

Summer 2007

On Anonymity in Libraryland Blogging

John Buschman

Mark Rosenzweig

Kathleen de la Peña McCook

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.shu.edu/lib_pub

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Buschman, John; Rosenzweig, Mark; and de la Peña McCook, Kathleen, "On Anonymity in Libraryland Blogging" (2007). *Library Publications*. Paper 60.
http://scholarship.shu.edu/lib_pub/60

EDITORIAL

ON ANONYMITY IN LIBRARYLAND BLOGGING

by John Buschman,
Mark Rosenzweig &
Kathleen de la Peña McCook

The case for anonymity in various libraryland blogs — in which

(mostly) conservative librarians justify varying degrees of anonymity to mask their identity — is as follows, a distillation of various posting from over the past year or two:

- Anonymous writing has a long and proud history. It is a key component of the rights of free speech and intellectual freedom, and if people don't choose to identify themselves, that is their right too. Anonymous speech is done to focus attention on the debate rather than the speaker.
- There is no reason to stand by someone else's opinions or be responsible for what they say. However, it is possible to have a reasoned debate or to defend your position without necessarily saying who you are. I do not defend the anonymous attack culture but rather their right to engage in their culture. I can defend the right to speech, including anonymous speech, without defending the content. Viciousness reflects back on the speakers, even if they are anonymous.
- Anonymous bloggers' posts have not been overly vicious — possibly overly sarcastic, but interesting and thoughtful all the same. Calling out this person is just *ad hominem* attack. Besides, most of the attacks are not on individuals, but on library groups. How does this have a chilling effect? If you don't like it, feel free to exercise your right to ignore it.
- A particularly nasty or vicious blogger does not represent all conservatives. Attacking the extremes allows you to tar everyone with the same brush, and the bad behavior of anonymous bloggers does not justify a non-anonymous response in-kind.

- Disingenuous, juvenile, and inflammatory posts would have been better off posted anonymously since there was an attempt to hold the blogger accountable for the words. If posted anonymously, then the attacks won't affect the blogger and co-workers can't see what the blogger's views are. Both are better protected. Breaking anonymity is simply another way of silencing.
- This blogger is not anonymous. The name is posted at the website. It makes no sense to accuse a blogger who posts under a *nom de plume* of any form of anonymity.
- I am not anonymous, I spelled my name backwards to shield it from searches on the web.

If by now you are beginning to suspect that anonymity in libraryland blogging protects less-than-lofty goals and discursive exchange, you are correct (see Buschman, 2004 for a humorous take on this phenomenon). A low-light review of some (but not the worst) of the verbiage tossed about anonymously and semi-anonymously from the Right would include “totalitarian,” “boot-licker,” “goose-stepping,” “thought police,” “semi-literate,” “infantile-minded,” “apologist for murderers like Stalin and Mao,” and of course “friend of...” to invoke the always-popular guilt-by-association in Red-baiting. Historically in libraryland blogging, it has been the anonymous and semi-anonymous attacks of the Right, followed by a counter-response, and that response is then characterized by the Right as “silencing” of the original attackers. It is our contention here that the means and the mean-ness of anonymous attack are one in the same. Before addressing that concern, we would like to point out seven fundamental flaws in the argument for anonymity in libraryland blogging (of all stripes).

First and foremost among the points to address is the notion of intellectual freedom as a right, coupled with anonymous speech holding a similar status. Without repeating the long history here, intellectual freedom is our field's version of academic freedom — not a “right” but rather a hard fought space or zone of freewheeling inquiry and exchange in the academy (and thus in libraries) that tenure is meant to protect (see Buschman and Rosenzweig, 1999 and Buschman, 2006). In other words, intellectual freedom is a variant also meant to protect *open, public exchange* in the interests of an open society and democracy. Intellectual freedom as a pillar of support for anonymous speech — particularly the attack-mode variety — is thus a shaky foundation.

Second, the statements justifying anonymity tend to conflate it with the right to privacy. We will not take the time here to comment extensively, except to note the deep ironies of conservative librarian bloggers invoking this idea in the current conservative legal environment which does not recognize a fundamental right to privacy in order to spy on citizens and reinvade women's wombs. Rather, we will simply note that privacy protections come in four varieties: from intrusion into private affairs or

seclusion; from public disclosure of private, uncomfortable facts; public disclosure of falsehoods about oneself; and identity theft (Schoeman, 1992). Privacy as a protection, in other words, would tend to favor more those being anonymously and publicly attacked, not the anonymity of the attackers. Privacy as a right is meant to protect the private, not one's identity upon entering the public arena.

Third, shielding one's identity in entering the public arena is not privacy, but rather a form of secrecy — again a related concept that is often conflated with privacy in the justifications for anonymity. Secrecy is “the practice, often mandated and sanctioned for insiders, of excluding information and conduct from outsiders” (Byrne, 1998). Anonymity is, in other words, a form of secrecy and in no way represents a “right” to or form of privacy or intellectual freedom. There is no right of secrecy. There is no hard-fought zone of secrecy protections meant to push forward the ends of democracy in open, public exchange.

Fourth, the secret that secrecy protects can be legitimate *or* illegitimate. However constructed, “it generally has a culturally and morally more ambiguous status than privacy” (Marx, 2006). The shield or cloak that anonymity and its variants in libraryland blogging represents does not therefore fall into the protected zone of the continuum between public and private, between publicity and privacy, between confidentiality and public disclosure. Rather, in this case it skews the playing field dramatically in favor of the “insider” holding back a piece of information but claiming the full rights of participation in the public sphere, invoking its protections.

Fifth, facile comparisons to the *Federalist Papers* as a justification for anonymous blogging (a real example) are the height of puffery. The answer to bad speech — if it be bad speech — isn't anonymity, it is more speech. The force of the better argument is our best protection, but behind that is an even more fundamental issue about *who* is making the argument. Secrecy in this case is the refuge of scoundrels. The notion that one's coworkers (or readers or public) are “better protected” by anonymous opinions and attacks is wholly specious.

Sixth, *nom de plumes* and backwards names — even if one can find or figure out the identity of the author — represent a variant mask of secrecy in blogging discourse. Unless one goes further into a blog to try and find an identity (thereby further empowering a soapbox against your will), one does not know the source of the opinion. On the contrary, one knows full well the *object* of the petty slap or vicious attack. It is like saying someone can don a mask and scream at you, and the only response available is to be able to take down the license plate number to track down who that person is (without accounting for the benefit of the extra “hits” on the blog in this analogy). Otherwise it comes down to the picayune issue of research and proper citation of *nom de plumes*. In a world of Google name searches, this represents a fundamental form of power, secrecy, and dishonesty. Arguments for anonymity and semi-anonymity allow people

to simply write things with no (or greatly lessened) accountability. The attacks are not meant to convince, they are meant to chill the discussion and silence the more timid. Would those bloggers do the same standing up in a meeting, facing that person? When and why is it wrong to expect someone to own their own words?

Seventh, anonymous commentary is, according to the prevailing logic of the justifications, acceptable when aimed at a *group* of people (PLG, SRRT, “liberals”, socialists, etc.). That is no more a reasonable defense for anonymous blogging attacks than it was for the Ku Klux Klan’s tactics or infiltration of progressive groups by the police.

We deal with extremes in our analysis, because the extremes represent a significant amount of anonymous commentary from those who feel the need to attack those who have worked for people’s right to know and those who actually take time to work for social justice and human rights. They will name people they dislike under the hood of secrecy, but are afraid to stand up for what they purport to believe and unwilling to accept that others outside of their webfans should know their identity. Anonymous libraryland bloggers harm the discourse. Their “ethos” is victory at any cost, democracy be damned. In this sense, they are not librarians, and there is an abiding irony in writing “as librarians” (implying a deep connection to intellectual freedom) from behind a disguise.

The anonymity question must be treated as part and parcel of a broader matter of the degradation of the norms of communication and discourse, as part of what is wrong with blogging as social communications. Abuse of anonymity is not necessarily a deviation within blogging; it is considered somehow of the essence of the thing, part of what makes it so appealing. The inauthenticity of online interactions is a continuum, stretching from routine use of “handles” instead of names, to elaborate cultivation of false online persona, to abusive anonymity in malicious exchanges. All of this posing has become quite naturalized. People don’t even think much about it any more. The reason an attack on the “right” to anonymity creates such a reaction is because it gets close to the heart of the cyber-libertarian ideology which motivates those who hype an “all-internet” culture. If they give up that principle, a large part of the attraction, not only of blogs, but of the on-line social life, disappears.

Even if we concede the distorted form of “privacy” (anonymity) as a distorted “right,” it is something of a straw man. For those who are engaged with blogs and social networks/networking, privacy is inherently “less of a concern.” Advocating for and taking advantage of the customized benefits of the online “good life” means adopting, by definition, one’s “self” — and exposing one’s self — as a customer whose proclivities are constantly monitored and harvested to further customize products and spectacles to consume. Privacy as a right is a meaningless and vacuous concept in the online life. Identity is a vendable commodity, and blogs (used this way) are ways to attract eyeballs and project an inauthentic persona. In other words,

the changing attitude towards privacy in librarianship is ironically linked to deeper questions and consequences about the needs fulfilled by the use of these technologies. Polishing one's profile becomes a substitute for personal development, anonymity in the expression of a plethora of private information and well beyond in the public sphere becomes a substitute for privacy; identities are created as brands and logos (and thereby falsified and reified); cleverness becomes a substitute for the power of argument and the persuasiveness of evidence.

In the end the anonymous will fade and the commitment to intellectual freedom, equal access and diversity will prevail because they are the correct things to fight for by librarians. An opinion you'd not care to defend in the light of day does not grow more valid delivered from the shadows. Hiding the source of opinions because co-workers, employers, etc. might not approve leads to the festering culture laid bare here in the exchanges on record. Intellectual freedom is *not* free — and the cheap stunt of hooded attack is no way to practice it. The moral equivalence between anonymous (and its variants) attacks and public discourse, exchange, and debate is not one we would care to go to the Supreme Court over. Let them blog, by all means. Let them fill their echo chambers with hollow righteousness. Let them talk to each other. Hooded heroism is not noble.

When the debate is open, and the issues are vetted fairly in the open, conservatives don't like the results. The culture of anonymous, semi-anonymous and pseudonymous personal attack is a way to change rules in order to win. Krugman (2007) pegs the issue: "the Little Lie — the small accusation invented out of thin air, followed by another, and another, and another [isn't] meant to have staying power. Instead, they create a sort of background hum, a sense that the person facing all these accusations must have done something wrong." These bloggers may well be our new Shakespeare, Morrison, Austen, or Cervantes, their words deathless, their reasoning flawless. However, when they choose to enter the public arena, disguise is not a noble stance. Anonymous speech has value, it of course has the same right to exist as any, but when debating among equals in the public arena, owning one's words is more than simply a technical matter.

References

- John Buschman, "Editorial: Miss Leftist Manners Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Communication With Right-Wingers," *Progressive Librarian*, 24, Winter 2004, pp. 2-4. John Buschman, "On Not Revising the ALA Code of Ethics: an Alternate Proposal," *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 8(2), Spring 2006 (<http://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/~mbolin/buschman2.pdf>). John Buschman and Mark Rosenzweig, "Intellectual Freedom Within the Library Workplace: An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Information Ethics*, 8(2), 1999, pp. 36-45. Edmund F. Byrne, "Privacy," in *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, Volume 3. New York: Academic Press, 1998. Paul Krugman, "Sweet Little Lies," *New York Times*, April 9, 2007, p. A17. Gary T. Marx, "On Privacy," *Progressive Librarian*, 27, Summer 2006, pp. 23-30. Ferdinand Shoenman, "Privacy," in *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, Volume II. New York: Garland, 1992.