



# Re-thinking the datafied society through the anonymity kaleidoscope

Philip Di Salvo

## review of

Anon Collective (ed.) (2020). *Book of anonymity*. Earth: punctum books. (Pp. 486, \$27 in PB and free e-book, ISBN: 13: 978-1-953035-30-1, DOI: 10.21983/P3.0315.1.00)

Anonymity is a crucial issue in debates concerning technology, politics, and data justice. A new anthology offers fundamental insights into what anonymity is and why it matters. *The book of anonymity* focuses on the possibilities connected to and created by anonymity, how it is produced, its outcomes, and its potentials. The book looks at anonymity as a 'mode of being and knowing' [23], moving beyond a purely technical definition. The editors frame anonymity as a concept that includes issues related to equality, freedom, collectivity, and their 'entanglements with power, exclusion, privilege, and aggression' [19]. Thus, the book considers anonymity as a broad societal issue, one that connects with geopolitics, cybersecurity, media, and policy-making. Anonymity, as defined in the book, is an 'active absence' [26] that produces a range of possibilities and opens up potentials for what would otherwise be unthinkable. With anonymity being so strongly under attack today, especially in terms of its political dimensions, which possibilities for a fairer and less surveilled digital realm are being neglected?

The book is explicitly and theoretically intended to be a ‘kaleidoscope’, in which ‘disciplines encounter one another in shifting relations while remaining distinct, yet establishing common patterns at certain points in time,’ as the authors state in the book’s introduction [20]. Thus, the book follows a multidisciplinary and collaborative approach, bringing different disciplines together in the analysis of anonymity. However, while keeping the disciplines distinct in principle, this approach, at the same time, also allows the creation of common thematic patterns. *The book of anonymity* is composed of 28 chapters that consider anonymity in terms of how it is being conceptualized in a variety of areas, how it is under threat, how it can become a political tool for subversion, and how it can provide forms of delight by offering certain gratifications. As a further experiment with anonymity potentials, all book chapters are authored partially anonymously – with authors’ identities withheld in the single chapters, but still indicated in the book overview of contributors – and the book is published by the Anon Collective, a group of over 40 writers, academics, and artists. With this attitude, *The book of anonymity* aims to untangle the concept of anonymity and relate it to a range of areas: policing, 4Chan, the arts, offshore economies, Bitcoin, and genetics. In particular, the book deals with the politicization of anonymity and the consequences of the profiling of real data names in the context of digital services and commercial platforms, and it offers important inputs regarding the fundamental role of anonymity in a ‘datafied society’ (Schäfer and van Es, 2017), and the strategies needed to reposition anonymity at the core of contemporary societies and their principles and values. By engaging with the chapters most focused on these themes, this review will attempt to position the book in the broader debates around surveillance and the attacks that anonymity faces in the context of the pandemic, which has certainly inspired even more occasions for surveillance normalization.

One of the clearest outcomes of the extended ubiquity of surveillance in contemporary social and economic paradigms of today’s life is the *de facto* erosion of anonymity from most human activities on the Internet and, increasingly, in the physical world, especially due to the dominance of digital services and platforms provided by for-profit entities well positioned in what Shoshana Zuboff defines as ‘surveillance capitalism’ (2019). This progressive

elimination of anonymity, however, is not only to be found in economic and technical dynamics. Rather, it also affects how the most powerful actors have allocated their surveillance powers, mostly by normalizing them. Issues related to privacy and data justice have also gained more prominence in the public sphere. For instance, anonymity-related issues are still frequently contested in public debates and are at the core of fundamental contemporary discourses around the politics of technology and its impacts on rights and freedoms (Monsees, 2020). In light of this, it is possible to argue that, while anonymity appears to be increasingly questioned in various areas by the very assumptions of a ‘datafied society’, its technologies, and its most powerful actors, anonymity is a foundational concept in today’s discourses around technology and its role in society. However, the fact that the conceptual centrality of anonymity implies a need to ‘defend’ it, ‘protect’ it, or fight for its survival is also a reminder of anonymity’s fragile nature.

The chapter ‘Anonymity: The politicisation of a concept’ connects anonymity with some of the most pressing issues in the relationships between technology, politics, and power(s). This chapter also focuses on how anonymity and anonymization techniques are frequently delegitimized in public discourses in the technical, economic, legal, and sociopolitical domains. As the chapter describes, anonymity has frequently been critiqued in all these domains or framed mostly as an ‘obstacle’ to achieving certain supposed positive goals, such as security. These are the core reasons why there is a pressing need to discuss (and defend) the concept of anonymity, especially when considered in its ‘vertical’ dimension, the one along which anonymity is conceptualized *vis-à-vis* powerful institutions, such as state entities or Big Tech, those with the broadest capacities to conduct surveillance at scale, as well as retrospectively, as the chapter author argues. This dimension is usually dominant in public debates around surveillance, privacy, and intrusive technologies and has re-emerged with a strengthened visibility in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in debates around the technological solutions proposed by governments in order to curb the spread of COVID-19, starting with contact-tracing apps (Couch, Robinson and Komesaroff, 2020). The pandemic has contributed to the acceleration and reinforcement of various surveillance practices, putting the aforementioned

‘vertical’ dimension of anonymity under even more stress. In Italy, for instance, arguments in favour of anonymized solutions (e.g. Bluetooth-based rather than GPS) for contact-tracing apps have frequently been dismissed as ‘whims’ by various public voices, as if fundamental rights, such as the right to privacy, should be lightly dismissed from such crucial social debates (Di Salvo, 2021). This is obviously not a novelty of the pandemic world, and similar discussion points have also emerged on previous occasions. The voices driving these visions of ‘anonymity-as-an-obstacle’ have usually been those of powerful political actors pushing for ‘surveillance normalization’ (Wahl-Jorgensen, Bennett and Taylor, 2017). Particularly since the Snowden revelations in 2013, these instances of normalization have emerged in various parts of the world, and in most cases, they have framed anonymity as problematic in relation to the use of cryptography and strong encryption tools. For these purposes, various governments have also attempted to advance bills and legal proposals attempting to ban strong encryption, frequently pointing at these technologies’ use by criminals and terrorists to communicate anonymously.

Thus, the politicization of anonymity discussed in *The book of anonymity* has become a battleground on which the futures of technology are debated, advanced, or expressed in all their possibilities. In this regard, *The book of anonymity* is a reminder that, in order to ‘ensure that anonymous communication has a secured place in digitized societies,’ radical changes in how a ‘datafied society’ is governed will be needed [107]. Moreover, the power dynamics of surveillance capitalism, largely centralized around a few US-based commercial platforms, has changed the meaning of ‘being online,’ an issue discussed in the ‘Where do the data live?’ chapter. As the constant mining and extraction of personal data has become the hegemonic mode of being online, the idea of ‘community’ has ‘shifted from the nineties cyberutopian vision of fluid anonymous *online beings* to an imperative of an *authentic, consistent social media profile*’ [229]. Inevitably, this ends in replicating existing and strongly rooted social and political issues and imbalances, such as ‘gender and racial biases as well as reinforcing social and economic inequalities embedded within societies’ [247]. In the face of these imbalances, anonymity could increase the possibilities for a radical re-

thinking of the contemporary controversial and potentially dangerous logics of surveillance. These possibilities are debated in a variety of chapters in the book, including in the ‘Collective pleasures of anonymity’ chapter more in detail.

Here, anonymity becomes a way of ‘radically inhabiting and accelerating the logic of mass-mediated publicness that social media platforms themselves rely on and exploit’ [359]. This may become the grounding argument for a radical re-discussion of how anything digital functions today, starting with the capitalist obsession over the ‘personalized self,’ which is actually a goldmine for companies and commercial entities. As author and activist Cory Doctorow notes (2020), to be constantly surveilled while conducting personal activities, such as looking for locations, asking questions to search engines, or building a social network of relationships, ‘is to lose the sanctuary of your authentic self’. Surveillance modifies human behaviour and makes us all vulnerable and naked in the face of power. This is true with regard to law enforcement agencies conducting monitoring in public spaces, as well as for companies monopolizing the Internet and thus eroding the quality and equity of social life online. However, it would be naive to pursue purely technological solutions in order to modify the current state of things. As *The book of anonymity* argues, ‘anonymity can no longer be achieved by switching off our computers or other devices’ [100], because the demarcation lines between the offline and online worlds are now completely obsolete and it would be naive to fight powers created through techno-solutionism with other techno-solutionist arguments.

Here, the ‘kaleidoscope’ metaphor and approach at the core of *The book of anonymity* may also be useful in the search for viable solutions to the structural de-anonymization taking place in surveillance capitalism, as well as in the ‘datafied society’ overall. The book is a powerful reminder that kaleidoscopic efforts are needed in order to ensure that the possibilities created by anonymity still have a future. These efforts will inevitably have to be legal, institutional, and robust enough to ‘keep capitalist dynamics and governmental overreach in check’ [106]. Cory Doctorow’s argument against the dangers of surveillance capitalism, for instance, is kaleidoscopic in nature and examines technological monopolies as one of the strongest elements in

the contemporary dominance of surveillance (2021). The way forward, Doctorow argues, is to build an ‘ecology’ around the many battles for a different Internet, aiming at dismantling the dynamics – beginning with monopolies – that brought us to the current situation. One of the major strengths of *The book of anonymity* is examining anonymity itself outside of purely technological frames. It is only with a new kaleidoscopic-ecological attitude that anonymity can be again placed at the core of modernity. The book offers precise and diverse indications of how and where this kind of anonymity is still visible, as well as where and how it can be produced and pushed forward. In sum, the book is a solid, needed, and engaging read that encourages a more ‘kaleidoscopic’ and multidisciplinary understanding of how the commodification of human identities, bodies, fears, and desires has dramatically changed the way in which we inhabit, make sense of, and create social life and its spaces. Otherwise, ‘the freedom to be another – to enter and disappear into a fold’ will be at stake [372].

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## **the author**

Philip Di Salvo, PhD is a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Media and Communication at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and a post-doctoral researcher in the Institute of Media and Journalism at Università della Svizzera Italiana (USI). Philip performs research about whistleblowing, Internet surveillance, and the relationship between journalism and hacking. Philip is the author of two books: *Leaks. Whistleblowing e hacking nell'età senza segreti* (Roma: LUISS University Press) and *Digital whistleblowing platforms in journalism. Encrypting leaks* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

Email: philip.di.salvo@usi.ch