

Online Media Forums as Separate Social Lives: A Qualitative Study of Disclosure Within and Beyond Reddit

Martin L. Shelton, University of California, Irvine
Katherine M. Lo, University of California, Irvine
Bonnie A. Nardi, University of California, Irvine

Abstract

Social media websites and web forums increasingly resemble massive media-sharing spaces where participants must manage self-presentation by targeting data disclosures to anticipated audiences. To explore the dynamics of selective disclosure, we conducted a qualitative study with participants on the social news site, reddit, and examined how people discuss its content in conversation on the website, in other websites, and in face-to-face conversation. We conducted 24 interviews with users and analyzed a supplementary corpus of popular reddit threads and reddit Internet Relay Chat logs. We also made regular use of the website to ground our understanding of the community. In our inductive analysis we found that many reddit users described deliberate social choices to compartmentalize discussions involving content on the website from their social lives beyond.

Keywords: anonymity; social media; disclosure; self-presentation; reddit

Citation: Shelton, M., Lo, K., Nardi, B. (2015). Online Media Forums as Separate Social Lives: A Qualitative Study of Disclosure Within and Beyond Reddit. In *iConference 2015 Proceedings*.

Copyright: Copyright is held by the authors.

Acknowledgements: We'd like to thank the multiple reddit communities who participated in this research, virtually everywhere.

Contact: mshelton@uci.edu, kmlo@uci.edu, nardi@ics.uci.edu

1 Introduction

Governments and organizations around the world increasingly confront issues of user identification in online media websites. Should real names be required to use them, is enforcement tenable, and to what end? Perhaps the most notable example, Facebook requires that users disclose using their real name and spotlights personal disclosure among friends and family as the value of the platform. However, relatively anonymous media websites deemphasize users' personal identities, and instead highlight the media and discussions that they share. Ecosystems of user-driven forums, weblogs, and content aggregation tools (e.g., 4chan, Tumblr, reddit) allow participants to exchange internet memes, lore, and media content with both familiar and unknown users. Internet memes, "typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission," (Davison, 2012) as well as stories and cultural histories shared by users, are often conveyed through media articles—for example, images, video, and text. In relation to centrally-operated media, growing research attention has been given to interactions enabled by web forums and content aggregators that actively involve participants in the creation and sharing of media (Coleman, 2012b; Jenkins et al., 2013; Phillips, 2012). In light of the growing ubiquity of media-sharing websites, we know relatively little about the specific influence of communication in web forums on communication and disclosure practices beyond those forums. People in these spaces present themselves by disclosing through text posts, sharing hyperlinks, and sharing media. In what ways do they affect how we talk to each other, disclose personal information, and present ourselves? In particular, how do people discuss internet memes, jokes, and references within relatively anonymous media-sharing forums? How do users' practices influence self-presentation and disclosure in face-to-face communication and in other websites?

In this paper we analyze how users of a large web community called reddit refer to its content beyond the website—in external websites and face-to-face conversation. Our goal is to understand how the unique features of relatively anonymous online communities like reddit impact self-presentation beyond the website, and how shared histories between community members diffuse into outside conversation. For the purposes of this paper, we use the term *anonymous media sites* to describe websites that emphasize the exchange of media and discussions between users and where users operate in relative anonymity, for example, Tumblr, 4chan, reddit, and others. "Relative anonymity" is characterized by the capacity to withhold identifying information by using pseudonyms or posting anonymously, as opposed to the widespread use of personal identifiers (e.g., on LinkedIn). We will discuss the relationship between relative anonymity and online media in detail.

We first look to previous work on self-presentation on the internet. We present our study design, findings, and a discussion to unpack the influence of a large media-sharing forum on self-presentation and disclosure beyond the website.

2 Background

2.1 Online self-presentation and personal disclosure

Scholars including Cooley (1902), Mead (1934), Goffman (1959), and numerous others laid the foundations for thinking about the self in relation to others. Goffman's dramaturgical model visualizes self-presentation as a stage performance, in which we selectively share information for various audiences to control the impressions that others form of us. Just as we talk to our co-workers differently than family, we attempt to segment online self-presentation into multiple audiences. For example, Miller (1995) explored how people manage personal websites to respond to multiple public personas as a representative of a group, as an individual, or as a professional, orienting a profile to a putative audience. People manage their presentation of self through personal websites, social network sites (SNSs, boyd, 2007; Marwick & boyd, 2011), and various other locales.

Social network sites represent a particularly rich arena for research in self-presentation and personal identification with multiple schemas. On Facebook, the user usually assumes a persistent and singular identity, while Twitter includes a range of alternatives between self-identification, using pseudonyms, and even accounts directed at parody of people and ideas. Social network sites complicate self-presentation by altering the potential reach of individual disclosures in a variety of ways (Baym & boyd, 2012; boyd, 2007; Litt et al., 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2011). In SNSs many potentially distinct audiences—friends, family, workmates, and so on—are collapsed into one space. The collapse of the audience into a single context introduces the potential for conflicts and contradictions between multiple presentations of self (Marwick & boyd, 2011). For example, Facebook assumes a single “self” for each user, but we orient our conversations to multiple parties of colleagues, friends, family, and other associations.

Challenges of delivering tailored messages for tailored audiences are not novel within our digital trails, but are instead persistently stubborn problems. Even the simplest statement in conversation is complicated by peripheral audiences of inactive conversational partners, eavesdroppers, and bypassers (Goffman, 1981). Controlling the audience in SNSs often requires the use of privacy settings and specific grouping features across platforms. Vitak (2012) found that a small minority of people on Facebook use its “friend list” feature to segment the audience and manage personal disclosures, suggesting that it takes great time, effort, and knowledge to post to a slice of one's entire network. It can be difficult to manage disclosures on SNSs, where personal data is persistent, searchable, replicable, and may introduce unseen audiences (boyd, 2007).

Litt (2012) points out that users must orient their self-presentation to an “imagined audience,” that is difficult to discern without sufficient knowledge. The persistence of user data extends the audience over time, but people are not always aware who has access to their personal data. For example, Bernstein and his colleagues found that people dramatically underestimate the size of their audience for posts on Facebook (Bernstein et al., 2013). In-the-moment outbursts linger, and half-truths are exposed through misdirection to unintended viewers, leading to experiences of regret among users attempting to manage their personal disclosures (Wang et al., 2011). Indeed, SNSs frequently allow users to post information about others, leading to distributed control over users' self-presentation, often in conflict with individual impression management (Litt et al., 2014). That is, managing self-presentation in the context of SNSs is difficult and can suggest challenges in various other locales where users present themselves through selective disclosures of personal data.

In addition to the complex negotiations of self-presentation that people already manage, online media can amplify audiences by making personal data disclosures available to people around the world—in the present and in the future—leading to unforeseen audiences and misdirected disclosures. Relatively anonymous websites that allow users to post without persistent identities can enable altogether unique brands of self-presentation that shift emphasis on the self to emphasis on media content and discussions.

2.2 Anonymity and Disinhibition in Online Media

In contrast to the idea of media spectatorship, Jenkins and colleagues (2013) describe “participatory culture” as the shift toward active consumer participation in media production. Lessig (2008) similarly distinguishes between “Read Only,” and “Read/Write” culture, the former describing passive consumption of media, while the latter describes active participation in reconfiguration or creation of media. People can easily produce and distribute original content, or reconfigure existing media to share with others through computing tools. The reappropriation of existing media by distributed users can be seen in image boards like 4chan (Coleman, 2012b; Phillips, 2011, 2012), forums like Something Awful (Phillips, 2012), social news sites (including reddit) (Bergstrom, 2011; Vickery, 2014), and numerous other relatively anonymous venues on the internet. Anonymous media sites promote the discussion and sharing of media content, and do not require users to share personal information.

What makes relatively anonymous websites ideal for sharing media content and discussions between users? In his writings on authorship Foucault (1979) argues that diminished attribution enables creative flexibility by allowing people to emphasize *what* was said, as opposed to who said it. Moreover, much previous work suggests that anonymity may promote a sense of dissociation among users—a phenomenon that Suler (2004) calls dissociative anonymity. In particular, political correctness and western pluralism are not clearly reproduced in relatively anonymous web communities, where transgressive and off-color humor finds a wide audience. For example, previous investigations of 4chan, one of the largest anonymous image boards in the world, illustrate the impact of dissociative anonymity on disinhibition. Coleman (Coleman, 2012b) described how 4chan trolls find amusement in offending others on the internet, frequently engaging in disruptive pranks at the expense of unsuspecting strangers. For example, Phillips (Phillips, 2011) described how trolls vandalize Facebook memorial pages, and the psychology of amusement that trolls find in provoking the ire of mourning users. 4chan trolls find humor in death and disaster, yet the websites they inhabit are also profoundly generative and have an enormous footprint on internet culture, spawning popular internet memes including LOLcats, Advice Animals, and numerous others (Davison, 2012; Phillips, 2012). In contrast, reddit is the site of deeply sensitive personal disclosures among pseudonymous users (Vickery, 2014), who often use the website to distribute media and discussions, including their most vulnerable and intimate secrets with strangers in the community. Suler (2004) suggests that online disinhibition amplifies both antisocial and prosocial communications, allowing participants freedom over the media and discussions that they share with others.

We are interested in understanding how the unique communication practices on anonymous media sites diffuse into external websites, as well as face-to-face communication. As a robust online community with unique norms, reddit represents a powerful space for examining disclosure of personal data, as well as self-presentation within and beyond the website.

3 Research context

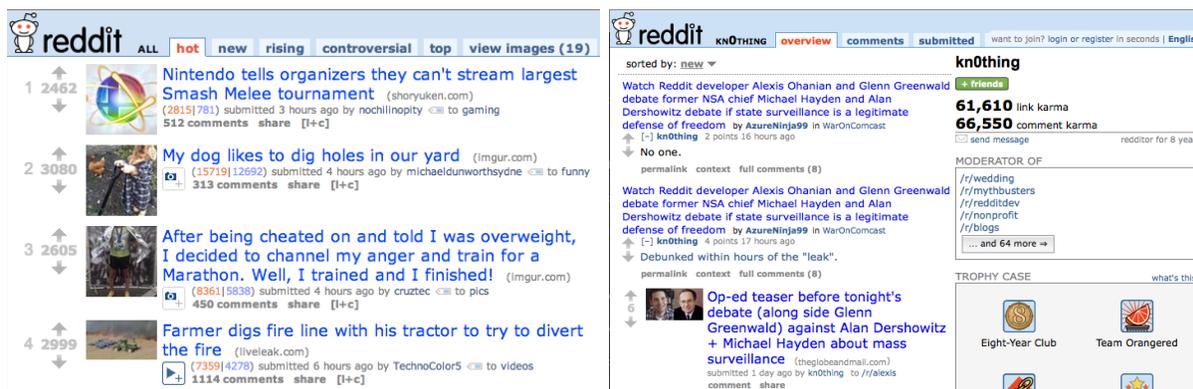
3.1 Reddit as a Research Site

Reddit—the self-titled “front page of the internet”—is a social news website in which users vote on the prominence of user-contributed links. The website is best known for its unconventional subforums, popular internet memes (Vickery, 2014), crowdsourced investigations (Surowiecki, 2013), philanthropy (Morris, 2012; Watson, 2012), “Ask Me Anything” discussions (Rogers, 2012), and off-color content. Previous work uses reddit as a research context for predicting the success of threads shared by users (Gilbert, 2013; Lakkaraju et al., 2013; Van Mieghem, 2011; Weninger et al., 2013), modeling the evolution of comments (Wang et al., 2012; Weninger et al., 2013), as well as describing the characteristics of community members who socialize new users (Hsieh et al., 2013). With few exceptions (e.g., Vickery, 2014), little previous work explores cultural aspects or communication practices on the website.

Reddit serves as a compelling foil for SNSs like Facebook, where users can similarly share media, “friend” one another, follow others’ persistent user histories, and share personal data. However, redditors use pseudonyms, disposable usernames, and occasionally, alternative identities (Bergstrom, 2011). Rather than friends, users tend to connect with distributed strangers. Small differences between the platforms result in wildly distinct interactions, such as the trend among reddit users to share personal confessions with the community through internet memes (Vickery, 2014).

Finally, reddit has several practical features that make it a valuable research context. First, it is almost entirely open source and offers a freely accessible application programming interface (API) to preserve users' posts for investigation. Like other social news sites, reddit allows users to vote on the value of content, and it is particularly useful because it allows us to examine high-traffic media content at the same time as a massive population of users. In recent years, at the time of writing, its popularity has exploded. Throughout 2012, reddit had approximately 400 million unique visitors and 37 billion page views (reddit blog, 2012). In 2013, that number grew to 731 million unique visitors and 56 billion page views (reddit blog, 2013). At the time of data collection in July 2013, reddit was the 125th most visited website globally and the 48th most visited in the United States (Alexa, 2014) where it held an audience of approximately 6% of all adult internet users (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Only six months later in January 2014, the site ranked 27th in the United States, and 72nd globally. Beyond the technical advantages of the website as a research context, reddit's rapid growth has led to its centrality among large content aggregation and media-sharing websites, where millions of users maintain knowledge of a growing repertoire of in-jokes, memes, and references.

3.2 The Anatomy of Reddit



Figures 1 & 2. Left: The “front page” of reddit (reddit.com/r/all), where its content is arranged by current popularity. Right: A user’s profile, and their recent post history.

Reddit shares many components with other social news websites like Digg and StumbleUpon, which similarly structure conversations around threads that contain an initial post with links to articles, images, videos, or text content. Users may *upvote* a thread with a link or text to elevate its prominence on the site, or *downvote* to diminish it relative to a queue of competing threads and comments (see Figure 1). The site slowly pushes older content down the queue of threads. Each thread contains a comment section, allowing registered users to discuss links with one another and vote on the quality of others' comments.

Users typically post through screen names with an attached user profile, containing a history of previous posts entries to the website that may be viewed by anyone (see Figure 2). Finally, users' posts are organized into *subreddits*—subforums that registered users may subscribe to and add to their personalized thread queue. For example, users interested in science may subscribe to reddit.com/r/AskScience (commonly referred to as */r/AskScience*), or a variety of scientific subcommunities. If a subreddit does not yet exist, any user may create it. Users can subscribe to subreddits for nearly anything, ranging from general (e.g., */r/funny*) to highly specific interests. The website leverages collective approval to surface new, interesting content and discussions across a variety of niche subcommunities.

4 Study Design and Analysis

To explore reddit's influence on self-presentation and disclosure practices in outside spaces, we inductively analyzed qualitative interviews and a data corpus composed of high-traffic reddit “front page” threads, as well as public reddit Internet Relay Chat (IRC) logs. IRC is a popular web chat protocol, supported by a variety of subreddits that we will describe here. We made routine use of the site throughout the entirety of the study to ground our understanding of the community, specifically the memes, jokes, and references that circulate within.

We interviewed participants regarding how they use reddit, and how they correspond with acquaintances about the content and discussions that they encounter on the website. In particular, we asked interviewees about how they refer to content on reddit in other websites and in face-to-face conversation. We recruited a total of 24 interviewees, including 12 in our local community in Southern California, as well as 12 distributed participants for audio-only interviews via Skype (8) or text chat (4) under the precondition of anonymity. We specifically recruited registered users because they are able to customize their subreddits and may therefore see more diverse content than unregistered users. For in-person interviews, we recruited participants through local subreddits (e.g., /r/LosAngeles) on corresponding local reddit meetup groups organized through Facebook (e.g., the “Los Angeles Redditors” Facebook group). We targeted active, distributed users by soliciting recent commenters. We here define “active” as participating in reddit threads through comments within the past 24 hours, having a history of previous posts, and at least three months of self-reported activity on the website. We used an automated script to parse commenters in a randomized thread generated by <http://reddit.com/random>, which opens one of 500 currently active threads. We selected one commenter at random from each thread, and asked them to participate in interviews via private message. Seven distributed interviewees were located in North America (6 in the United States, 1 in Canada), 3 in Europe, 1 in South Korea, and 1 in Australia. Participants were mainly in their twenties, and ranged from 18-60 years of age. Interviewees reported using the website for between 3 months and 7 years.

To supplement our interviews and observations, we developed a corpus to document trends in significant topics of interest on reddit over the course of 10 weeks. Our corpus includes 1393 threads with 30,170 comments. Because we are interested in knowledge that users likely share in common, we focus on the site’s most recognizable content aggregated on the “front page” of /r/all. From May 10 to July 25 2013, we gathered logs from several reddit IRC channels and top threads from reddit.com/r/all. We used the reddit API to crawl the front page twice each day at 0:00 and 12:00 PDT to retrieve the top 10 posts across the entire website. We collected each thread’s unique identifier, title, submission time and date, upvotes, downvotes, net score, content link, permanent link, and the number of comments attached to the thread. We developed our corpus with the intent to document the website’s popular discourse during the time of our interviews. However, while we found the thread corpus was a rich source of information, we found that the IRC logs did not add substantively to the quality of the analysis and revealed modest novel information.

We focused our collaborative inductive approach on qualitative analysis of interviews. We iteratively developed our coding schemes to organize interviewees’ behaviors and attitudes toward references to reddit into clusters of emergent categories (Muller, 2014). Following several iterations, two researchers involved in analyses approved the current coding scheme that segments several interviewees’ reports into clusters of high-level behaviors for discussing reddit content, and reasons for participants’ behaviors. We asked interviewees about (1) details about themselves, (2) how they use reddit (e.g., the subreddits they follow, level of involvement, who they know on the website), (3) the types of information they are willing to share about their use of the website, and with whom (e.g., their username, post history). We explore these findings through our interviewees’ firsthand accounts, and referred back to the data corpus to understand what users were likely to see at the time of the interviews.

5 Findings

We found a range of social complications that lead many users to routinely *compartmentalize* their activities on reddit from their social life beyond the website. Similar to its use in psychological literature where the term is used to describe segmented social identities (e.g., Brewer, 2010), we define *compartmentalization* as the process of separating disclosures for multiple audiences. For example, some interviewees manipulate selective disclosure by using multiple screen names and disposable accounts—a practice we will unpack in further detail. In the following sections we describe disclosure among users, as well as communications with non-users. Finally, we will explore how and why users compartmentalize communications related to their use of reddit.

5.1 Who is Using Reddit?

Participants described how they would use reddit when they had extra time—sometimes for minutes, sometimes for hours.

I work for a laboratory supplier... I manage a database and a website, and I have a fair amount of downtime. Reddit is what I fill that downtime with. (P1)

The experience of using reddit to fill time gaps is common, but the website is something different to everyone because users often subscribe to different subreddits. Diversity is reflected in interviewees' subreddit feeds, tailored for comedy, gaming, self-improvement, science, news, and general interests. Some participants subscribe to highly specific subreddits whose topics include nail polish, seduction techniques, or film soundtrack remixes. Yet a great deal of common overlap exists between users. A steady class of subreddits that most people saw by default that accounted for over 90% of the front page threads that we gathered. Indeed, only three default subreddits (*/r/funny*, */r/pics*, */r/AdviceAnimals*) made up over half of the front page threads that we collected. We caution that this is a limited sample at specific times of the day. It nonetheless stands to reason that many default subreddits are clear contexts for building shared knowledge among users because they are by far the most highly trafficked.

Interviewees described reddit as a fundamentally “nerd culture.” (P16) We observed a technical character to the most pervasive topics of conversation on front page threads (e.g., computer surveillance) and many interviewees' personal interests:

I've got a big group of nerd friends and... nerds are drawn to reddit. (P14)

Reddit essentially started out as very techy- and nerd-oriented. (P3)

Over half of the interviewees had a technical background—computer science students, network engineers, web developers, and related positions. According to a previous survey by Pew Research (Duggan & Smith, 2013), the population is disproportionately represented by young male users, though participants argued the population is more inclusive than the above stereotypes would suggest. One interviewee who frequents local events with other redditors suggested that “internet shut-in” archetypes are misplaced, and that redditors are increasingly diverse:

It's getting more popular, so it's not just two guys meeting up in a pizza place somewhere... It's still a subculture, but it's not so isolated. Normal people do it, it's not just a bunch of neckbeards. (P2)

Diversity is also reflected in interviewees' subreddit feeds. Simultaneously, users sometimes subscribed to highly specific subreddits. The history of reddit as a technical community pervades its culture, but the site is nonetheless increasingly accessible to the broader public.

As the website grows, users increasingly know others who use reddit, yet it does not often come up in conversation. Rather, users have multiple conversational practices to make subtle nods to content. We discuss these practices in detail.

5.2 Redditors in Conversation

As opposed to meeting users on the site, interviewees nearly always knew other redditors as previous acquaintances before getting involved on reddit. For example, some participants had roommates and friends from school that used the website. Like a social networking service, users may “friend” one another to subscribe to posts by other users, but almost none our participants claimed to have used the feature. If they made acquaintances through reddit, it was usually through local subreddits (e.g., */r/LosAngeles*) which are frequently used for organizing informal “meetups.” That is, interviewees almost never used reddit to build or sustain long-term relationships; their conversations instead would shift to other applications such as Facebook, Meetup.com, or IRC. Compared with conversations on reddit, which frequently include passing responses among hundreds or thousands of individual contributors, interviewees who went to meetups often described growing to know other redditors more closely:

My friends that are now Facebook friends aside from reddit, we don't really mention reddit because we know a little bit about each others' lives. It's become more than just a reddit friend. They're an acquaintance now, a real acquaintance. (P7)

Unlike anonymous media sites, where content is central to conversation, participants who know one another outside of reddit learn about one another more personally and can assume many other areas of shared knowledge. Indeed, many participants suggested that they have little interest in overtly discussing content on reddit beyond the website:

They've got access to all the same information. It'd be like talking about work with your workmates. (P18)

It doesn't come up often. When it does, I don't find there's much to talk about other than, “Have you seen?...” “Yep.” (P10)

The website more often filtered into conversations as background knowledge. Nearly half of our interviewees recounted how they occasionally default to language familiar on reddit, namely among friends who understand:

A lot of my friends say TIL now in regular conversation... (P15)

People would just openly discuss, "Oh, somebody else did an AMA on reddit." (P5)

TIL refers to a subreddit called Today I Learned, where users can post about surprising facts that they recently discovered, and Ask Me Anything is a subreddit that allows users to start discussions to and ask others about themselves. Participants described shorthand slipping into their conversations, and seldom as an explicit topic of conversation.

People who knew other redditors usually knew them as prior acquaintances, independently of reddit. If they met someone through the website, it was usually through a local meetup group, and enduring discussions would move into other social media (e.g., Facebook) and face-to-face conversations. While users knew acquaintances who use reddit, they also had shared knowledge over much else, and topics on the website seldom become explicit subjects of conversation. Instead, users' familiarity with anonymous media sites provides background knowledge of jokes, memes, and references.

5.3 Disclosing to Non-Users

Nearly half of our participants described strategies to synthesize content for potential audiences. For example, a user might synthesize an amusing thread for acquaintances unfamiliar with reddit.

It feels more legitimate if I cite that it's a publication instead of people talking on the internet. (P1)

Well somebody in the comment section on reddit made a really good point... I'll say, "I was talking to somebody who said something that made a lot of sense." Just for simplicity's sake. (P14)

Reframing strategies are not unique to anonymous media sites, but they highlight the necessity to interpret and synthesize media before they can be communicated to various audiences. Rather than direct and overt expressions, users engage in subtler forms of self-expression. Participants described pointing to content on reddit as background knowledge, and otherwise references would more commonly be reframed for the anticipated audience.

6 Compartmentalization of Disclosures

Not only are disclosures involving reddit infrequent, but some users actively separate their life on reddit from their social life beyond the website—a practice we call compartmentalization. While not all users engage in compartmentalizing their disclosures, many users have a strong reasons to do so. Separating social life on anonymous media sites from external social spaces helps people react to disparate social norms and expectations.

People frequently represent themselves in different ways on reddit and outside spaces. Half of participants did not want to talk about a range of topics common on reddit in person—in particular, internet memes—because they evoked negative reactions through both use and misuse:

We don't really talk about the internet in real life. I'm sure you know some people who take it way too far, who say "LOL" out loud, it's just really embarrassing. (P8)

Let internet humor stay on the internet. I understand why people say "cringeworthy" when they see memes in real life. Don't bring that into real life. (P18)

About one third of interviewees described reddit as a space where they could talk about things that would be difficult to talk about in face-to-face conversation, notably politics, religion, and gender relations:

[[It's] a place to vent where nobody knows it's me... Certain things are my views and I don't like people to know how I stand on issues. It can cause too many problems and you will never actually succeed in changing somebody else's opinion on things like politics, ethics, and the like. These must change through self-discovery, so it is a place to talk about things that I do not like to talk about in my social life. (P11)

While some found it unproblematic, compartmentalization norms are reflected in how users understand others' activities on reddit. Over one third of interviewees felt it was inappropriate or irrelevant to ask for others' usernames, particularly because they could be used to look at previous post histories:

Somebody was like, "Yeah, I saw that one post that you did!" Like, what the hell. Really? You went through my history? Why? (P5)

It's like listening into your friends' conversations. (P15)

Post histories may house ordinary conversations and comments, but also off-color jokes and information that users wouldn't necessarily share outside of reddit. In explaining the advantages of compartmentalization, three interviewees described finding an acquaintances' username independently through investigating leads on their reddit usernames. Two of those recognized acquaintances on /r/GoneWild, a subreddit devoted to nude self-images. The assumption that they can disclose freely can also backfire, giving other users a window into their presumed private activities:

... It doesn't take me long to figure out what their username is and go through all their posts... Most people are completely innocuous. But there was this one chick that I was interested in... I went and pulled her up, and I was like, "Holy crap! This is all porn. (P17)

Even when people don't make risky disclosures, such as posting about sensitive personal details, the ability to post freely is valuable. Some users provide details about their lives on reddit that can be intimate and difficult to talk about in person and on other websites; it can be liberating to have a space for frank discussions. Nearly half of interviewees described finding comfort in reddit and similar websites for permitting openness in their discourse:

Part of the reason my username is relatively secretive is that I [wanted] to be able to speak my mind and not have to worry about this stuff being read later by another party that actually knows me in person. (P17)

It's kind of nice to go on and say what you want without [risk]. You don't have to worry about being tagged for who you are. It's more about what you say. (P21)

Nowhere could disinhibition through anonymity be better demonstrated than through the use of reddit as a confessional. We observed the use of disposable accounts for various purposes, notably for making (sometimes dark) public confessions to the community. An interviewee described one such difficult conversation with an American soldier who opened up on reddit:

[The soldier] was in Iraq, and there were bombs, and six of his personal friends from [his] group died. And he starts to have these serious trauma problems. He can't discuss it with a neighbor because they may be hesitant. (P20)

Vickery (2014) explored the use of the Confession Bear internet meme as a vehicle for disclosing personal confessions to the community. While redditors often use the meme to share humorous and absurd disclosures, it can also detail accounts of taboo, anxiety, and trauma. Among other difficult topics, they confront issues of racism, sexism, depression, suicide, and sexual abuse.



Figure 3. Humorous and traumatic confessions through the Confession Bear meme (Vickery, 2014)

Especially among users who make sensitive personal disclosures or value their ability to disclose freely, it is necessary to protect post histories. Participants described multiple strategies for disclosing and managing personal data.

Over one third of interviewees described making multiple accounts for anticipated audiences, both online and offline:

I have one that I use for work, and it's kind of a personal one, and I have a not-safe-for-work one. (P23)

I'll share my public username with pretty much anyone... I did an AMA for student government last year... I don't really share my other usernames with people just because there are a lot of facts that I share that I wouldn't necessarily share with a person I know. (P3)

Some users compartmentalize activities on reddit, and avoid disclosing about them elsewhere as a matter of routine. Compartmentalization practices suggest that many users embrace the ability to disclose without risk, and users can make temporary throwaway accounts or manage multiple accounts for this purpose.

Some conversations stay relegated to reddit because they are socially appropriate there, and tailored to the audience in a particular community or subcommunity. Users can talk about socially sensitive topics freely—for example, religion or politics—without worrying about self-presentation through the use of throwaway accounts. They can also segment parts of their identity by using multiple usernames. The relative anonymity of reddit makes disclosure less risky, as compared to face-to-face conversation, or on social networking websites like Facebook that ask users to share personally identifying information. The result is that users on reddit can make disclosures that they would not be willing to share elsewhere, assuming that their communications will not be directly tied to them.

7 Discussion

7.1 Anonymous Media Sites and Social Life in Context

Many users are mindful of how they represent themselves through their post histories on reddit when their disclosures may be connected back to them individually. In particular, usernames and post histories can be connected back to participants if they use personal identifiers in their usernames, or post identifying details. For example, one participant described deleting her old reddit screen name because it was also a screen name that she uses elsewhere. The use of discrete usernames, disconnected from other websites, is intended to help avoid being tracked by others. Anticipation of “real-life” acquaintances who may see their post histories can prompt some users to make sensitive disclosures through throwaway accounts or multiple usernames.

However, not all users will compartmentalize their activities on reddit. Indeed, a small number of users enjoy a celebrity status within the community. One such celebrated user, an ecosystem ecologist who posts under the handle Unidan is known for insightful comments on reddit threads related to biology and ecology. In the course of his commentary Unidan shares some personal details; his real name and education history are no secret. Users who have a celebrity-like persona within reddit are uncommon, but his story represents two counter-instances to compartmentalization norms:

- 1) Cases of celebrity-like public personas within reddit.
- 2) Cases where users openly share personal information.

One strong possibility is that compartmentalization represents a common strategy to manage contextual integrity, or to manage how their personal behaviors fit within contextually-specific norms (Nissenbaum, 2004). Users may compartmentalize their personal disclosures within and beyond reddit to manage the disparate social expectations that exist between the website and their broader social lives, whether in their digital trails or face-to-face conversations. For some users, this may manifest in choices to guard their usernames and post histories, and use throwaway accounts when their behaviors may not be seen favorably out of context. One of the website's few rules is to avoid posting personal information. However, many users still manage contextual integrity by providing appropriate personal information, or sharing contextually-appropriate personal details. Indeed, the website's diverse subforums provide a wide range of spaces where personal disclosures may be actively encouraged—the “Ask Me Anything” subreddit, local city or regional subreddits, as well as various subreddits related to meeting other users in person. Some users participate in an elaborately personalized reddit gift exchange system that actively encourages users to investigate one another, and determine the right gift for other users around the world. Compartmentalization is one viable solution to users who share information that is appropriate on reddit, but may not be elsewhere.

Complex efforts to manage self-presentation across various contexts suggest that many users value the ability to disclose freely on anonymous media sites. Why is the ability to share freely so important to users? One explanation is that people value the ability to dissociate from their posts, even in websites like Facebook where users' disclosures are attached to their persistent personal profile. For example, boyd

(2008) described how the rollout of Facebook's 'News Feeds' amplified the visibility of users' old posts. She suggests that users' posts on Facebook do not exist simply in a binary of disclosure and non-disclosure. Rather, people believe their data will be obfuscated over time. A simple interface change undermined that assumption, leaving users exposed—their old data a sudden cause for anxiety. Reddit offers a similar timeline of post histories, but also allows pseudonyms and the tools to manipulate or discard identification, allowing users to dissociate from disclosures of their personal data. Paradoxically, reddit can support sharing personal information with relatively little risk, whilst simultaneously opening users to heightened exposure. Post histories introduce the potential for others to intercept sensitive personal disclosures, such as previous posts containing traumatic confessions, or lewd photos. Yet, boyd's (2008) exploration suggests that even our most seemingly insignificant disclosures, taken out of context, can provoke distress.

7.2 The Attraction to Anonymous Media Sites

With millions of users from around the globe, we wonder what needs or desires are fulfilled through participation in anonymous media sites. Some of the most prevalent discussions on reddit revolve around off-color internet memes and jokes. Why would millions of people go out of their way to participate on reddit and similar websites?

One possibility is that reddit and similar websites represent what Bakhtin (1984) describes as *carnival* spaces, where codified ethics are temporarily discarded in favor of "ethical situationalism." (Coleman, 2012a) Anonymous media sites evoke the image of carnival spaces, where disinhibited users act out through irreverent discourse displayed in animated gifs, videos, music, links, and text posts. That is, reddit is often the site of political incorrectness, disinhibited humor, and while its inherent structure as a content filter can be somewhat limiting, reddit has a strong reputation for promoting free speech online. The disinhibited humor and discussions represented by network media websites are not new, but instead reproduce a long history of celebration in carnival spaces that level institutional social hierarchies and public-facing morality, creating a momentary escape from daily life. As early as the 5th century BC, the Greeks celebrated the Dionysiac festival over wine, parades, and coarse comedy, permitting what Halliwell (2008) calls "culturally institutionalized shamelessness." The carnival, prevailing norms are subsumed by shamelessness, enabling freedom of speech over even the most taboo of subjects. Unlike the momentary escape offered by the carnival, taking place over the course of days, anonymous media sites offer escape indefinitely. Participants have the opportunity to open up, share their thoughts (no matter how unpopular), discuss taboos, and then go back to their daily lives. When people compartmentalize their activities on anonymous media sites, they are attempting to manage multiple social worlds with altogether unique norms and social expectations.

While anonymous media sites are still significant in the online media landscape, enormous social and institutional pressures exist to make our online activities more persistent and identifiable. We are increasingly aware of numerous government intelligence-gathering activities on websites like Facebook, and applications like Skype (Greenwald & MacAskill, 2013). Significant industry players have long collated and marketed ordinary peoples' publicly available data (Nissenbaum, 1999) (e.g., phone numbers, home addresses, court records, birth and death records), and the trend has extended to personal data on social media websites. As 4chan founder Christopher "moot" Poole suggests, anonymous websites are "going the way of the dinosaur." (TED, 2010) The need to make personal data identifiable and persistent is increasingly required to navigate our social world. Yet many people value anonymous media sites as spaces to experiment with free speech and disinhibition—to dissociate from their persistent and identifiable lives. The value of anonymous media sites lies in relative anonymity and the use of media as a vehicle for open discourse, suggesting that the need for open discourse is not truly being met in our broader social lives.

8 Conclusion

Relatively anonymous media sites including reddit emphasize the use of media and relative anonymity, giving rise to a culture of disinhibition and open disclosure. These websites allow people to leverage relative anonymity to share a variety of discussions and media—videos, images, articles, music, and links to nearly anything. They have an enormous footprint on internet culture, and play an important role in enabling creative content generation online. While certain spaces within reddit promote the disclosure of personal details, and persistent discussion beyond the website in Facebook groups and IRC chats, many users actively compartmentalize their behaviors on anonymous media sites from their social lives beyond.

We found many users make deliberate social choices not to discuss content from reddit in person because they can be conversationally awkward, and because they strategize to disclose personal data to separate audiences.

Our findings may also apply across a range of anonymous media websites wherein users communicate through both media and discussions. We believe compartmentalization can help to frame selective disclosure of personal data across a variety of social contexts. For example, some participants in anonymous media sites contend with “doxxing,” where a third-party broadcasts their personal details to unanticipated audiences. When users assume relative anonymity, doxxing can violate user’s expectations over how their personal details will be disclosed. Similar phenomena abound in the world of cybersecurity, where leaks of private, and potentially compromising communications may become available to the world. This work highlights the importance not only of relative anonymity, but more specifically the desire to dissociate from our personally-identifiable electronic disclosures. As one participant puts it, on reddit, “*You don’t have to worry about being tagged for who you are. It’s more about what you say.*” We hope this work inspires future research to better support relative anonymity through media that displace the spotlight from who we are, to what we say.

9 References

- Alexa (reddit.com). Retrieved January 6, 2014 from <http://www.alex.com/siteinfo/reddit.com>
- Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Rabelais and his world*. Indiana University Press.
- Baym, N. K., & boyd, d. (2012). Socially mediated publicness: An introduction. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(3), 320–329.
- Bergstrom, K. (2011). “Don’t feed the troll”: Shutting down debate about community expectations on Reddit.com. *First Monday*, 16(8).
- Bernstein, M. S., Bakshy, E., Burke, M., & Karrer, B. (2013). Quantifying the invisible audience in social networks. In *Proc. CHI 2013*, 21–30
- boyd, d. (2007). Why youth <3 social network sites: The role of networked publics in teenage social life. *The John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media & Learning*, 119–142.
- boyd, d. (2008). Facebook’s privacy trainwreck. *Convergence*, 14(1), 13–20.
- Brewer, M. B. (2010). Social identity complexity and acceptance of diversity. In Crisp, R. J. (Ed.) *The Psychology of Social and Cultural Diversity*. UK: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing.
- Coleman, G. (2012a). *Coding freedom: The ethics and aesthetics of hacking*. Princeton University Press.
- Coleman, G. (2012b). Phreaks, hackers, and trolls: The politics of transgression and spectacle. In Mandiberg, M. (Ed.) *The Social Media Reader*, 99–119.
- Cooley, C. H. (1902). *Human nature and the social order*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.
- Davison, P. (2012). The language of Internet memes. In Mandiberg, M. *The language of internet memes. The Social Media Reader*, 120-119. NYU Press.
- Duggan, M., & Smith, A. (2013, July 3). 6% of online adults are reddit users. Retrieved from <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/reddit.aspx>
- Foucault, M. (1979). Authorship: What is an author? *Screen*, 20(1), 13–34.
- Gilbert, E. (2013). Widespread underprovision on reddit. In *Proc. CSCW 2013*, 803–808.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Oxford, England: Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Greenwald, G., & MacAskill, E. (2013, June 6). NSA Prism program taps in to user data of Apple, Google and others. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/06/us-tech-giants-nsa-data>
- Halliwell, S. (2008). *Greek Laughter: A study of cultural psychology from homer to early Christianity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hsieh, G., Hou, Y., Chen, I., & Truong, K. N. (2013). “Welcome!”: Social and psychological predictors of volunteer socializers in online communities. In *Proc. CSCW 2013*, 827–838.
- Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2013). *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture*. New York University Press.
- Lakkaraju, H., McAuley, J., & Leskovec, J. (2013). What’s in a name? Understanding the interplay between titles, content, and communities in social media. In *ICWSM*.
- Lessig, L. (2008). *Remix: Making art and commerce thrive in the hybrid economy*. New York: Penguin.
- Litt, E. (2012). Knock, knock. Who’s there? The imagined audience. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(3), 330–345.

- Litt, E., Spottswood, E., Birnholtz, J., Hancock, J., Smith, M. E., & Reynolds, L. (2014). Awkward encounters of an "other" kind: Collective self-presentation and face threat on Facebook. In *Proc. CSCW 2014*, 449–460.
- Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, D. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, 13(1), 114–133.
- Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviour*. Chicago University Press.
- Miller, H. (1995). The presentation of self in electronic life: Goffman on the Internet. In *Embodied knowledge and virtual space conference* (Vol. 9). Retrieved from <http://www.dourish.com/classes/ics234cw04/miller2.pdf>
- Morris, K. (2012, March 9). How reddit saved the world. *The Daily Dot*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailydot.com/society/reddit-charity-alexis-ohanian-list/>
- Muller, M. (2014). Using curiosity, creativity, and surprise as analytic tools: Grounded theory method as a way of knowing in HCI. In *Ways of Knowing in HCI*. Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag.
- Nissenbaum, H. (1999). The meaning of anonymity in an information age. *The Information Society*, 15(2), 141–144.
- Nissenbaum, H. (2004). Privacy as Contextual Integrity. *Washington Law Review*, 79, 101-139.
- Phillips, W. (2011). LOLing at tragedy: Facebook trolls, memorial pages and resistance to grief online. *First Monday*, 16(12).
- Phillips, W. (2012). The house that Fox built: Anonymous, spectacle, and cycles of amplification. *Television & New Media*.
- Reddit blog. (2012, December 31). Top posts of the year and best of 2012 awards. Retrieved from <http://blog.reddit.com/2012/12/top-posts-of-year-and-best-of-2012.html>
- Reddit blog. (2013, December 31). Top posts of 2013, stats, and Snoo year's resolutions. Retrieved from <http://www.redditblog.com/2013/12/top-posts-of-2013-stats-and-snoo-years.html>
- Rogers, K. (2012, August 29). Barack Obama surprises internet with Ask Me Anything session on reddit. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/us-news-blog/2012/aug/29/barack-obama-ask-me-anything-reddit>
- Suler, J. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 7(3), 321–326.
- Surowiecki, J. (2013, April 24). The wise way to crowdsource a manhunt. *The New Yorker Blogs*. Retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/comment/2013/04/reddit-tsarnaev-marathon-bombers-wisdom-of-crowds.html>
- TED. (2010, February 10). *Christopher "moot" Poole: The case for anonymity online*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_1UEAGCo30
- Van Mieghem, P. (2011). Human psychology of common appraisal: The reddit score. *IEEE Transactions on Multimedia*, 13(6), 1404–1406.
- Vickery, J. R. (2014). The curious case of Confession Bear: The reappropriation of online macro-image memes. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(3), 301–325.
- Vitak, J. (2012). The impact of context collapse and privacy on social network site disclosures. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 56(4), 451–470.
- Wang, C., Ye, M., & Huberman, B. A. (2012). From user comments to on-line conversations. In *Proc. SIGKDD 2012*, 244–252.
- Wang, Y., Norcie, G., Komanduri, S., Acquisti, A., Leon, P. G., & Cranor, L. F. (2011). "I regretted the minute I pressed share": A qualitative study of regrets on Facebook. In *Proc. SOUPS 10*, 1–16.
- Watson, T. (2012, August 31). Reddit's fundraising partnerships: A vote up for philanthropy? *Forbes*. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/tomwatson/2012/08/31/reddits-fundraising-partnerships-a-vote-up-for-philanthropy/>
- Weninger, T., Zhu, X. A., & Han, J. (2013). An exploration of discussion threads in social news sites: A case study of the reddit community. *Proc. ICSNAM 2013*, 579–583.