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Faceless Bodies: Negotiating Technological and Cultural Codes on reddit gonewild

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Abstract

Through a case study of reddit gonewild - a bulletin board that features photographs of naked bodies with their faces hidden or removed - this article argues that anonymity is an important social practice, and one that reveals a complicated interplay between visibility, gender, and the false yet perceived neutrality of code. Although hundreds of photographs of naked bodies are submitted to reddit gonewild each day, only a few appear on its 'front page'. Which of the photos feature depends on not only who posts photographs and who votes on them, but also on technological codes (reddit's algorithms, interfaces, and user accounts) and cultural codes (guidelines, social norms, and 'karma' points) that operate alongside these actions. When technological and cultural codes are taken together, they reveal an amateur pornography site that appears open and inclusive, but is instead closed to all but the few who fit the amateur pornography ideal: young, white, slender and female. Users negotiate these codes when they post or browse photographs on reddit gonewild, and in doing so, they decide how anonymous they want to be in a complex layering of conscious identity work.

Introduction

Browsing reddit gonewild, a website that features nude self-portrait photographs, bodies are featured without faces. Breasts, buttocks, legs, and genitals belonging to anonymous women dominate the screen, while the identity marker of the face is rarely revealed. Remaining

anonymous while showing such intimate body parts highlights complexities and contradictions implicit in online anonymity. In exploring some of these, this article seeks to stress the importance of a nuanced understanding of anonymity practices, as these practices are crucial to many different ways of being social on the internet. The value of online anonymity is often debated, although Gary Marx (1999) concludes that although it carries the risk of anonymous people abusing others, online anonymity is still beneficial to society. Examining practices of anonymity offers critical insights into the kind of behaviours that people wish to keep separate from their name: behaviours that may be offensive, illegal, immoral, experimental, sexual, embarrassing, or just private. In featuring faceless bodies, amateur pornography site reddit gonewild offers an insight into some of these anonymity practices. Although reddit describes itself as "a website about everything, powered by community, democracy, and you" (reddit 2013), an examination of reddit gonewild reveals a complicated interplay between anonymity, gender, and the false yet perceived neutrality of code.

This article first explores how previous literature has treated some of the tensions within online anonymity, including risks and productiveness, and ways anonymity has been deployed in strategies to manage context collapse (Marwick & boyd 2011), and data profiling (Brunton & Nissenbaum 2011). I then provide a situated examination of how reddit gonewild users negotiate both technological codes (the site's algorithms, interfaces, and user profiles) and cultural codes (guidelines, social norms, and 'karma' points), before turning to how these two levels of code are experienced when brought together. Within this situated examination, I draw upon my own observations of reddit gonewild, as well as comments made by reddit users. I have chosen to reproduce a selection of these comments in their entirety, spelling and grammar errors included, to give an insight into these online exchanges. Although I am aware it is problematic to isolate and highlight particular comments from reddit out of their original setting, I believe comments on reddit are public, as the site is "open and available for everyone[…] and that does not require any form of membership or registration" (Sveningsson Elm 2009: 74). This article seeks to illuminate the gonewild subreddit through using these comments as a source of data, which I believe is a just reason to include them, attributed to the users that posted them.

Examining the ways in which reddit users negotiate technological and cultural codes on reddit gonewild demonstrates the ways in which the site appears to be an open, egalitarian space when in fact it is closed to all but a select few. It also gives weight to past scholarship on online anonymity that has insisted that although anonymity has been part of both friendly and unfriendly interactions, it is still an important aspect of being social on the internet.

Tensions of online anonymity

Perceived risks of online anonymity

"Anonymity makes us all strangers, and strangers are hard to trust", claims A. Michael Froomkin (1999: 114), who stresses anonymity's volatility, as it can lead to both harmful and valuable consequences. Some of the perceived harms of online anonymity include abuse, bullying, harassment, fraud, and other illegal activities (Kling et al. 1999), but Judith Donath (1999) adds that while anonymity eliminates accountability, it also provides freedom of speech, freedom from surveillance, and freedom from being judged on one's gender, status, age, or appearance, among other benefits. Moves to restrict or ban online anonymity have been largely unsuccessful; there have been attempts to pass legislation in the United States

that would ban all anonymous communication (Akdeniz 2002), although none have been granted. Debates concerning the worthiness of online anonymity often emphasise its potential for beneficence: following a conference regarding possible legislation of online anonymity, the American Association for the Advancement of Science concluded that anonymous communication was a valuable feature of the internet, and one that ought to be preserved (Teich et al. 1999).

Productiveness of anonymity

Of the rationales for allowing online anonymity, Gary Marx (1999) advances perhaps the most comprehensive. Marx outlines fifteen ways in which anonymity is socially acceptable, including the protection of personhood, facilitating the flow of information, research, encouraging experimentation, enhancing play, and to assist with making merit-based judgements. While Marx does not believe that anonymity should be deployed to unfairly deceive others, he finds it useful in a range of situations. In a study of United States newspaper audiences, Jack Rosenberry (2011) wanted to know whether they approved of anonymous comments on online news articles, after the *Buffalo News* in New York began requiring identification from online commenters. He found that while participants in online comment forums often blamed anonymity for rude or otherwise negative comments, they still supported keeping these forums anonymous. These audiences found anonymity valuable, even when there was the potential for rudeness to occur - perhaps they recognised that it is not only polite comments that contribute usefully to conversations. Michael Salter and Chris Bryden (2009) point out that on a more practical level, even if eradicating online anonymity was seen as necessary, it would prove impossible to implement and enforce on an internet that requires little verification to create email addresses, web accounts, and social media profiles.

Strategies of managing context collapse

With regard to social media, one persistent theme in the case for anonymity is that it is a way to manage separate contexts. Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011) argue that social network sites flatten multiple audiences into one, a phenomenon they call "context collapse". People attempting to communicate with groups of people that are not normally brought together, such as family and colleagues, can find this challenging. Using social media anonymously or pseudonymously is one strategy to manage this context collapse, as it means people can choose what they reveal of themselves depending on their perceived audience. Christina Allen (1999) recommends focusing on internet contexts instead of internet identities, as people consider what real-life information they give depending on the context of engagement. This is an issue taken up by website My Name Is Me, which features a collection of stories from people who advocate for online anonymity. Maymay, a sexual freedom activist, argues that his pseudonym is a tool he uses for context management. "Having the power to choose a pseudonym isn't just an Internet tradition, it's a user-centred design pattern that actively nurtures empowerment" (Maymay 2011). While Maymay's approach to context management seems relentlessly optimistic, his point is that the decision to reveal personal information online should rest with the individual, instead of being forced upon someone by a social media site. He considers his use of a pseudonym to be a form of circumvention when websites demand personal information. Taking the issue of circumvention further, Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum (2011) describe anonymity practices as "obfuscation" when anonymity is deployed to resist surveillance from either third parties or data mining companies.

Strategies of obfuscation

When opting out of online systems is not desirable, some resort to disguising parts of their identity to or to avoid appearing in search results or having data compiled about their activities. Noting that there are many online transactions that involve data profiling, Brunton and Nissenbaum (2011) call obfuscation tactics both "legitimate assertions of autonomy" and "destructive acts, poisoning the wells of collective data". This infers that anonymity is both constructive and destructive. My approach is that having the option of anonymity is vital to internet sociality. Anonymity is key to the kinds of interactions possible on sites such as reddit gonewild, as will be demonstrated in the following case study.

reddit gonewild

reddit is an online bulletin board where users post content in the form of links and text. Users, known as 'redditors', can then vote on this content by allocating each post one 'upvote' or 'downvote', a system which aims to push poor quality content down a dynamic list, while pulling popular content towards the top, resulting in a front page that gives users the best new content on the internet. Content on reddit exists in themed threads known as 'subreddits', which do not simply organise content into topics, but create clusters of redditors whose ties are based far more strongly on mutual interest than pre-existing connections or geography. Niche subreddits often attract those looking for others who share their passion, which tends to create intense pockets of discussion around topics as controversial as men's rights activism, and as narrow as individual characters from television shows. Popular subreddits include 'world news', 'gaming', 'funny', and 'gonewild', which features nude self-portrait photographs. The name of the subreddit is derived from softcore pornography franchise *Girls Gone Wild* (Reilly 2013), which depicts young women incited by film crews to expose their naked bodies to the camera. reddit gonewild is characterised by its logo: a silhouetted figure, with the reddit alien as a head, having their underwear pulled off by a puppy, in a reference to 1954 character Little Miss Coppertone, who featured in sunscreen advertisements (Coppertone 2013).

 Fig. 1: Coppertone 2013.   Fig. 2: reddit 2012

On gonewild, body parts are on gratuitous display, while faces are most often turned away from the camera, obscured, or simply cropped out of the shot. It is common for those who

post to the subreddit to only reveal their naked body, without the identity marker of their face, from a temporary or 'throwaway' reddit account. The photographs appear as provocatively-titled links to externally hosted images; the titles include a bracketed letter to denote the gender of the photograph's subject. Titles, "[f]irst timer, looking for someone to think I'm sexy", "just having [f]un", "[f]or science, this is what 30G boobies look like" (gonewild 2012) all indicate that the subject of the photograph is female. Other permitted gender tags include [m] for male, [CD] for cross dresser, [t] for transsexual, or [?] for a "surprise" (gonewild 2012), but such tags are rarely seen. The vast majority of popular posts on gonewild feature photos of young, white women. Perhaps the reason for this is that reddit's user base is mostly male, meaning males dominate the voting system: the average redditor is a 20-something American male according to a reddit survey (jenakalif 2011), with a Pew Internet survey revealing that men are twice as likely as women to visit the site (Duggan & Smith 2013). It may also be self-fulfilling: the more photographs of women are upvoted, the more the front page of gonewild features women, which may encourage women - while implicitly discouraging other genders - to post photographs to the site.

I now turn to a consideration of the ways in which redditors interact with both other users and the reddit website itself. These interactions will be considered on two distinct yet related levels, which represent two different types of code. Firstly, users interact with technological codes when they deal with the website itself: its algorithms, interfaces, and user accounts. Secondly, cultural codes are dealt with when users interact with each other, such as reddit guidelines, social norms, and 'karma' points. These two categories are by no means fixed, and affect each other in numerous ways. But by considering these technological codes and cultural codes in turn, I provide a situated analysis of anonymity practices on reddit.

Technological codes on reddit gonewild

Algorithms

A central premise of reddit is that votes from redditors are used to rank the content. An "ask me anything" post featuring US President Barack Obama answering questions from reddit users (PresidentObama 2012) attracted 240,727 upvotes and 225,971 downvotes, which left the post with a total score of 14,756 'karma' points. However, the site also employs algorithms to determine the content that 'floats' to the top of the page, which operate alongside the voting system. Algorithms are a form of technological code that sorts content on reddit: Randall Munroe (2009), the creator of reddit's comment algorithms, describes them as working "splendidly", given that "good comments will jump quickly to the top and stay there, and bad comments will hover near the bottom". But just because the process is automatic does not mean it is unbiased. Amir Salihefendic (2010) explains the most important elements of reddit's automatic ranking system: submission time is factored in so that newer posts rank higher than older; "hot" voting is implemented so that the first upvotes that a post receives are weighted heavily; and "controversial" posts (ones that garner similar amounts of upvotes and downvotes) get a lower ranking compared to posts with mainly upvotes. Decisions like these have a large impact on the reddit browsing experience, as they determine what kind of content will appear more prominently. Algorithms are an example of the false yet perceived neutrality of code: redditors are encouraged to choose the subreddits they subscribe to, and to vote on the content posted in them - but while both of these options emphasise the control the user has over the site, algorithms work silently in the background to exert another kind of control. Eli Pariser (2011) calls such algorithms the new gatekeepers of online content, arguing that they isolate people in narrow versions of all the existing

information on the internet. He argues that the more users browse websites that employ such algorithms, the more they will end up in a personal "filter bubble" that only shows them a limited version of the content range on the internet. redditors may be active in subscribing to subreddits of their choice and voting on content in an effort to curate their experience of reddit, but most are not involved in the process behind designing and implementing algorithms - their contributions can only occur through the interfaces available to them.

Interfaces

reddit is made up of a series of simple interfaces: the homepage, which displays content from all of a user's subreddits, the specific content of the different subreddits, and a user's 'overview' page that displays a list of links and comments they have submitted. The process of submitting content is straightforward: users post a URL, give it a title, and choose a subreddit for it. Any registered user can post any kind of content anywhere on reddit - a simplicity that implies immediate acceptance, when this is not the case. Just because a user can post something to the site does not mean it will be appreciated - only the top few posts in every subreddit are awarded enough upvotes to be viewed immediately - or even kept, as moderators can remove content if they feel it does not conform to a subreddit's standards. On reddit gonewild, people of any gender can post, but it is the photographs of women that are more likely to become popular; not that such popularity is unproblematic. Stephen Bruckert details a trend of "checking for gonewild" on the site: as user pages automatically display a user's submission history, there have been incidents of women contributing to other parts of the site and being dismissed or ridiculed after other redditors find and highlight their naked photographs on gonewild (Dunn 2013). One redditor expressed her concern over this trend:

The last thing I want is to be 20 comments deep in a debate presenting excellent data to another redditor and then someone linking to my GW posts: 'ZOMG YOU POSTED UR TITS TO GW' (and subsequently get upvoted/downvoted because of my boobs, rather than my point). (OnOffStar 2009)

Such attention, when unwanted, can prompt users to disguise themselves on reddit by creating a 'throwaway' account.

User accounts

According to Helen Nissenbaum (1999), unreachability is what is at stake in having a pseudonym: if someone reveals personal information, but it does not allow someone else to get at them, they are protected from the potential harms that come from being known, such as being treated differently as a result of posting naked photographs. The convention on reddit is to have one persistent account that records and displays a history of what the user has posted, voted on, or commented around the site. Such a history provides what Judith Donath (1999) calls contextual information about the user, which over time builds an established reputation. This kind of technological code can be disrupted by creating a 'throwaway': a temporary reddit account that strips away a user's history. Often the temporary username will avoid referencing a real name, gender, or place: usernames 'justabitwild' and 'gonewild135' play on the title of subreddit 'gonewild', without giving away any personal details. Throwaways disrupt the idea that each user has one account, but there are a large number of people who browse reddit without registering an account at all. Since signing up for the site is not a prerequisite for accessing reddit's content, there exist a mass of people who use the site without creating, voting, or commenting on content. Although this behaviour is often

described as "lurking", Kate Crawford argues for recontextualising it as one of "listening", framing the practice as "receptive and reciprocal" (Crawford 2009: 527). She notes that online participation is commonly referred to as having a "voice", and that the notion is overemphasised in discourses of internet use. Instead, to use listening as a metaphor for paying attention online is to see value in it, rather than cast it as a form of non-participation. The kind of dispersed, low-level attention that occurs when people "tune in" to a social media site several times during the day (Crawford 2012: 218) contributes to the feeling that posts are given attention, even when this is not explicitly rendered in comments or upvotes. While listening on reddit rather than creating an account or voting on posts disrupts technological codes of reddit, it is the cultural codes - reddit's guidelines, social norms, and 'karma' points - that are consciously negotiated with each action taken on the site.

Cultural codes on reddit gonewild

Guidelines

reddit gonewild bears the self-description "a place for open-minded Adult Redditors to exchange their nude bodies for karma" (gonewild 2012). Such guidelines mark the separation between technological and cultural codes: while the technological code of the website means that any image can be posted to the site, it is the cultural codes of the site that determine how the image will be appreciated. Guidelines on reddit gonewild emphasise the value of anonymity. A moderator writes:

The internet is a public place. You are posting naked pictures of yourself on the internet[…] If you want to be as anonymous as possible, take the following precautions.

1. Make a throwaway reddit account.

2. Don't include your face in your photos. If you must, blur or blackout your features.

3. Take pictures against difficult-to-identify backgrounds. Plain walls or colours work well. (Technohazard 2012)

Users actively negotiate these cultural codes: while this moderator recommends practicing anonymity while posting photographs to the site, users decide for themselves what kinds of identity information to include in their photographs. This decision is not always made alone: one user posted the question "Anonymous or not?" (TheSilverLining 2009) to gonewild, which elicited a range of advice. "This is my one and only account. I have a friend IRL [in real life] who uses reddit and so it's possible one day they'll stumble on it, but really? I don't care" said the_Pinball (2009), while Pipiru (2009) cautioned, "it's so very important to remember once something is on the internet you have to give up hope on any other control of it".

Social norms

Elsewhere on gonewild, a moderator advises that remaining anonymous while posting photographs "is the digital equivalent of wearing a condom. You don't have to stop having fun, but you really ought to be safe about it" (upvotesforgw 2012). Safety is an issue taken up by stevep98, who predicts that "at some point in the near future someone is going to start mining those images and running facial recognition software on them" (stevep98 2010). Both

comments express a social norm: that remaining anonymous while posting naked photographs on the internet is a way to remain safe. This implies there is danger in public nudity, namely the reputation damage of being associated with images considered intimate or explicit, which transgresses the norm that these images should be kept private. Having guidelines and social norms as cultural codes does not mean that every user adheres to these. There are many gonewild posts of people who do show their face, as well as other identifying information like tattoos, clothing, or bedroom interiors. These posters may not mind if they are recognised from their photographs - indeed, this may be their intention - or the additional exposure of including their faces may appeal to them. Some believe that gonewild posts that have faces in them will increase the likelihood of gaining upvotes, or 'karma' points, for the user.

Karma points

Social capital on reddit is cultivated through 'karma' points, or upvotes: the form in which peer approval is manifested on the site. This becomes an important part of a user's reputation on reddit, and it contributes to a redditor's dynamic profile, which changes based on encounters within the site: a numerical score indicating both "link karma" and "comment karma" are important features. Considering the value of karma points reveals a further complexity to the practices of anonymity on reddit gonewild: the posting of photographs from a throwaway account. After all, these accounts are doubly anonymous; they detach a person not only from their physical self, but from their regular reddit account as well. Although titles of the images on gonewild vary enormously, a common theme is the requesting of karma points from other users - echoing the subreddit's description, a place to exchange nude bodies for karma. This theme is present in image titles such as "Where's the love [f]or a girl who loves hockey?!", "On my knees, just for you Reddit" and "any love (f)or thick thighs?" (gonewild 2012). Many titles seem to conflate the social capital of karma points with 'love'. At first, this practice seems confusing. Why post photographs from a throwaway account that will gain karma points, when these points will not then be displayed on the user's regular reddit account? It suggests that karma points must be valuable in themselves, even when disconnected from a more persistent online identity. It alludes to a sense of satisfaction that comes from posting nude photographs: this may be shown by karma points, but felt by the original poster as gratification for showing off their naked body and having it appreciated, without the poster having to reveal who they are. Embodying an otherwise anonymous online presence is one of multiple ways that gonewild complicates dichotomies of public and private, of online and offline. It demonstrates that technological and cultural codes, while distinct, are also entwined - karma points really fall under both categories. Considering these entangled practices means a kind of anonymity specific to reddit gonewild emerges.

Lawrence Lessig argues that spaces express their values through the practices they enable or disable. He contends that, "blind, deaf or ugly (we cannot assume away the burdens that the unattractive suffer), in text-based communication we are equal," (Lessig 1999: 64). With an interface rich in images, the limitation that Lessig identifies in being unattractive is reinstated. The front page of gonewild consistently features photos of young, slim, white women, while other body types (including males) are more commonly relegated to the 'controversial' section of the site. The gonewild subreddit reveals a contradiction in how naked, sexualised, usually female bodies are valued. reddit users are both promised karma points as reward for their nude photographs, and urged to post anonymously to avoid potential punishment, such as reputation damage. The fact that reddit users practice

anonymity on gonewild by hiding their faces while displaying their bodies reveals how complex anonymity practices can be.

Discussion

Being anonymous as a social practice on the internet involves negotiating both technological and cultural codes. On reddit, even posting something from a throwaway account identifies the person as both an English speaker and a reddit user, illustrating Gary Marx's (2004) argument that absolute anonymity is never truly possible. Technological and cultural codes are both lenses through which anonymity practices of reddit users can be examined, but they often overlap. One aspect of reddit gonewild that speaks to both technological and cultural codes is the question of consent: with so much amateur pornography available on the internet, how do the onlookers at gonewild know that the person in the photograph is the same person responding to comments? How do they know this person has given permission for this photograph being shared on the internet? To prove their consent, some include 'verification' photos: their username and the date in the same photograph as their face or body, to assert that the photograph was taken with the specific intention of uploading it to gonewild. Most verification photographs include this information on a piece of paper, though some choose to demonstrate their consent through an act that enmeshes the technological and cultural: writing it directly on their body.

Fig. 3: LadyLiberty 2011.

Verification photographs are one negotiation of many that users must make when they post photographs on gonewild. As reddit is a site that relies upon user-generated content, those who post to gonewild are at once its most valuable commodity and the most vulnerable participants. People - mostly women - post photographs with as much or as little personal information about themselves as they choose, photographs that usually attempt to obscure their identity, which still risks drawing criticism or abuse from their immediate audience, or even being 'outed' by the wider reddit user base. They do this ostensibly for the pleasure derived from being admired, and the gratification that comes with having their naked self-portraits appreciated - but the process is far from straightforward. When both technological and cultural codes are experienced in composite, the result is an amateur pornography site that appears open and egalitarian, but is in fact closed to all but a few. Those who post play into the amateur pornography dynamic by looking like the 'girl next door': a popular way to do this is by hiding their face, therefore appearing reticent about their explicit photographs. Anonymity practices in this instance function as both a safety measure against unwanted attention, and a marker of the amateur pornography aesthetic.

To browse the subreddit is to be faced with the same kinds of photographs each day; although many post, only young, white, female bodies emerge on the front page. To post is to conform to these standards or be rejected through a voting system that will push photographs of bodies that are not in this category down the list. Together, these codes produce a subreddit that perpetuates stereotypical ideas of the kinds of girls who 'go wild' on the internet, rather than the kind of setting it purports to be: a "safe, mature, low-pressure environment for true exhibitionists" (gonewild 2012). In this way, reddit gonewild disrupts conventional ideas about amateur pornography. Although Niels van Doorn argues that the "increasingly spectacular, silicon-enhanced artificiality of commercial feature-length pornography" (van Doorn 2010: 414) has prompted a desire for more authentic representations of sexuality, instead of showing the opposite, gonewild presents a derivative: women who mimic popular mainstream pornography genres, with amateur aesthetics. Gonewild's departure point from mainstream pornography is not its representations of women and sexuality, but its insistence that these are "the 'real' bodies and pleasures of people who could be your neighbour" (van Doorn 2010: 414).

Those practicing anonymity on gonewild negotiate both technological and cultural codes when they post photographs that reveal their naked bodies, but not the identity markers of their names or faces.

Conclusion

Hundreds of photographs of naked bodies are submitted to reddit gonewild each day. Which photographs appear on the front page of the subreddit is influenced not only by who posts and who votes, but also by the various technological and cultural codes that operate alongside these actions. Through a situated examination of how these codes are negotiated, this article demonstrates a complex layering of conscious identity work that occurs on the site. Literature concerning online anonymity often weighs the potential benefits of anonymity against its risks, but rarely provides nuanced accounts of how anonymity is practiced in specific online settings. This article argues that practices of anonymity offer insights into what kinds of online activity people wish to separate from their public identity. reddit gonewild has been considered in this article as a site in which bodies, faces, and names connect and disconnect in ways that reveal troubling associations: the site promises a "comfortable environment without pressure" (gonewild 2012) for any gender and any body, yet routinely features

anonymous female bodies that conform to conventional pornography standards. Those who post to the site seem embodied through the uploaded photographs of their bodies, but detached through the decision to leave out their faces. This article opens a discussion about online anonymity by framing it as a dynamic social practice that makes an important contribution to being social online.

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Acknowledgements

Biographical Note

Emily van der Nagel is a PhD candidate at Swinburne University of Technology. Her PhD thesis argues that online anonymity should be considered as a social practice, especially as the 'named internet' gains cultural relevance, with Google and Facebook requiring 'real' names from their users. Rather than think of anonymity as a state of being, her thesis argues that anonymity is a complex, dynamic practice that problematises a sense of agency when using social media sites.