

# Should we eliminate anonymous comments online?

ANYBODY CAN POST remarks on social media or in the comments sections of newspaper and magazine articles without giving their name. Such online anonymity has been under attack by those who say that it encourages misinformation, rude comments, stalking and bullying. Others argue that requiring people to use their real names in these instances would curtail free speech and eliminate an important forum for activists, victims of abuse, whistleblowers and others.

What do you think?

**FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THIS TOPIC.** On the internet, search:

- Should anonymous comments be banned on blogs?
- Should we have the right to anonymity online?
- It's time to end anonymous comments on the internet
- Anonymity: Electronic Frontier Foundation



 **YES FROM OUR READERS**  
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■ Freedom of speech comes with a price. If your speech is legal and honest, then sign your name. I am proud to put my name on my speech.

—Gary W. Funk

■ If you think you're an adult enough to form an opinion, then you assume the responsibility to own it.

—Bud Phillips

■ People should not be allowed to hide behind a computer.

—Pat Humphreys

 **NO FROM OUR READERS**  
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■ I think it makes no difference. There are plenty of folks using their real names who post obnoxious comments, so I'm sure that eliminating anonymous comments would change nothing.

—Kevin J. O'Conner

■ Anonymity allows people to speak freely without fear and reprisal for speaking unpopular views.

—Hal Summers

■ A real-name-required policy would be virtually unenforceable. Many decent and honest people have good reason not to want to be personally identifiable by an anonymous public.

—Andrea Atwood

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## YES FROM EXPERTS IN THE FIELD



**Kevin Wallsten** (kevinwallsten.com) is an associate professor of political science at California State University, Long Beach and chair of the American Political Science Association's section on information technology and politics.

UNFORTUNATELY, THE SIREN song of incivility has proven too alluring for most internet users to resist, and anonymous comments sections have become, in Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Leonard Pitts' words, "havens for a level of crudity, bigotry, meanness and plain nastiness that shocks the tattered remnants of our propriety." Indeed, study after study has shown that when people are allowed to post their thoughts anonymously, online discussions inevitably deteriorate into uncivil "trolling" and "flame wars."

My research with Melinda Tarsi (published in *Journalism Practice*) shows that the mere presence of anonymous comments on news sites harms the credibility of individual news organizations and erodes the public's overall trust in the media as an institution. Other studies find that those who distrust the mainstream media reject information presented by established news organizations and instead learn about political developments from highly biased, partisan media outlets. As Jonathan Ladd demonstrates in *Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters*, the public's increasing reliance on these alternative news sources has produced a citizenry that is more polarized and less informed than it was a generation ago.

So what is to be done? Some politicians believe regulation is the answer. In 2013, for instance, the New York Legislature debated a bill that required internet commenters to verify their names and home addresses before posting content online. Such heavy-handed governmental intrusions would likely prove impractical, ineffectual and unconstitutional. A far better approach is for news sites to simply shut down anonymous comments sections on their own. Anonymous comments sections hurt brand identities, expose media companies to significant legal liabilities and require considerable financial resources to develop, manage and monitor. News organizations have little to gain and much to lose by hosting anonymous comments sections. It is time, in other words, for the media to end their failed experiment with anonymous comments.

Anonymity can promote freedom of speech by shielding individuals from retribution for expressing their opinions. As such, anonymous speech will always have an important place in our public sphere. That place, however, is not in small boxes below articles posted on websites paid for by privately owned media companies. **C**

## NO FROM EXPERTS IN THE FIELD



**Gabriella Coleman**, the Wolfe Chair in Scientific and Technological Literacy at McGill University, is the author of *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (Verso, 2014; not available at Costco).

IN RECENT YEARS, anonymous online comments have developed a poor reputation. Numerous editorials have called for their end. The worry: Allowing internet users to hide their identity will breed more hateful and harmful speech. The problem: The same anonymity used by bullies and harassers is also relied on by ordinary people, citizens and activists to express controversial political opinions and share sensitive information to support each other. While banning anonymity might curb some negative speech, it would also lead to other detrimental social costs.

Forcing everyone to reveal their real names would create a speech monoculture, marginalizing the oppressed, voiceless and powerless who routinely rely on cloaking. The benefits of anonymous speech are best illustrated by a story. In 1972, at the American Psychiatric Association annual meeting, a psychiatrist concealed himself with a rubber mask and voice distorter and confessed to the audience that he was gay. At the time, psychiatry classified homosexuality as an illness. This anonymous revelation catalyzed a debate that prompted the association to remove homosexuality from their diagnostic manual only a year later. Dr. John Fryer, whose name became public decades later, depended on a protective shield for social critique.

Today, as more of us conduct all of our affairs online, it is imperative that anonymity remain a staple in our media diet. This does not mean every online forum is well served by cloaking. Communities should be empowered to decide whether anonymity serves them or not. Some organizations, including the BBC and *The Huffington Post*, have banned anonymous speech, while others, like *The New York Times* and *Jezebel*, still allow anonymous commenting.

Prohibiting anonymous comments en masse will also stifle the search for innovative solutions that curtail harmful speech without sacrificing anonymity. Sites like *Jezebel*, for instance, minimize hateful speech with moderating—forms of intervention that can be applied automatically with technology or human judgment. These sorts of efforts, which strike a balance between anonymity and control—and not a universal call to end anonymous speech—deserve our support. **C**

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

**Should we eliminate anonymous comments online?**

### THREE WAYS TO VOTE

#### 1. Online

At [costcoconnection.com](http://costcoconnection.com), click "Informed Debate" in the contents column on the left.

#### 2. Email

Send your feedback to: [debate@costco.com](mailto:debate@costco.com). Please include the title of the debate and the issue month.

#### 3. Mobile

In our *Newsstand Edition* (available for iOS and Android), vote buttons appear on the Debate page (see page 12 for details).

Watch for results of the vote in the next issue.

## MAY DEBATE RESULTS

**Is rewilding a good idea?**

**64% YES**

**36% NO**

Percentage reflects votes received by May 17, 2016.

Results may reflect Debate being picked up by blogs.

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