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More anonymity is good

More anonymity is good: that's a dangerous idea.

Fancy algorithms and cool technology make true anonymity in mediated environments more possible today than ever before. At the same time this techno-combo makes true anonymity in physical life much harder. For every step that masks us, we move two steps toward totally transparent unmasking. We have caller ID, but also caller ID Block, and then caller ID-only filters. Coming up: biometric monitoring and little place to hide. A world where everything about a person can be found and archived is a world with no privacy, and therefore many technologists are eager to maintain the option of easy anonymity as a refuge for the private.

However in every system that I have seen where anonymity becomes common, the system fails. The recent taint in the honor of Wikipedia stems from the extreme ease which anonymous declarations can be put into a very visible public record. Communities infected with anonymity will either collapse, or shift the anonymous to pseudo-anonymous, as in eBay, where you have a traceable identity behind an invented nickname. Or voting, where you can authenticate an identity without tagging it to a vote.

Anonymity is like a rare earth metal. These elements are a necessary ingredient in keeping a cell alive, but the amount needed is a mere hard-to-measure trace. In larger doses these heavy metals are some of the most toxic substances known to a life. They kill. Anonymity is the same. As a trace element in vanishingly small doses, it's good for the system by enabling the occasional whistleblower, or persecuted fringe. But if anonymity is present in any significant quantity, it will poison the system.

There's a dangerous idea circulating that the option of anonymity should always be at hand, and that it is a noble antidote to technologies of control. This is like pumping up the levels of heavy metals in your body into to make it stronger.

Privacy can only be won by trust, and trust requires persistent identity, if only pseudo-anonymously. In the end, the more trust, the better. Like all toxins, anonymity should be kept as close to zero as possible.