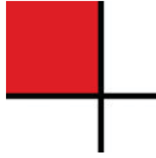

ephemera
theory & politics in organization

© the author(s) 2017
ISSN 1473-2866 (Online)
ISSN 2052-1499 (Print)
www.ephemerajournal.org
volume 17(2): 241-258

The social productivity of anonymity*

Götz Bachmann, Michi Knecht and Andreas Wittel

Introduction

Anonymity is under attack. In a process that started decades ago, an increasing multiplicity of forces is creating a slow, but steadily rising perfect storm. These forces include communication infrastructures like the IP-address-based Internet, cellular networks and social media platforms. Exponentially increasing storage and processing capabilities are now mounting up to big data, to be analysed with algorithms evolving out of machine learning. An ever increasing number of sensory devices, from surveillance cameras to smartphones, smart cars, smart cities to the rise of drones are matched by low cost ways of analysing DNA and other biological traces. All such technical forces find their equals in the politics of fear; in the extension of the various national security apparatus; in normative dreams of transparency, connectivity and justice-via-measurement; and in digital capitalism's competition for more and more data. As a consequence, the end of anonymity has been declared as near, or already upon us. But even though this special issue is partially motivated by such scenarios, we aim to take a step back. Our initial questions are simple: What is that which might be under threat? And why should we care?

* Some elements of our conception of anonymity were developed in the context of a VolkswagenStiftung funded project 'Reconfiguring anonymity: Reciprocity, identifyability and accountability in transformation'. We thank all our colleagues in this project. Further essential input came from Bernd Jürgen Warneken and Carol Wittel, as well as from the reviewers and members of the editorial collective of *ephemera*.

Conceptualising anonymity

This special issue is based on the premise that anonymity is always socially productive and always produced. With this premise we do not try to establish a normative or ethical principle. Our aim is to highlight conditions for, and potentials of, anonymous forms of social action and interaction to contribute to the making of the social world. Anonymity's contributions are manifold. Surely they include those to radical political action, as anonymity can not only help to evade and fight surveillance, but it can also enable particular forms of equality or certain forms of speaking out and speaking up. Indeed, the ties of radical politics to anonymity are only bound to grow further – an example for this is anonymity's potential to challenge new forms of surplus value extraction in the data economy. However, at the same time we know all too well that hate speech or attacks on the values and practices of doubting and challenging truth claims thrive under anonymous constellations, too. And indeed, all such forms and potentials – be it for politics of the radical left or its opposite – are part of an even larger field of the social productivity and production of anonymity in general: a field that is not only marked by various and often contradictory ethical and political potentials, but also by a plethora of forms, constellations, practices, actors and outcomes.

It is the aim of this issue to explore this wider field. We aim to explore how the productivity and production of anonymity contribute to the making of the social world (which includes, but exceeds radical politics.) Given that anonymity plays a significant role in the constitution of the social world, it received for a long time less theoretical attention than one might expect. But this situation has started to change profoundly. As anonymity is seen as both under threat, and threatening – both claims are often tied to digital media –, the topic of anonymity has generated a small boom of research in a variety of disciplines. Anonymity has thus become a topic in organisation studies (Rossiter and Zehle, 2014; Scott, 2013), media and communications (Brunton and Nissenbaum, 2015; Lovink, 2011,), philosophy (Halpin, 2012, Ponesse, 2013; Vogelmann, 2012), history (Pabst, 2011; Starner et al, 2011), literature studies (Griffin, 2003, Mullan, 2007), sociology (Bauman, 2012; Hirschauer, 2010; Rost, 2003; Wiedemann, 2012), information science (Tsikerdekis, 2013), geography and urban studies (Garber, 2000). Some disciplines can draw on more intensive traditions of engagement: these entail social psychology (Huang and Li, 2016), law and legal studies (Kerr et al., 2009) and cryptography, mathematics and computer science (Danezis and Diaz, 2008) as well as the new, specialised surveillance studies (Lyon, 2007; Marx, 2015). While it is notable that the topic has seen a rise of attention in a multiplicity of disciplines, it is also remarkable how little acknowledgement or discussion there is across them.

We conceptualise anonymity, as many of the aforementioned authors do, as constellations of partial unknowability, invisibility and untrackability. However, such a short definition hides as much as it clarifies. The editorial collective of this special issue consists of scholars based in social anthropology, German european ethnology, cultural and media studies. We assume that the constellations of anonymity emerge in complex intersections, entailing and combining, amongst others, social practices, technologies and infrastructures, ethics and politics. Ethnographies give us a particularly rich access to such intersections: Lock's ethnography of organ transplantation (2001), Konrad's (2005) and Klotz's (2014) work on egg and sperm donation, Copeman's comparative inquiries into blood donation (2009), Frois' exploration of anonymity in self-help groups (2009), Loeber's ethnography of imageboards (2011), Coleman's study of the online collective Anonymous (2014) and the Tactical Tech Collective's research into anonymised online visibility of marginalised communities of activists in Kenya and South Africa (Ganesh et al., 2016) are examples of research that discuss the complexities of situated anonymity.

Ethnography's attention to the complexities of situated anonymity can come at the cost of making systematic claims across different case studies. At the same time, it enables us to map a plethora of forms and appearances: anonymity exists in highly regulated and highly random settings, it appears in intentional and non-intentional forms, it is sometimes a protective shield against the outside of a given social configuration, and sometimes a trait of the relations contained within. It can be welcomed and embraced, but it can also be instituted as a regime upon unwilling participants. It can invite reciprocity or deliberately foreclose reciprocity. It can be both a condition and a process. It is amorphous and transient. It is situational and context-specific. It is therefore a category that defies easy ways of modeling and framing, but also a category that opens up a structured field of potential properties.

The authors of this issue contribute to a mapping of this field with ethnographic, theoretical, experimental and artistic forms of research. The social production and productivity of anonymity gives the issue its overarching theme. In the following passages we will first explore the social productivity of anonymity. Then we will turn to questions that investigate how anonymity is socially produced. We will conclude with introductions to the papers that make up the special issue.

On anonymity's social productivity

Stating that anonymity is socially productive, means more than that is produces desirable outcomes. Anonymity's contributions to the making of the social world

can, but do not have to be desirable. Not only are there different ethics and politics at stake. Some of anonymity's forms might be undesirable from almost every possible ethical stance, but they still contribute to the making of the social world. At the same time, thinking about what is a stake in the social productivity of anonymity cannot evade ethical and political questions. The conflicted social, moral, and legal significance of anonymity is reflected, for example, in controversial domains such as baby drop-off boxes and anonymous births, the anonymous donation of organs, gametes, and blood, or peer reviewing and application procedures. To give a sketch of what is at stake, when anonymity co-produces social worlds, we therefore want to start with exploring how anonymity is tied to a fundamental set of values associated with the European enlightenment: liberté, egalité and fraternité.

This is nowhere as apparent as in liberté. In times of a growing surveillance apparatus, with technologies ranging from networked databases to biometric identification and ever improving recognition algorithms, all matched by moral imperatives that celebrate transparency and openness, anonymity has the potential to protect and enable freedom – partial, fragile and privileged freedom, but freedom nonetheless. Anonymity's liberté is, to evoke Isaiah Berlin's ([1958] 1969) distinction, negative: It is a freedom from being fully visible for the governmental surveillance apparatus, from social and cultural restraints, and, indeed, from accountability. Freedom from accountability can also, in its best moments, produce new possibilities and foster the courage to speak truth to power (see Trytko and Wittel, this issue). The social productivity of anonymity lies here in an increase of social space and subjective possibilities. The same social space for freedom has then, in turn, all the characteristics, including the chances and perils of the liberal ideas around freedom. Without systematically questioning whose freedom it is, at whose expense, and for what purpose it is used, freedom can quickly become a space for the accumulation of unaccountable power.

But anonymity's freedom does not stop here. It also increases freedom with respect to the data we produce. This is not fully new neither. Ethnographers grant anonymity to their interlocutors so that they may speak freely without fears of being reprimanded by others. Journalists promise anonymity to their sources and informants. But with respect to the data we produce being online, and to the value chains of the new data economy, anonymity has recently undergone massive reconfigurations. In the new context of 'communicative capitalism' (Dean, 2014), 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff, 2015), and 'platform capitalism' (Srnicek, 2016), our social life is being transformed into valuable data. This is a new form of capitalist enclosure. Our connections, social relationships, and friendships have become valuable information, or more precisely, have become information with a significant exchange value. This extraction of data from our social life and its

transformation into a commodity is a capture of what once was a common good. However, online anonymity is a severe obstacle for those who operate in the data extraction, data analysis, and data trade business. While online anonymity, even on a mass scale and in the most radical forms, would not put a stop to the data economy, it would surely devalue the extracted data significantly. In such a constellation anonymity can foster a freedom from the commodification of the social.

Less immediately visible but just as important are the ties of anonymity to the other two values in Robespierre's well-worn triad. But anonymity has a welcoming effect on egalité, too. Equality can be promoted by anonymity, particularly in situations in which social actors are mutually anonymous to each other. Categories in social life often produce hierarchies, such as age, class, gender, ethnicity and education. If information on these categories is not available to those who interact anonymously, hierarchies between them cannot be established easily. Anonymity is then able to create more equality. In the words of British anthropologist Copeman, it can operate as a 'critical site of social change', specifically in the way 'it comes to act as an instrument of re-composition of an array of associations, relationships and institutions' (Copeman, 2009: 2). The work anonymity is doing here is aimed at a momentary or temporarily extended de-institutionalisation of classificatory systems and towards an unmaking of status inequality. Let's look at the example of the academic convention called double-blind peer review. Even though peer reviewing is in many ways a rather problematic convention, the non-disclosure of both the author's name and the reviewer's name can help creating a more equal relationship between these two parties. The same is true for anonymous self-help groups: the deep and intense relationships between attenders of self-help groups are created on the foundations of anonymity (see Frois, 2009; Helm, this issue). We are all equal in front of the demon alcohol, so to speak.

Even fraternité is tied to anonymity. Anonymity's capability of traversing cultural differences can lead to new forms of sharing, communality and collaboration. Sisterhood is difficult to define. We understand fraternité as a specific state of care for each other. A brother or a sister is someone with whom we have strong and lasting bonds, someone who gets our attention without much need for justification. We find anonymous structures of sisterhood in various sizes, from inter-personal relations, to groups, and to large-scale collectives such as commons-based peer production initiatives (Wikipedia, open-source community) or online activism (Anonymous). Anonymous self-help groups (see Helm, this issue) are also a great example for fraternité. These groups embody and represent indeed our understanding of an organisation with a distinctive state of care for each other. Anonymity is the undisputed foundation on which strong and caring relationships can grow between the members. On a larger scale, the scale of the collective,

fraternité is a coming together of individuals and groups from various backgrounds in solidarity for a common political cause (Warneken, 2016). Anonymity also helps to create such structures of collectivity, for example through the performance of being and becoming part of a larger collective, of being-one in a mass.

To discuss the close ties of anonymity with central values of the French Revolution underlines the fact that anonymity is a foundational concept of Western modernity. However, Western modernity is, of course, not to be reduced to this set of rather elevated values. And indeed, anonymity has contributed to modernity's darker sides, too. One example is the anonymisation of weapons at a distance, which reaches its conclusions in modern weapons of mass destruction. Or take another fundamental trait of modernity, as we currently know it: The economy of money and commodities. The buyer does not need to know the producer of the commodity. The same applies to capital owners and investors. Both commodity fetishism and reification can not be reduced to anonymity but neither can they be understood without it. Anonymity is deeply ingrained in capitalist relations of production.

There are multiple ways of being modern in the world today, and by far not all of them are exclusively modern. Pre-modern forms of anonymity, and its successors in the present, have their own forms. Masks and other disguises have long had significant roles, especially in ritualised and spiritual contexts. The notion of multiple modernities is helpful in redirecting dichotomies of traditional versus modern or the West vs. the Rest towards an acknowledgement of multiple forms of being contemporary (Fabian, 1991) in interconnected worlds. Placing the question of anonymity's social productivity centre stage thus entails the necessity to recognise that concepts of anonymity often implicitly build on Western assumptions and categories. To give an example, the symbolic, social and practical act of conferring a name as a marker of individuality and personhood is common to all human societies but it can come in many forms. Not always are state related forms of governmentality involved, nor is name-giving necessarily tied to the cascade of 'isolational effects' (Trouillot, 2001) so typical of Western nation states that model individuals as autonomous within unspecified publics and relate them with each other along pre-given systems of identification. If namelessness as one form of anonymity is seen as the other side of the coin of name-giving, it becomes obvious that its social and symbolic meanings will differ with respect to the social orders and exchanges to which a name grants access.

The implied naturalness of Western ways of conceptualising anonymity needs to be made explicit for two reasons. For one, it is instrumental in opening up analytical sensibilities to the multiple trajectories and historical contexts in which

anonymity stands. Such an acknowledgement entails that we grasp the wide array of possibilities in which anonymity, as a way of 'undoing the person' has to be conceptualised as the other side of getting to know a person or even 'making' a person in very different historical contexts and societies. Secondly, we might be able to rethink anonymity's productivity for the Western context on the basis of alternative ways to create relationality and the person. An anonymous person might be easier to conceptualise with ideas about personhood from the highlands of Papua New Guinea in mind, than on the basis of an imaginative canvas of identity concepts that dominate our life in the West. The examination of (or the immersion into) alternative ways of understanding object-person relations, social forms and orderings of private property/the commons has the capacity to sensitise us for what might be one of the most productive potentials of anonymity: to recompose existing foundational relations, institutions, and social forms.

On anonymity's production

Anonymity can be produced in various ways: socially, discursively, technically or legally. What is produced is an absence of information. Few authors, who write about anonymity, miss the opportunity to mention that the word anonymity is rooted etymologically in ἀνωνυμία, the Greek word for the absence of ὄνομα, the 'name' (Liddell and Scott, 1996) Indeed, the absence of a name gives us an entry into conceptualising anonymity, since the name is a central hub for connecting information to our persona and our bodies (Marx, 1999). However, anonymity can clearly not be reduced to the question of namelessness. Even if we are nameless, we might still not be faceless – a fact that gains new significance in an age of ubiquitous surveillance cameras and face recognition, driven by machine learning algorithms. Indeed, as Nissenbaum (1999) pointed out, it is neither name- nor face- but tracelessness that has become the most endangered trait of anonymity in recent decades, as we are communicating online, while spreading offline our all too easily readable genetic material. After all, who needs a name, when you have an IP address and DNA? Or when you use a specialised sensory device also known as a smart phone? Anonymity is obviously a condition that changes historically, and its production does so, too. Indeed, anonymity is situated in a cluster of concepts, all of which are undergoing historical changes. This cluster includes terms such as privacy as well as crowd, loneliness as well as confidentiality, and multiple opposites ranging from transparency and surveillance to individual and common property.

To produce constellations of anonymity can mean a plethora of practices. Anonymity can, for example, describe the state where a conversation happens in full public, for anyone to perceive, but with no one knowing who is talking. But it

can also refer to a situation, where two or more people who know each other have an intimate conversation, but shield it from others. Both situations can legitimately be described as anonymous, however they lead to almost opposite social and communicative arrangements. There are more of such ambivalent meanings. Take the example of namelessness again. The name is an indexical sign, usually attested by the nation state, connecting events or acts or a piece of information to a person and a body. Namelessness can thus denote both a body without a name (such as a person roaming the streets anonymously) and an act, which we cannot tie to an identifiable subject (such as an anonymous graffiti message). Even something as simple as namelessness describes a variety of forms that cut connections.

Such connections and their cuts have their own temporality. When we try to evade surveillance by the state, for example, it is often essential that we not only produce anonymity in the present, but in the foreseeable future too. In this case anonymity has to entail an inevitably fragile effort to control the future – an effort that is especially tenuous, if the data is out there in principle, but not (yet) connected to our name. We therefore need assurances that these connections won't be made in the future. The German Federal Data Protection Act defines 'rendering anonymous' as a 'modification of personal data so that the information concerning personal or material circumstances can no longer or only with a disproportionate amount of time, expense and labour be attributed to an identified or identifiable individual' (BDSG §3/6[1]). Note the rather careful phrasing that exempts anonymity from the need to be able to withstand 'disproportionate amount of time, expense and labour': without such an exemption, anonymity might hardly ever pass the legal test.

The same formulation of 'time, expense and labour' also points to the different actors that are involved in the present and in the potential future. Complex databases, for example, usually have a maze of domain-specific access authorisations, including the manifold authorisations to provide authorisations to others, as well as the authorisations to authorise authorisations. All this is far from trivial once we take into account that databases do not only contain already existing knowledge, that is information, which is explicitly stated in the database. Rather, once databases reach a certain complexity, they are also full of potential knowledge, ready to be actualised, once new connections are made: a database might not contain a name, but enough information to deduct it, once certain bits of information are linked with each other. Anonymity can often only be protected through the deliberate construction of artificial boundaries. Complex systems of authorisations are one possible way to achieve this. This in turn can further complicate the matter. When those whose information is documented in a

1 BDSG stands for Bundesdatenschutzgesetz, Germany's Federal Data Protection Act.

database wish to protect parts of their anonymity, they often need to demand that the anonymity of those handling their data is unveiled. Anonymity can require transparency.

If we look at anonymity in acts of communication, the situation becomes even more complicated. The anonymous network Tor for example does not only keep the senders and receivers of messages anonymous, but also the hubs, which transfer the messages. One might think that such a method is ideal; however, a relevant critique of Tor is that this arrangement fails to ensure that only trustworthy and known hubs selected by those who communicate through this network, are the ones providing the communicational infrastructure. For all these reasons there is hardly ever total anonymity, neither temporally, nor socially, nor technically: 'Anonymity is never perfectly complete' (Wallace, 1999: 25). No wonder that intentional anonymity can only exist with a certain amount of trust.

In all the above examples, anonymity is produced intentionally. There are, however, forms of anonymity, which are non-intentional. Think for example of the anonymity of urban spaces, which became an important topic for early 20th century sociologists such as Simmel (1971/1903); the anonymity of people passing by each other as strangers in the streets of metropoles; the anonymity of citizens living in the same urban neighbourhood. To solve this confusion it makes sense to distinguish between the state of anonymity on the one hand and the act of anonymisation on the other. Anonymisation is the process of intentionally producing constellations of partial unknowability, invisibility and untrackability. Often intentional anonymity – if successful – consists of a long chain of intentions in which the first step secures the anonymisation whereas the next steps are designed to uphold this state over time. Anonymity can be, but does not have to be, produced by (intentional) anonymisation. It can be its outcome, but also the outcome of other processes such as modernity or urbanisation, or more generally of unintended socio-material processes and constellations, in which identifying information is dis-associated from a person or simply vanishes. Therefore anonymity is always socially produced, albeit only sometimes intentionally.

If we ask how anonymisation in a digital environment can be achieved and maintained, it makes sense to knock on the doors of today's specialists for such an endeavour: computer scientists. Here we can learn that anonymity is attained by blurring either the sender in larger sets of senders, or the receiver in larger sets of receivers, or the message in a larger set of messages, or some, or all of these elements in their respective sets – potentially in combination with blurring the respective sets in even bigger sets (Pfitzmann and Hansen, 2010; see also the interview with Marit Hansen in this issue). Such blurring in 'anonymity sets' prevents an 'attacker' from singling out specific entities in the blur of the set. In

computing, relations of anonymity are never dyadic for two reasons. Firstly, being anonymous means to be part of a larger set of other entities. Secondly, we are, at least in computing, only ever anonymous-for-an-attacker. This 'attacker' is not necessarily malicious, but simply an abstraction, a representation of a given entity that might want to know something we don't want it to know. Cryptography always solves the double problem of encoding messages and/or senders and/or receivers in ways that unintended 'attackers' cannot decode, while intended receivers can. Indeed, the mathematical discussions of cryptographers are inhabited by a whole range of standardised fictional characters: 'Alice' (for receiver) and 'Bob' (for sender) are trying to communicate, but not without 'Eve' (for eavesdropper), 'Carol' (for the third person), 'Chuck' (a malicious participant), 'Mallet' (the active intruder), 'Trent' (the trusted third party) and 'Grace' (the government representative) all having their role to play. Therefore it is impossible to understand anonymity if we make the mistake to conceptualise it simply in one single dyadic relation.[2]

The abstract yet precise models of computing can cater for many of the constellations of anonymity. However, the abstraction, purification and formalisation of code and its mathematical logic is not only a strength, but at the same time a limitation for social and cultural theorists. Anonymity entails a lot of further problems that cannot be explained with such logic. One such example is simply the question, what happens to the 'set'? Remember, for example, that while specific entities hide themselves in an 'anonymity set', the 'anonymity set' itself often becomes more visible. Once an 'anonymity set' becomes visible, it can take on a further social life of its own. The online collective Anonymous, for example, turned such a 'set' of anonymous entities – the many people who post on specific platforms and channels – into a fragile process of collectivisation, joint decision-making and collective action. While all its members are hiding inside the 'anonymity set', this 'set' starts its own life. In such a situation its members do not only hide inside the 'set', but begin to interact and to use the 'anonymity set' as a collective weapon (Coleman, 2014).

Aside from the set and multiple forms of collectivities that can emerge, many other social and socio-technical forms are at stake in anonymity: individual relations, relations between individuals and organisations, or between organisations, as well as socio-technical assemblages. In its most general form, anonymity constitutes a specific form of social relation in which a range of potentially identifying markers

2 This is even the case when two communicating participants are anonymous towards each other. While these two are communicating they are senders and receivers, but also attackers prevented from identifying each other. Within this constellation of two, we thus have three analytical positions: sender, receiver and attacker.

of individuality and difference are dissociated from specific individuals (see Ponesse, 2013). It is neither a form of a-sociality nor the 'ultimate symbol of incoexistence' (Konrad, 2005: 5), but rather in itself a social form and a form of sociality. Such a perspective opens up a new set of questions: How many identifying markers can be dissociated in a social relationship for it to still exist? What kind of 'relations of non-relationality' (Konrad, 2005) emerge here? How can fundamental traits of social relationships such as reciprocity, trust or accountability be ensured? Which webs of relationships emerge around the anonymous relationship itself? Who are the gatekeepers of anonymity, who become the guarantors of trust, and who are its beneficiaries and victims? How can anonymity trigger 'congregational thoughts' (Copeman, 2009: 7), new forms of solidarity and different rationalities of identity not necessarily connected to property assumptions? What forms of intimacy and confidentiality arise, and what happens to parrhesia, the speaking of truth, when the speaker is hidden?

Adding to the complexities of anonymity is a further grey area: the subtleties of open secrets (Curtis/Weir 2016) and non-knowledge in general. We might, for example, stabilise social situations by ignoring what we could know – including identifying information. These are Goffman-esque forms of anonymity. Take for example the moment in a double-blind peer review process, when the author recognises the person who produced the peer review, or more commonly, when the peer-reviewer recognised the author(s). To keep the conventions of the peer review's 'ongoing panoptic organization of communication' (Hirschauer, 2010: 72) intact, it often makes sense to separate between a front stage, where anonymity is formally acknowledged by all sides, and a backstage, where this is not the case. The convention of the double-blind peer-review is only one of the many examples, where non-knowledge of identifying information can greatly matter. Such dissonances between front and backstage only point us to a much larger issue, to the performative dimensions of anonymity.

While anonymity therefore has to be analysed in specific situations, it nevertheless has to take into account larger contexts. Context refers to a heterogeneity of interacting factors such as technologies, infrastructures, values and laws. What standards, protocols, codes, technologies and aesthetics are shaping anonymity? How are they designed, decided upon, regulated and changed? What are the laws, regulations, and social conventions that structure, shape, or undermine anonymous forms of interaction? Which role play moral and ethical discourses? How do they contribute toward a legitimisation or delegitimisation of anonymity? Last but not least: how do hierarchical settings and relations of power and domination shape anonymity? Is it imposed, as an act of violence, against the will of those who are being anonymised (Natanson, 1986)? Or is it used, as a strategic move, to circumvent, undermine, abolish, or even reverse relationships of power?

To summarise: We started with a broad diagnosis that anonymity is under attack. We then unpacked our two basic assumptions: anonymity is socially productive, as well as produced. In both its productivity and production, anonymity is a category that defies easy ways of modelling and framing, yet sets up a structured field of properties. The tensions and connections within this highly complex, yet structured field of properties might never be ordered in a satisfactory way, but they nevertheless present social theorists with a persistent and insistent requirement for precision. Any attempt to theorise anonymity has to deal with a conceptual messiness on the one hand, and a call and opportunity for precise analysis on the other hand.

We will now introduce the contributions in this special issue.

The contributions

Daniel de Zeeuw's article 'Immunity from the image: The right to privacy as an antidote to anonymous modernity' opens our issue with an exploration of two different forms of anonymity. On the one hand, anonymity can be seen as a means-to-an-end to achieve a specific form of privacy. On the other hand, anonymity can describe a specific form of sociality. In a genealogical enquiry into legal and philosophical debates in the 18th, 19th and early 20th century in the US and Europe, de Zeeuw shows that these two meanings of anonymity are both distinct and connected: the merger of anonymity and privacy arose out of class-specific anxieties over mass modernity and mass culture, which were perceived as alienating and impersonal. To re-establish an analytically sound idea of anonymous sociality requires its dissociation from ideas around anonymity as a means for privacy, as well as from the latter's origins in bourgeois fear.

A similar demand to contextualise anonymity, as well as the debates and discourse around it, in specific historical, social, political and geographical conditions drives the analysis of Kornelia Trytko and Andreas Wittel in their article 'The exposure of Kataryna: How Polish journalists and bloggers debate online anonymity'. Analysing a case study of a Polish blogger who became an influential voice in the Polish public sphere, only to be doxed, Trytko and Wittel show two things. Firstly, they explore the issues that are negotiated in and through the debates around this case of de-anonymisation, including the nature of the public sphere, the status of journalists and bloggers, and the state of democracy as well as citizens' autonomy in Poland. Secondly, they provide a passionate defence of anonymity, showing how the debates and the conflicts have ultimately enriched the Polish public sphere.

'On anonymity in disasters', an article by Katrina Petersen, Monika Büscher, and Catherine Easton puts equally much emphasis on the context in which anonymous data and anonymous relationships are produced and maintained. Analysing disaster and emergency management, the authors start from the premise that anonymity is neither a state nor something that happens in isolation. All individuals and organisations involved in disaster management have to balance the requirement for data protection with the urgency of the situation and the need to share data across various socio-technical systems. Here anonymity and anonymisation can sometimes get in the way and obstruct the most efficient responses to emergencies. In particular the authors explore disaster information and anonymity with respect to two moments, (1) how anonymous sources of information are dealt with, and (2) how protected data is shared between different agencies.

'What can self-organised group therapy teach us about anonymity?' – asks Paula Helm in a case study that explores anonymity in mutual support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, groups that fundamentally rely on anonymity to prevent possible stigmatisation and discrimination. Her contribution focuses in particular on various functions of anonymity. Some of these functions structure the social dynamics and the social distances within anonymous therapeutic groups, others organise the political communication and the public relation between the group and the outside world, and some functions are about the formation of a specific subjectivity as well as a sense of belonging to a specific collective. Helm suggests a typology of forms of anonymity to facilitate future research and more differentiated discussions on the merits and dangers of anonymity in a digital age.

In his contribution 'Archaeology of no names? The social productivity of anonymity in archaeological information process', Isto Huvila investigates the 'labour of faceless individuals of the past and present'. He analyses the relations and overlaps between named and anonymous individuals and institutions as a control regime of information and draws specific attention to the role of writing in mediating between anonymous and non-anonymous work. While the productivity of anonymity – as a glue or enabler, for example – is in parts quite evident, other effects and outcomes of anonymity within archaeology remain hard to judge, meander between openness and vulnerability and remain ultimately dependent on specific situations and contexts.

'Images of anonymity' by Andreas Broeckmann offers a special gift: a curated visual essay. The essay does not intend to present an exhaustive overview of visual representations of anonymity. Rather, it explores a diverse field of entitlements, agencies and power relations within anonymous constellations and social forms. Playful and terrified at the same time, we follow the visual representation of

identity markers and their opposites through the picture-text arrangement and encounter violence and suppression as well as nonchalance and new modes of identification and existence.

Renee Ridgway's note 'Against a personalisation of the self' presents tentative results of an on-going research project on personalisation. In a series of experiments, Ridgway compares online search results that she either achieves while allowing herself to be personalised by Google, or by using the anonymity network Tor. In a paradoxical twist, so the analysis of Ridgway shows, personalisation forces her into uncontrollable associations with anonymous clusters, whereas anonymous research allows membership, and, indeed, agency as part of a collective of anonymous users. Standing at the core of the Internet's power structures, personalisation thus contributes to the 'tragedy of the web', whereas evading personalisation through anonymisation is a chance to continue to explore its potentials.

Paula Bialski and Götz Bachmann have conducted an interview with Marit Hansen, a computer scientist, and the head of the Independent Centre for Data Protection in Kiel, Germany. Together with her colleague, the late Andreas Pfitzmann, Hansen co-authored an article, which provided an influential contribution to synthesise and stabilise the terminology around anonymity in computer science. The terminology developed by Hansen and Pfitzmann aims to cater both for the mathematical precision needed to build systems, as well as for a terminological common ground to think about anonymity together with members of other disciplines. As such, it is a theory of anonymity in itself, albeit a rather abstract one, and firmly rooted in computing. The interview revisits the article, and explores how concepts from computer science can enrich the thinking of disciplines that are more familiar with qualitative approaches than with the logic of computing.

Final remarks

One thing that all papers of this issue demonstrate is that diagnoses claiming the nearing end of anonymity are oversimplified. While anonymity clearly is under attack, while processes of de-anonymisation are undeniably taking place, anonymity is not dying a slow death, not yet. Instead regimes of anonymity are getting reconfigured and we need to be able to better understand how exactly such transformations of anonymity are affecting the multiplicity of our social practices and what kind of new dimensions of the social they entail.

Both academic and non-academic discourses on anonymity are often oriented to explain the workings of anonymity through reference to normative questions and terms. The diagnosis of merits and dangers, of allegedly good and bad aspects of anonymity is part of such a predominantly moral evaluation. In contrast our purpose is to analyse anonymity on the basis of qualitative empirical case studies and to portray it as a social form. We hope to contribute to an analysis of anonymity as a practice of doing the social that aligns technical, infrastructural, political, and regulative dimensions. We draw attention to its production and productivity, and with it to its temporalities, its transformative powers and its entanglements with practices of person making, property relations, public spheres and social forms. However, we are not completely disinterested bystanders in this debate – without anonymity the social world would be poorer. It would be reduced in quantitative and qualitative terms.

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the editors

Götz Bachmann is Professor for Digital Cultures at Leuphana University Lüneburg, Germany, and currently a Research Fellow at Stanford University. He is an ethnographer by trade, and the author of a monograph on 'Kollegialität' (Collegiality, Campus Verlag, 2014). His ongoing research looks at radical engineers in the San Francisco Bay Area, who aim to develop a new digital medium.
Email: bachmann@leuphana.de

Michi Knecht is Professor for Anthropology and Cultural Research at Bremen University, Germany. Her publications have examined social and cultural implications of assisted reproductive technologies, political and religious movements in the field of reproduction, new kinship, poverty and inequality and praxeographic methods in the anthropology of science, medicine and technology. Currently, she is conducting research on how contemporary regimes of anonymity are reconfigured at the interfaces of infrastructures, regulation and social practice. Most recent English language publication: M. Knecht and S. Beck (2016) '"Crisis" in social anthropology: Rethinking a missing concept', in A. Schwarz, W. Seeger and C. Auer (eds.) *The handbook of international crisis communication Research*. Wiley-Blackwell.
Email: Knecht@uni-bremen.de

Andreas Wittel is Senior Lecturer in Social Theory at Nottingham Trent University, School of Arts and Humanities. He is interested in the political economy of digital media, in the intersection of capitalism and the internet, and in the search for alternatives to capital. His most recent book is *Digital transitions* (Lambert Academic Publishing, 2016).
Email: andreas.wittel@gmail.com