



Call for papers for an *ephemera* special issue on:

## The social productivity of anonymity

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Anonymity is deeply tied to the European values of liberty, equality and fraternity. Concealing one's identity can enable freedom (as in the anonymity of speech), support equality (e.g. in anonymous application procedures), and provide the basis for non-reciprocal relationships as expressed in the value of brotherhood (e.g. asking a stranger for directions). It is capable of traversing cultural differences and is essential for many contemporary forms of sharing, communality and collaboration (e.g. commons based peer production such as Wikipedia entries and open-source software). However, it is also contested and, indeed, under threat: networked databases, biometric identification and surveillance technologies such as CCTV are matched by discourses that condemn anonymity and celebrate transparency and openness. Legal, technological and moral imperatives towards transparency contribute to a process in which anonymity is increasingly under attack. As a consequence, the 'end of anonymity' has been declared in public discourses, not only since the revelations of Edward Snowden. However, this claim deserves to be scrutinised a bit further.

Using a more analytical perspective, it becomes apparent that anonymity constitutes a specific form of social relation in which potentially identifying markers of individuality and difference are dissociated from specific individuals and collectives. This has the effect of creating situational, relational and partial forms of unknowability, invisibility, and untrackability

(Nissenbaum, 1999; Ponesse, 2013). As contemporary societies are increasingly based on networked infrastructures we face new questions of how information, property and people can be disconnected. This holds true with regard to phenomena such as the international activist network Anonymous, internet-based communication, and forms of 'algorithmic anonymity' (Rossiter and Zehle, 2014). The social, moral, and legal significance of anonymity is also reflected in such controversial domains as baby drop-off boxes and anonymous births, the anonymous donation of organs, gametes, and blood, as well as peer reviewing and application procedures.

Research into current transformations of anonymity at the intersections of technologies/infrastructures and politics is surprisingly thin. Empirical scholarship is fragmented and theoretical conceptualizations are rare (Nissenbaum, 1999; Frois, 2009; Wiedemann, 2012; Ponesse, 2013). With a perspective on everyday social and cultural practices future research will be able to build on a number of ethnographies such as Konrad's work on egg donation (2005), Copeman's comparative inquiries into blood donation (2009), Frois' exploration of anonymity in self-help groups (2009), Lock's ethnography of organ transplantation (2002), and Coleman's study of hackers who operate under the Anonymous label (2010, 2013). While these studies provide some methodological and theoretical groundwork, none of them has addressed anonymity in its full complexity, nor have they linked constellations of anonymity regimes across different case studies.

To collect insights into the ways in which anonymity is modified, maintained or abandoned in contemporary online-offline worlds, this special issue will combine three areas of research into anonymity: (1) research into technologies and infrastructures of information, communication, surveillance and identification; (2) research into the regulation, ethics and politics of anonymity; and (3) research into the everyday practices of anonymity ranging from sperm donation to social media, from peer review to police work, from political mobilisation to self-help groups.

While anonymity is a deeply ambivalent social form we are particularly interested in contributions that defend anonymous interactions. Can we develop a concept of anonymity that emphasises its cultural and political values and its social productivity? Can we demonstrate that anonymity enhances, enriches and strengthens the social?

We welcome contributions from a wide range of disciplines, looking for

- Enquiries into the technical dimensions of anonymity: What forms of standards, protocols, software designs, technologies and aesthetics are shaping anonymity? How are they designed, decided upon, regulated and changed?
- Ethnographic case studies into local formations of anonymity, especially those that connect online-based forms of anonymity with offline practices.
- Case studies on the macro and micro-politics of anonymity, especially when anonymity becomes problematic. What undermines anonymity in specific settings, who develops strategies in its defence and to what aim?
- Research into activist tactics and strategies for enabling anonymity, and attempts to raise the public socio-technical literacy with regard to managing identifying information (for example cryptoparties).
- Research into the legal, moral or ethical principles and (historical) discourses, and how they are enacted, reflected, criticized or recreated by heterogeneous actors while doing/undoing anonymity.
- Theoretical and empirical articles on the properties of anonymity, such as blockages of tracing identification, continuities between past and present and the prevention of reciprocity, and anonymity's duration, (non-)reversibility and dynamics.
- Theoretical and empirical articles on ways in which anonymity connects to concepts and practices of the person, the self, the social, of private/public constellations, of statehood, property and the commons.

## **Contributions**

Potential contributors are asked to write an extended abstract (between 500 and 1000 words). Abstracts should be sent to all editors (goetz.bachmann [at] leuphana.de and knecht [at] uni-bremen.de and andreas.wittel [at] gmail.com). The deadline for the submission of abstracts is **15 January 2015**. Notification of acceptance of abstracts will

be 1 March 2015, and the deadline for the submission of full papers is **30 September 2015**. Please note that three categories of contributions are invited for the special issue: articles, notes, and reviews. All submissions should follow *ephemera's* submissions guidelines ([www.ephemerajournal.org/how-submit](http://www.ephemerajournal.org/how-submit)). Articles will undergo a double blind review process.

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