internet has often made people nastier and more crude in their speech. It allows them to speak and do things without having to take responsibility. Anonymity allows people to unleash their id and all the ugliness they conceal beneath their polite facades.

Given the dark slimy things that crawl underneath the cloak of anonymity, one's first instinct might be to celebrate when modern technologies destroy anonymity. Surveillance cameras are propagating like insects. Facial recognition makes it harder to go about in public or online without being identified. If people are acting badly, others can readily launch an online shaming campaign against them. They can snap cellphone photos of people, post them on the Internet and then invite others to identify the people and supply information about them.

But the destruction of anonymity is not necessarily a good thing. For all its vices, anonymity has many virtues. With anonymity, people can be free to express unpopular ideas and be critical of people in power without risking retaliation or opprobrium. The anonymity in everyday life enables people to be free to do many worthwhile things without feeling inhibited.

The loss of anonymity might make many people more civil in their speech and more circumspect in their actions. That's a good thing. But it might also chill a lot of valuable expression. A world where everything people said and did was monitored, recorded and scrutinized would be an oppressive place to live.

The law might be able to help strike an appropriate balance with what I call "traceable anonymity." The law should protect people's anonymity online and in public. But if the anonymity is abused to cause harm to others, the law should preserve a way to trace the identity of the culprit.

Anonymity is an issue where it is hard to take one side or the other. The choice need not be to allow unchecked irresponsibility or to live in a fishbowl. We need to find an appropriate balance.

Join Room for Debate on Facebook and follow updates on twitter.com/roomfordebate.

Topics: [Internet](#), [Technology](#), [privacy](#)

The loss of anonymity might make many people more civil, but it might also chill a lot of valuable expression.