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## Myth #14: Only criminals want anonymity online

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# MYTH #14

*Thorsten Thiel*

## Only criminals want anonymity online.

**Myth:** Digital communication furthers anonymous communication and being anonymous makes people behave unaccountably and irresponsibly, erodes societal trust and has a deleterious effect on the public discourse. Anonymity is an unfair opportunity to take advantage of others, spread hate or commit crimes. Therefore, it should be outlawed.

**Busted:** It is often assumed that the rise of networked communication has made the world more anonymous. (→ #5) This is false or at least needs to be substantially qualified. While computer-mediated communication always works in a somewhat pseudonymous way and it is certainly possible to hide one's identity vis-à-vis other Internet users in most circumstances, the ability of resourceful actors like states and corporate entities to identify and track users has significantly increased. Digital communications can be held, tracked and analyzed - and the possibilities to re-identify persons have been vastly improved to the detriment of fundamental rights. Staying anonymous in a data-rich environment is something demanding that must be actively sought. The starting point of the argument is, therefore, wrong.

Secondly, anonymity does not only benefit criminals (although they too might make use of anonymization techniques). Anonymity is vital to many different individuals or groups in society. Minorities or political activists are a prime example since they often need a secure space to find and form their identity and debate how to position towards the wider society. (→ #18) There are also many professional groups in society – think of journalists, therapists, etc. – that are dependent on contexts where anonymity can be safely assumed and actively protected. Finally, individuals themselves may benefit from a societal structure that sets anonymous communication as the default. Anonymity allows citizens to try out different identities (and, thereby, learn about the views of others), to change opinions over time and to speak their mind. Not being observable is an important good in a liberal society - for reasons of privacy as well as democracy. (→ #17)

Furthermore, anonymity does not in itself trigger bad or irresponsible behaviour. Empirical studies show that there is no clear case to be made that people who communicate anonymously behave worse than people who are knowingly identifiable. Much depends on the context, cultural factors and the inclinations of the actors. Anonymity might also yield a more open and creative behaviour, counter biases or inspire an equal discourse instead of a shallow and conformist reputation management.

**Truth:** Since identification possibilities are ubiquitous and pervasive, it is no longer enough to just tolerate pseudonymity online. Instead, we have to find ways to ensure that also in the digital constellation anonymity is actively preserved in the sense that at least in certain specified contexts anonymity is legally secured and technologically assisted. A broad, but measured societal discourse on the benefits and risks of anonymous communication is key to achieve this.

■ **Source**

Hans Asenbaum, *Anonymity and Democracy: Absence as Presence in the Public Sphere*, *American Political Science Review* 112 (2018): 1–14; Gary T. Marx, *What's in a Name? Some Reflections on the Sociology of Anonymity*, *The Information Society* 15 (1999), 99–112

## Nur Kriminelle wollen Anonymität im Internet.

Nein, sagt Thorsten Thiel: Anonymität ist ein zunehmend rares Gut in der vernetzten Gesellschaft, sollte jedoch aktiv geschützt werden, da sie vielen Menschen und Gruppen in der Gesellschaft erlaubt, ihre Stimme zu erheben. Anonymität per se führt nicht zu verwerflichem Verhalten. Liberale Gesellschaften sollten gesellschaftliche Kontexte diskutieren und definieren, in denen anonyme Kommunikation akzeptiert und geschützt wird.

### المجرمون وحدهم يريدون خفاء الهوية على الإنترنت.

كلا، هكذا يقول تورستن تيل: خفاء الهوية هو أحد الحسنات الآخذة في التلاشي في المجتمع الشبكي، لكنه أمر ينبغي أن نسعى جاهدين للحفاظ عليه لأنه يساعد الكثير من الأفراد والفئات في المجتمع على إيجاد فرصة للتعبير عن آرائهم. ولا يؤدي خفاء الهوية في حد ذاته إلى سلوك سيئ. وينبغي على المجتمعات الليبرالية أن تناقش وتحدد السياقات الاجتماعية التي يُقبل فيها الاتصال مجهول الهوية ويكون مؤمناً.

### 只有罪犯想要在网络上匿名。

不，Thorsten Thiel 写道：匿名是网络社会中即将消失的益处，我们应积极保留，因为它可以帮助社会中的许多个人和群体发出自己的声音。匿名本身并不会造成不良行为。自由社会应该讨论和定义接受并保护匿名通信的社会背景。

## **Seuls les criminels veulent l'anonymat en ligne.**

Non, écrit Thorsten Thiel : l'anonymat est un bien en voie de disparition dans la société en réseau, mais il convient de le préserver activement, car il aide de nombreux individus et groupes à pouvoir avoir la parole dans nos sociétés. L'anonymat en soi ne conduit pas à de mauvais comportements. Les sociétés libérales devraient débattre et définir des contextes sociétaux dans lesquels la communication anonyme est acceptée et sécurisée.

## **Только преступники хотят сохранить анонимность в Интернете.**

Это не так, говорит Торстен Тиль: Анонимность – это исчезающее благо в сетевом обществе. Иногда ее следует активно сохранять, поскольку она помогает многим людям и группам в обществе обрести свой голос. Анонимность сама по себе не подталкивает к плохому поведению. Либеральным обществам следует обсудить и установить социальный контекст, в котором анонимное общение будет общепризнанно и защищено.

## **Solo los criminales desean el anonimato en el internet.**

No, dice Thorsten Thiel: el anonimato es un bien que escasea cada vez más en nuestras sociedades interconectadas, sin embargo es algo que deberíamos intentar preservar activamente, ya que ayuda a muchos individuos y grupos de la sociedad a tener una voz. El anonimato por sí mismo no lleva al mal comportamiento. Las sociedades liberales deberían debatir y definir contextos sociales en los que la comunicación anónima sea aceptada y protegida.