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Your Anonymous Words Matter: The Harms of Internet Anonymity and Its Inhibiting Effects on Producing Knowledge

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Your Anonymous Words Matter: The Harms of Internet Anonymity and Its Inhibiting Effects on Producing Knowledge

submitted to
Professor Dustin Locke

by
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for
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Abstract

In this paper, I will argue against Karen Frost-Arnold’s claim that internet anonymity has more epistemic benefit than epistemic harm for online communities. I will first outline her arguments that anonymity poses epistemic benefits for speakers of marginalized communities, who often rely on anonymity to share their experience and testimony without fear of repercussions, such as testimonial injustice, backlash, and even physical harm. I will then consider objections to Frost-Arnold’s account made by others, including the idea that anonymous testimony is not reliable. I will show how this objection alone is insufficient against Frost-Arnold’s claim. Then, I will offer my own objections to Frost-Arnold’s argument, highlighting how she severely understates the physical harms that anonymity poses off of the internet, and how these physical harms lead to epistemic harm. I will also argue that transparency may make society on and off the internet more inclusive. Finally, I will consider counter-arguments to my own argument, and offer my replies.
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“O snail, Climb Mount Fuji. But slowly, slowly!”
-Kobayashi Issa

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I owe a huge shout out to all of my friends who have cheered me on through this process. I could not have completed this project without my teammates and coaches, who were always interested in how my thesis was going; my apartment-mates, who allowed me to bounce all of my ideas off of them; and last but certainly not least, my thesis-buddies in Poppa Lab, who suffered through countless Pomodoro sessions with me and kept me motivated.
Introduction

The internet can be extremely difficult to navigate. The amount of information available to internet users is overwhelming, and it can be hard to know what is useful to forming true beliefs. In the real-world, face-to-face interactions govern our daily lives. When you talk to someone in person, you can see their face, hear their voice, and might even have information about their background and how it affects their views. However, on the internet, anonymous interactions are prevalent. You don’t know who is behind an anonymous posting, making it hard to gauge the posting’s reliability.

When people are anonymous, they are empowered to say things that they may not otherwise say. In her piece, “Trustworthiness and Truth: The Epistemic Pitfalls of Internet Accountability,” Karen Frost-Arnold argues that while this empowerment poses both benefits and harms to people’s ability to gain knowledge from the internet, the benefits outweigh the harms. These benefits, which I will outline later, are hard to argue against. However, in this paper, I will argue that internet anonymity does more harm than good to people’s ability to gain knowledge from the internet.

A Note

Many times throughout this thesis writing process, I have questioned whether I have the authority to be making the kinds of arguments and claims that I am making in this paper, especially since I am writing about marginalized voices. I anticipate that at some points in my paper, you, the reader, may also think that I do not have the adequate standpoint to make certain arguments as well. So, before we begin, I would like to cite a source that has guided me through this semester. In her work “‘That's Above My Paygrade’: Work Excuses for Ignorance,” Emily...
Tilton discusses a new way to approach standpoints. She acknowledges that scholars (and people in general) who are in socially dominant positions are at an epistemic disadvantage when it comes to understanding oppression. She agrees that sometimes, the socially dominant simply cannot do justice to the narratives of the oppressed. However, she suggests that scholars too often do not share their opinions on topics they think they do not have adequate background in, and are too quick to defer to those who they think do have adequate background. She offers the idea that a socially dominant group can achieve a marginalized standpoint through hard work and a commitment to critically understand the views of the marginalized group. With Tilton’s claims in mind, I have worked hard, and tried to be as charitable and respectful in making claims that I feel need to be made in order to prove my argument. I hope you consider Tilton’s contemporary view on standpoints and understand that I have the best intentions at heart in putting forth this paper.

Clarifying Terminology

Let’s start with some terminology. Someone is anonymous when their identity is unknown. When someone shares their opinion on the internet but hides their identity, which may include their name, their appearance, or anything specific about that person, then they are anonymous. Anonymity can be a range; the more work it takes for someone’s identity to be known, the more anonymous they are. On the other hand, a speaker is not anonymous if their identity is readily known to listeners. When listeners know the true identity of the speaker, the speaker is sharing information non-anonymously. However, rather than using the word ‘non-anonymous’, for ease, I will use the word ‘transparent’. Transparency means the opposite of anonymity, where the speaker is transparent about their identity.
In this paper, I will argue that anonymity presents more epistemic harms than epistemic benefits. An *epistemic harm* is anything that inhibits the production of knowledge. Conversely, an *epistemic benefit* would be anything that promotes the production of knowledge. I mean the word ‘production’ broadly. When person A shares information with person B, even if the information didn’t originally come from person A, person A is still producing knowledge because person A is allowing others to gain knowledge, and is therefore producing more aggregate knowledge.

Epistemic harm can occur in different ways. For example, when someone is given misinformation and forms a false belief based on that misinformation, they are both being epistemically harmed and doing epistemic harm. They are being harmed because misinformation leads to the formation of untrue beliefs, and untrue beliefs are the opposite of knowledge; thus, misinformation inhibits the production of knowledge. They are doing harm by potentially sharing those untrue beliefs and preventing others from gaining knowledge. Silencing techniques, such as intimidating people to prevent them from sharing information, are also epistemic harms.

Another type of epistemic harm is *testimonial injustice*. Miranda Fricker defines testimonial injustice as “the injustice that a speaker suffers in receiving deflated credibility from the hearer owing to identity prejudice on the hearer’s part” (Fricker, 4). Testimonial injustice is the idea that a hearer does not view the speaker as credible because of their social identity, which is unjust and epistemically harmful. For example, in her piece, “Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing,” Fricker mentions an example of a police officer who doesn't believe a speaker because he is black. The speaker is harmed epistemically because the prejudice on the
police’s part causes the police to give him less credibility than they would otherwise have given (Fricker, 4). The speaker is not able to share, therefore produce knowledge.

What Exactly Will I Be Arguing?

Now that we have established the necessary terminology, I can state my thesis more precisely. I argue that more epistemic harms come from anonymity than transparency. More specifically, I argue that anonymity epistemically harms marginalized voices more than it epistemically benefits marginalized voices, which makes it harder for internet users as a whole to produce knowledge. I will not be making the claim that transparency has no epistemic harms. Transparency has serious epistemic harms, many of which Frost-Arnold mentions. Rather, I will argue that anonymity has worse epistemic harms than transparency. The harms that come from anonymity lead to a presence of misinformation about marginalized groups, which inhibits the production of knowledge on a greater scale than the harms of transparency, which merely lead to an absence of knowledge by marginalized groups. I will later show how these two harms are distinct, and how the former is much worse for the production of knowledge.

I will first outline Frost-Arnold’s arguments for why anonymity is beneficial and how removing anonymity hurts internet-users’ ability to gain knowledge from marginalized voices. I will then consider other scholars’ objections to Frost-Arnold’s argument, including the argument that anonymous testimony is not reliable. I will show that while this argument presents an important epistemic harm of anonymity, it alone is insufficient to refute Frost-Arnold’s claim. Then, I will offer my own objections, explaining the other epistemic harms that anonymity creates for marginalized groups both on and off of the internet. I will also explain how transparency may make society as a whole more inclusive for marginalized groups, which would
be an epistemic benefit of transparency. Finally, I will consider counter-arguments, and offer my replies.

**Frost-Arnold’s Argument Against Removing Anonymity**

Why do people desire anonymity, and why does anonymity make people act differently? In “Anonymity and the Social Self,” Steve Matthews suggests that people desire anonymity for the disconnect that it grants their real-life selves. He writes, “when we desire anonymity, it is to avoid being tracked down and to avoid being identified as the person who otherwise occupies a certain social position or role” (Matthews, 352). For example, a black person, when sharing information on the internet, may not want to be identified as ‘black’ in order to be free of the stigmas about black people as a whole. They may want to just be considered without their racial identity. However, as I mentioned before, anonymity can be a range. Someone may anonymize just their specific identity, or their name. They may not mind having characteristics such as their race, gender, profession, etc. known to their audience.

When people are anonymous, they are more inclined to share things that they wouldn’t normally share. Matthews gives an example of a traveler who offers personal and intimate information to a stranger in a foreign country. He writes, “she discloses the information in this context precisely because she knows it is practically impossible for this stranger to make the link between the information and who she is” (Matthews, 354).

Frost-Arnold suggests that anonymity allows marginalized groups to share information in a safer way. Because marginalized groups are oppressed in the real world, with anonymity, they can at least be free from punishment or criticism that stems from their identity on the internet
(Frost-Arnold, 70). In this way, the safety and protection that transparency fails to provide marginalized groups is an epistemic harm of transparency.

However, people can take advantage of anonymity and spread misinformation and hate. Many people believe that reducing anonymity is an attractive solution to combating this harm (Frost-Arnold, 64). Removing anonymity, or more simply put, requiring transparency, forces people who choose to be anonymous on the internet to use their real-life identity, or forces sites to get rid of the use of anonymity. People will think more deliberately about what they post transparently, as they will be just as responsible for the views they share on the internet as they are for the views they share in face-to-face interactions (Frost-Arnold, 69). Thus, they will be less likely to spread hate or misinformation.

Nevertheless, Frost-Arnold argues that removing anonymity would have serious repercussions, specifically for marginalized groups. Marginalized groups are especially prone to epistemic harm because their views are not as readily accepted. She writes that they “are likely to make claims that are not widely repeated. When a reader samples other internet sources to corroborate the claims, they are more likely to come up empty-handed” (Frost-Arnold, 75). Because the views of a speaker from a marginalized group are not often corroborated, readers may be quick to disagree, dismiss, and even personally attack the speaker because of the speaker’s identity. Frost-Arnold believes marginalized groups would rather stay silent than to face the consequences of sharing transparently; thus, with less diverse perspectives on the internet, less ideas will be shared, and there will be less knowledge on the internet. She writes,

Removal of anonymity could deprive the community of true beliefs by reports from socially threatened groups. Without online anonymity, activists, citizen journalists, and members of many socially stigmatized groups are much less likely to take the risk of sharing what they know with others. (Frost-Arnold, 70)
To show how anonymity is helpful in disseminating knowledge, she turns to sites that rely on anonymous users, like Wikipedia and HarassMap, but are reliable and helpful for producing knowledge. Most people are familiar with the way Wikipedia works. Although experts on specific topics are advised to contribute the most to a Wikipedia page on that topic, everyone is encouraged to edit (Mobner, 11). Wikipedia is edited mostly by anonymous users, but we still regard it as a good initial source of information. HarassMap encourages women to anonymously share where sexual assaults are geographically likely to happen (Frost-Arnold, 70). Anonymity is important on HarassMap because it prevents the women who share these locations from suffering repercussions in the real world. Because victims share knowledge anonymously, they can avoid being told that their claims are not true, or that the harassment was their own fault. Frost-Arnold points out that if the internet had less anonymity, the knowledge we could gain from socially stigmatized groups would be lost, and internet users would be worse off. Reducing anonymity leads to an absence of knowledge from marginalized voices, which inhibits the production of knowledge by internet users as a whole. In this way, transparency poses epistemic harms.

Frost-Arnold also argues that removing anonymity would make avoiding error on the internet harder. Criticism is important for refining true beliefs. However, people’s biases against marginalized groups, implicit or not, may prevent them from accepting criticism from people of those groups. If marginalized groups are more susceptible to having their criticism be disregarded or combatted, they will be less likely to share those criticisms if not for the protection anonymity affords (Frost-Arnold, 71). Frost-Arnold argues that by anonymizing the identity of the critic, people can take the criticism as is, and not overlook the critic because of their stigmatized identity. Thus, she argues that anonymity increases internet users’ ability to both gain truth and avoid error, which makes the internet a better place to produce knowledge.
Anonymous Testimony is Not Reliable, but That’s Not Enough

So far, I have outlined Frost-Arnold’s argument that anonymity protects marginalized individuals from oppression and how transparency creates epistemic harms. However, there is a clear argument against Frost-Arnold’s claim: anonymous testimony is not reliable.

In “Anonymous Assertions”, Sanford C. Goldberg argues that anonymous assertions hold less weight than transparent assertions. His line of reasoning is somewhat obvious; anonymity limits what an audience knows about the reliability of a speaker. Goldberg suggests that there are four types of information that the audience needs in order to gauge how reliable the speaker is. He writes that “these include 1) information regarding the speaker; 2) information regarding the act of communication; 3) information regarding the content of the communicated message itself; and 4) information regarding the context of the communication” (Goldberg, 145). However, Goldberg suggests that anonymity prevents these four types of information from being shared between the speaker and the audience. He suggests that anonymity prevents the hearer from knowing 1) information about the speaker and 2) the act of communication. The hearer does not know the identity of the speaker, nor the speaker’s motivations for making the claim, which makes the claim sound insincere and out of place (Goldberg, 146). He also argues that 4) the context of communication is also hindered by anonymity. In order to understand the context of the claim, the hearer needs background information about the speaker and their claim. However, because the speaker has decided to hide their identity, the hearer will have to rely on their own background information, rather than any background information provided by the speaker, which leads to a less reliable exchange of information. Thus, anonymous assertions are not reliable for producing knowledge.
Goldberg admits that there are epistemic harms to transparency (Goldberg, 150). Like Frost-Arnold, he suggests that marginalized voices would disproportionately face repercussions for sharing information transparently, and therefore choose not to share their knowledge. However, he still argues that those who assert something anonymously should expect that their audience will view their claim as less reliable. While Goldberg’s overall argument makes for a compelling objection to Frost-Arnold’s argument, his argument has some clear holes. He defines anonymity as the following:

Given a speaker/writer S who produces a message m, S is anonymous (with respect to m) relative to an audience A when (i) no one among the members of A is currently in a position to acquire knowledge to the effect that S produced m, (ii) it is reasonable (for S) to expect that no one among the members of A will come to know something this effect, and (iii) the explanation for both of the foregoing is that S’s identity, qua producer of m, is in some way ‘hidden’ from the member’s of A. (Goldberg, 136, 137)

This definition does not prevent the speaker from giving 2), 3), or 4). As I suggested before, anonymity is a wide range. Speakers may choose to shield all information about themselves, or just specific information like their name and physical appearance. If a person were to share their race, occupation, or any other information that is not specifically telling of their individual identity, they could still be anonymous but be able to share information regarding the act and context of communication. They could make clear why and in what social context they are making the claim, which gives the hearer more background information. Thus, his own definition of anonymity prevents him from making the claim that anonymous testimony is not reliable.

Nevertheless, his overall argument is still persuasive. Anonymous testimony is, without a doubt, less reliable than transparent testimony. When trying to find reliable information, most people would opt to rely on transparent sources rather than anonymous sources. Goldberg’s main point is that the inability to use usual epistemic practices to consider anonymous testimony
makes anonymity dangerous on the internet. Anonymous testimony poses epistemic harms because its unreliability does not allow for the production of knowledge.

While Goldberg’s account highlights an important epistemic harm of anonymity, it is not sufficient on its own to refute Frost-Arnold’s claim. In “Who Do You Speak For? And How? Online Abuse as Collective Subordinating Speech Acts,” Michael Randall Barnes captures the more concerning epistemic harm of anonymity. He argues that anonymity gives misinformation on the internet a false sense of authority (Barnes, 251). As people are more willing to spread misinformation anonymously, because of anonymity, misinformation will be repeated and will seem more credible. Hundreds and thousands of hate comments posted anonymously that say the same thing are not easy to disregard, as claims seem more legitimate when they have lots of replication and support (Barnes, 252). Barnes writes that “anonymity creates the semblance of cohesion where there might not, in fact, be any, thereby uniting different speakers who might not have anything in common aside from their hostile speech directed at the same individual” (Barnes, 269). This semblance of cohesion gives a false sense of reliability to misinformation, which may lead internet users to form false beliefs and inhibit the production of knowledge. In this way, Barnes presents a more damning epistemic harm of anonymity.

**Anonymity Does More Epistemic Harm Than Transparency**

Now that I have outlined some other authors’ views on anonymity on the internet, I want to offer my own thoughts. I argue that anonymity does more epistemic harm than transparency does. I have shown how the harms of transparency lead to an absence of knowledge on the internet, and how the harms of anonymity lead to a presence of misinformation on the internet. Through Frost-Arnold’s own example of misinformation spread by an anonymous blog, I will
show how the presence of misinformation about marginalized groups is much more dangerous than the absence of knowledge by marginalized groups.

“A Gay Girl in Damascus” was a blog run by a lesbian girl named Amina. On the blog, Amina often posted about what it was like to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community in Syria. Amina was influential and had a world-wide following; she often encouraged other gay people in Syria to come out, share their experiences, and stand up against their oppressive government. However, people in Syria, and around the world, became very suspicious of her after she “disappeared” (Frost-Arnold, 73). Many people who were actually in the LGBTQ+ community in Syria started to doubt her existence because no one actually knew Amina and could help find her. Journalists and reporters ran a 6-day investigation that ended with Thomas Macmaster, a middle-aged white man who lived in England finally admitting that he was Amina (Frost-Arnold, 74). I consider Macmaster to be anonymous, even though he was using a pseudonym, because his audience did not know his true identity.

Macmaster epistemically harmed all of his followers. All of the postings were fake; even if the content of the posts were representative of what a real lesbian in Syria would experience, Macmaster still spread misinformation and led people to form false beliefs about a marginalized group. Recall that transparency fails to protect marginalized groups from oppression on the internet, which leads to an absence of knowledge on the internet. However, Macmaster contributed misinformation, which led to a production of false beliefs about lesbians in Syria. The presence of misinformation is a worse harm than the absence of knowledge because the formation of false beliefs more actively inhibits the production of knowledge for internet users. In order to combat the absence of knowledge, all one needs to do is to seek out other sources, like those who are brave enough to share marginalized views transparently, or even go beyond
the internet for more reliable information. However, to combat the presence of misinformation, a person must actively practice internet literacy to ensure that they are navigating the internet in the most productive way. Many people do not know what internet literacy is, much less how to practice it. This distinction will be made more clear in the cases that I outline next.

Frost-Arnold acknowledges that anonymity poses harms. However, she suggests that these harms are not actually harms of anonymity, but harms of straying from the norms of civility (Frost-Arnold, 72). She suggests that instead of reducing anonymity, we need to create an environment on the internet where people are going to act in prosocial ways (Frost-Arnold, 77). This is a nice thought; however, Frost-Arnold gives too much credit to humans. Her account of how people act is naive, as proven by the cases I will outline. These cases are not a problem of civility. They are the problem of people taking advantage of anonymity to unjustly spread hate and misinformation about socially stigmatized groups. Anonymous-posting sites promote physical harm, therefore epistemic harm, which Frost-Arnold glosses over. I will later outline how physical harms lead to epistemic harms by silencing marginalized voices.

As most internet users know, many sites on the internet are built on posting, sharing, and reacting anonymously. Take Reddit, for example. Reddit’s welcome video ends with an interesting quote: “you can overshare without revealing your identity” (Reddit Help). To overshare is to overstep the boundaries of what is accepted in a normal conversation. It could mean sharing points of views that are not readily accepted by others, or sharing personal information that should’ve stayed private. Reddit is built on people oversharing, and doing so anonymously. There is even a ranking system in place; the more helpful or popular a user’s contributions are, the higher “points” they have and the more likely they are to get awards
(Kotlyarenko). This can lead to ‘point-chasing’, which may lead to internet-users posting things with the goal of getting points, no matter the epistemic value of the post.

Dangerous and subordinating ideologies often form on Reddit. These ideologies can lead to physical harm, therefore epistemic harm, in the real world. Amina Srinivasan begins her piece “Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?” with the story of Elliot Rodger, the world’s most famous “incel” (Srinivasan, 1). An incel is a sex-less man who “is convinced he is owed sex, and is enraged by the women who deprive him of it” (Srinivasan, 1). Because women often rejected Rodger, he turned to Reddit to find a community of other men who were enraged that women would not sleep with them. Reddit has had a history of having anti-women discussion boards; Srinivasan mentions a forum with around 40,000 people who identified as incels. Reddit shut it down because it “had become a forum whose users not only raged against women and the ‘noncels’ and the ‘normies’ who get to sleep with them, but also frequently advocated rape” (Srinivasan, 2). However, Reddit’s attempts to mitigate the growth of this anti-feminist ideology was not successful. New discussion boards echoing the same views were created, which Rodger joined. In joining this mostly anonymous discussion board, Rodger’s violent views about women were reaffirmed, and he felt empowered to murder two women on the lawn of the Alpha Phi sorority house on UC Santa Barbara’s campus. He killed five other people, totalling seven victims, before committing suicide (Srinivasan, 1).

4chan is another site that endorses anonymous users, thereby facilitating the formation of dangerous ideologies. The site, modeled on a similar Japanese imageboard site, was originally a place where fans of manga and games could come together and have conversations. However, the site quickly opened up its scope to politics, world news, culture, sports, and more (Wikipedia Contributors, “4chan”). Built into the fabric of the site is that people do not have to register.
Users do not need to create accounts, and they can post anonymously as often as they want. Even if users choose to create accounts, it is common for them to use the account for a few weeks, delete them, and create a new account in order to avoid being traced (Wikipedia Contributors, “4chan”).

Sites like Reddit and 4chan can actually be beneficial to the spread of knowledge. They bring together people who have common interests who would never have met in the real-world and promote discourse. However, there seems to be much more harm than good that stems from these sites. 4chan is home to what some left-wing commentators call the ‘alt-right pipeline’ (Wikipedia Contributors, “Alt-Right Pipeline”). Extremist versions of racism, sexism, and white supremacy exist on the alt-right pipeline. This pipeline can lead its viewers into echo chambers, like the forum for incels. Echo chambers are dangerous because they are built on the extreme trust of insiders (even if they are anonymous), and the extreme distrust of outsiders (Nyugen, 146). Pipelines and echo chambers are problematic because they can influence the minds of young people on the internet. Particularly young white men, who have yet to form concrete opinions on politics and social norms, can be exposed to alt-right theories, and believe the world is against them.

Like the forum for incels, the alt-right pipeline is linked to physical harm in the real world, beyond the US. The Christchurch mosque shootings in New Zealand were a result of the extremist views prevalent on the alt-right pipeline. Brenton Harrison Tarrant, a white supremecist who was affiliated with the pipeline, killed 51 people at two mosques (Perry). Not only did he publish his ‘manifesto’ on 4chan before the attacks, but he live streamed the shoots for all of his followers to see (Wikipedia Contributors, “Christchurch Mosque Shootings”).
Both Rodger and Tarrant were empowered by their respective anonymous posting sites to commit harm in the real world. They were epistemically harmed because their dangerous and misinformed ideologies were reaffirmed by other empowered anonymous posters. Anti-feminist and white-supremist views cannot be knowledge because they are morally and empirically wrong. Nevertheless, anonymity gives authority to these kinds of ideologies because anonymity allows people who would not otherwise outwardly support the ideologies to do so on the internet.

However, the physical harm, or the murders committed by Rodger and Tarrant, actually leads to the epistemic harm of silencing. In killing women and non-white people, Rodgers and Tarrant instill fear into other women and non-white people, preventing them from speaking out against these ideologies in fear of themselves being killed. Because these marginalized identities will be too afraid to speak out against anti-feminism and white supremacy, these dangerous ideologies will continue to grow, and epistemically harm others. In this way, the physical harm murders lead to the epistemic harm of silencing marginalized voices and perpetuating the presence of misinformation.

I have showcased three cases where the presence of misinformation on the internet has led to both epistemic harms. “A Gay Girl in Damascus” fooled many people in forming false beliefs about lesbians in Syria. The incel forum and the alt-right pipeline brainwash their followers and empower some to kill the targets of their subordinating ideologies, effectively silencing marginalized voices. These cases show that misinformation on the internet is much harder to combat than a lack of knowledge on the internet. The epistemic harms that anonymity poses is much more dangerous than the epistemic harms that transparency poses.
How Transparency Can Make the World More Inclusive

In this section, I am going to outline an epistemic benefit of transparency, which will further prove that transparency is better for producing knowledge on the internet than anonymity. Transparency makes the internet a more inclusive space especially for socially stigmatized groups because it allows internet users to combat their implicit and explicit biases in the long run. Frost-Arnold argues that an epistemic benefit of anonymity is that it keeps people from acting on their negative biases. Because anonymity hides a speaker’s social identity, internet users who tend to act on their biases will be saved from committing testimonial injustice. Recall that testimonial injustice occurs when a hearer does not view a speaker as credible by virtue of their social identity. The speaker is harmed epistemically because the prejudice on the hearer’s part prevents the speaker from being able to share knowledge. Anonymity allows hearers to consider information in a way that promotes knowledge production because it prevents testimonial injustice. However, I argue that this epistemic benefit is costly.

Why do people have biases in the first place? Perhaps it's because we humans have the natural inclination to form ourselves into ingroups and outgroups. There is comfort in being part of a greater community, and there is discomfort in exploring and embracing new perspectives and ideas. However, it could also be that sometimes, people are just assholes. People may refuse to be receptive to those who look different from them. Either way, most people have some sort of implicit bias that serves to navigate their world-view.

As I mentioned before, the internet can expose users to people of different backgrounds and perspectives. When you interact with people that are different from you, you can become less biased against them because you can learn that those biases are unjustified. I argue that
anonymity could be hindering people’s ability to reduce their unjust biases against speakers of marginalized groups.

To support my argument, let's look at some implicit bias studies. Antonya M. Gonzalez, Jennifer R. Steele, and Andrew S. Baron conducted a study measuring whether children’s implicit bias about black people would be reduced if they were exposed to positive examples of black people. This study gives insight into whether transparency could make the internet a more inclusive space by exposing users to people of different backgrounds and thus reducing their biases.

The researchers chose to study White and Asian children because they thought White and Asian people have a culturally higher status in the US compared to black people (Gonzalez et Al, 124). The researchers found that while the children initially had slight implicit pro-White bias, after exposure, their bias was reduced (Gonzalez et Al, 127). However, this was only the case for older children (around 10 years old) and not for children who were younger, which suggests that there is a sweet spot for reducing bias in children. This implication is especially relevant to my argument, as internet users are getting younger and younger. In 2021, 97% of 3-to-18 year olds in the US had access to the internet at home (COE). These results show the importance of children being able to interact with positive examples of outgroups in order to combat biases.

I acknowledge that negative examples could make biases worse. If an internet user was interacting with a member of a different social group, and that member happened to be someone who affirmed their negative biases, then transparency would not make the internet a more inclusive space. To this point, I agree. There is nothing to be done about transparent users who choose to shed themselves in a negative light.
However, Frost-Arnold suggests that anonymity benefits members of marginalized groups who want to contribute to epistemological spaces in a productive way. People who want to contribute to epistemic spaces in productive ways are generally positive examples. Therefore, even if negative examples of a social group make some people’s biases about that group worse, as long as there are more positive examples of that group, my argument still stands. My argument is that transparency has more epistemic benefit than anonymity; transparency is going to help reduce people’s biases more than they will reinforce according to these studies, as long as there are more positive examples. More positive exposure means more tolerance. Thus, transparency will make the internet a more inclusive space.

The LGBTQ+ community in the US is an example of a social group whose views were more readily accepted in society as a result of people being more exposed to them. In “Attitudes towards LGBT Rights: Political Tolerance and Egalitarian Values in the United States,” Andrew Flores suggests that in the US, there was a cultural shift towards accepting members of the LGBT community at the end of the 20th century. People increased their political tolerance of them; political tolerance is “the degree to which the public supports the civil liberties of members of different social groups,” which include liberties like freedom of speech, association, and expression (Flores, 1, 3). Around half of Americans were already quite tolerant of queer people in the 1970s; however, Flores suggests that 80% of Americans in 2020 were politically tolerant of members of the LGBTQ community and valued their epistemic contributions (Flores, 5). He suggests that this shift in people’s biases against the LGBTQ community is largely due to people becoming more exposed to those within the community. Like the researchers of the implicit bias study, Flores suggests that people become more tolerant of individuals in a socially
stigmatized group if they are provided additional information about that individual. People can see members of groups less as a member of that marginalized group (Flores, 15).

When more people spend time on the internet and learn about the different cultures of the world, they are more likely to engage in discussion with those people, and treat them with equal respect. In this way, transparency can reduce people’s implicit biases and explicit biases, possibly to the point of making a paradigm shift in the way people think about marginalized groups. I don’t think people will stop discriminating against outgroups; although the LGBTQ+ community in the US has come a long way in securing political rights and equal treatment, there will always be people who will discriminate against them. But, the internet can be a good place to start reeling back on those biases, and anonymity seems to be hindering this potential capability of the internet.

**Frost-Arnold’s Alternative To Reducing Anonymity**

In response to my argument that anonymity poses more epistemic harm than transparency, Frost-Arnold might argue that reducing people’s negative biases is not worth the harm that marginalized people will face without the protection of anonymity. In other words, the value of marginalized people’s experiences and their contribution to internet user’s knowledge is worth the epistemic harms of anonymity. As I mentioned before, Frost-Arnold believes in people’s prosocial nature. She believes people are genuine when given the opportunity; she claims that people are less likely to lie when they see that other people get hurt (Frost-Arnold, 77). She argues that displaying victims who have been affected by internet misinformation will deter people from taking advantage of anonymity. If internet users see how anonymity can hurt
others, they will think about those impacts when they share things anonymously and choose not to spread misinformation and hate.

However, I see several problems with this alternative to reducing anonymity. Displaying victims in this way doesn’t honor their deaths, it would be making an example of them. To return to the gruesome example of Rodger and the killing-spree he went on, Frost-Arnold’s proposition would mean that the murders of Katherine Cooper, Veronice Weiss, and the five others would be framed in a way to tell the story of what happens as a result of these dangerous ideologies. Rather than to condemn Rodger’s actions and memorialize the victims, the narrative of the murders would have to surround the Reddit forum in order for people to be deterred and understand that their anonymous internet postings have profound effects. To display the victims in a way that rightfully honors their deaths would miss the story of how internet anonymity played a role in the murders.

Perhaps victims of lesser harms than murder would be willing to share their story in a way that makes internet users understand that anonymous postings have negative effects on producing knowledge. However, making an example of victims of lesser epistemic harms may still not send the right message. Most people are not actively trying to be misinformed. Yet, when hearing about these cases where people were ‘fooled’ by misinformation, people may shame the victim, or even place the responsibility of being misinformed on the victim. Even if other people share the victim’s story for them, in hopes that the victim can avoid being shamed or held responsible, people still may not acknowledge the responsibility of anonymous posters, and still think that the victim is guilty for being easily misinformed. My point is that the burden of making the internet a more civilized place should not have to fall on the victims having to share their story if they do not want to.
Further, people would not necessarily be deterred by seeing the victims’ experiences. In Rodger’s case, other incels were not deterred. In fact, they praised him for his actions, and vowed to never forget him (Srinivasan, 2). Again, while Rodger’s case is extreme, seeing victims of misinformation on the internet does not mean people who post things anonymously would understand the repercussions of their actions.

Frost-Arnold also suggests that having people read a code of conduct before they post something on the internet can serve as a way to remind people that they have a responsibility to their fellow internet users. There is scientific backing to the claim that reminding people of a code of conduct prior to an event can make them more likely to abide by those codes during the event. In a psychological study conducted in 2023, Li Zhao, Junjie Peng, and other researchers tested whether reminding students of academic integrity policies would reduce cheating in an unproctored exam. The researchers conducted two studies. The first study

assessed whether university students are significantly more honest and cheat less when they are given either [an exam that reminded students of the academic integrity policies] or [an exam that gave students examples of those who were caught cheating and suffered consequences] compared to the no-reminder unproctored exam. (Zhao, 1)

As mentioned above, the researchers used three groups; the first group received an unproctored exam with no reminder of the code of conduct or academic integrity policies, the second group received an exam that reminded them of the policies in place for academic integrity, and the third group received an exam that gave them examples of two students who violated the academic honesty codes and were punished for it. The researchers hypothesized that the latter two groups would significantly decrease cheating on the exam compared to the first group. Their hypothesis was correct; the study showed that both the policy reminder condition and example reminder conditions significantly reduced cheating compared to the condition where no reminder was
present. This is not a surprising finding; many other studies and surveys concerning codes of
conducts and academic integrity support this result. Reminding people of their duty to be honest
and showing them examples of people who suffered consequences from cheating are good ways
to motivate people to honor academic integrity. Thus, Frost-Arnold has legitimate reason to
believe that making people read a code of conduct will effectively deter anonymous internet
users from spreading misinformation.

However, the results of these code of conduct studies may not transfer to non-academic
internet settings. Academic integrity policies are persuasive because the repercussions of
cheating can be life-changing. Students who are caught cheating may fail the class, have some
sort of stamp of disciplinary action on their transcript, or even get kicked out of school. When
students are reminded of the consequences of cheating, the smart ones realize that cheating is not
worth it. However, I am not sure the same can be said for spreading misinformation on the
internet. People may think that the benefit of sharing misinformation outweighs the cost of being
untrustworthy because being untrustworthy on the internet virtually has no consequence to the
individual. There are no life-changing repercussions for spreading misinformation like there is
for cheating. A reminder of a code of conduct may not deter anonymous internet users from
spreading misinformation in the same way a reminder of academic integrity policies deter
students from cheating.

Perhaps imposing a tangible consequence on anonymous users may achieve the desired
results of codes of conduct. In the second study, the researchers “explored whether adding
information about the negative consequences of academic cheating would provide an additional
cheating reduction effect” (Zhao, 6). The results showed that “adding a statement about the
university’s policy regarding the negative consequences of academic dishonesty significantly
reduced student’s tendency to cheat” (Zhao, 9). The threat of being punished if caught cheating significantly reduced students’ cheating in the exam. Again, it is easy to see how in an academic setting, this reminder could be effective and successful in reducing cheating. However, this argument doesn’t seem as effective when applied to anonymous users on the internet. Typical consequences for breaking codes of conduct on the internet could look like banning the account that posted misinformation or hate or preventing them from posting for some time. Neither of these consequences would deter anonymous users unless some threat of transparency were enforced. People who use anonymous accounts, if banned or censored, could just create another anonymous account. In order to truly deter anonymous users, punishment for breaking codes of conduct would have to include the threat of uncovering the anonymous person, which suggests that transparency is a more effective way to ensure that people can produce knowledge on the internet.

Another interesting psychological study supports my point. This study measured the motivations behind why college students spread misinformation on the internet. It surveyed 171 students; although most of the students suggested that trustworthiness was an important value to them, two thirds of them admitted to sharing false information or spreading misinformation on the internet (Chen and Sin, 1). The researchers do not specify what they considered as misinformation. Nevertheless, the study showed that people understand that spreading misinformation is wrong, but do it anyway. The students in the study reported that the top motivations for sharing misinformation online was to obtain others’ opinions, to express their opinion, and to interact with others (Chen and Sin, 2). You feel satisfaction when a post or opinion you shared on social media garners a lot of attention. You feel even more satisfaction when the responses you get are positive. Sometimes, the satisfaction of receiving positive
feedback can outweigh the necessity to be trustworthy. In this way, I do not think code of conduct will deter people who post anonymous hate on the internet enough to make a difference.

Objections and Replies

So far in my paper, I have outlined Frost-Arnold’s argument and explained where she falls short; I have also argued for my own claim that anonymity does more epistemic harm than good specifically for marginalized groups, and considered how Frost-Arnold might respond to my argument with an alternative solution to reducing anonymity. Now, I will consider other possible objections against my argument, some of which have a lot of merit. It is important to remember that I am not arguing that transparency has no epistemic harm. The following objections highlight many epistemic harms. However, none of these objections alter the calculus between the harm of the absence of knowledge by marginalized groups and the harm of the presence of misinformation about marginalized groups. The presence of misinformation still poses a greater harm, which makes anonymity more harmful than transparency.

Throughout this paper, I have suggested that transparency leads to the lesser epistemic harm of a lack of knowledge on the internet. However, if you recall the section where I discuss the cases of Rodger and Tarrant, I argued that the physical harms of murder, which was a result of anonymous posting sites, lead to the epistemic harm of silencing. In other words, I argued that anonymity also led to the lesser harm of a lack of knowledge on the internet. Therefore, you may argue that this case shows how the epistemic harms of anonymity are qualitatively the same as the epistemic harms of transparency, which hurts my argument that anonymity is more epistemically harmful than transparency.
Further, you may argue that I have portrayed silencing as an extremely dangerous harm only when it stems from anonymity. Silencing can also result from transparency; doxxing, arguably the most notable silencing technique, is “the action or process of searching for and publishing private or identifying information about a particular individual on the internet, typically with malicious intent” (Google). When someone is doxxed, images of their face, their phone number, and even their home address may be uncovered and posted online. Like the murder, doxxing clearly inhibits the production of knowledge by instilling fear into others who share the same social identity or views as those who are doxxed, and silences them. Again, because both transparency and anonymity lead to silencing, it doesn’t seem intuitive that silencing that stems from anonymity is somehow worse than silencing that stems from transparency. With the example of doxxing, you may argue that epistemic harms of anonymity and the epistemic harms of transparency are qualitatively the same.

In response to this objection, I argue that there is a tangible difference between the silencing that stems from anonymity and the silencing that stems from transparency, or doxxing. Silencing that stems from doxxing is easier to combat than silencing that stems from anonymity, or the presence of misinformation, because people are more likely to be deterred from doxxing. Doxxing is immoral. People generally frown upon it. Because doxxing is frowned upon, if someone was found to have doxxed someone, they would be shamed and criticized. Thus, people will be deterred from doing it. However, the spread of misinformation is not condemned in the same way. Some people don’t even know the extent of the presence of misinformation on the internet. Like I suggested before, people will not be as deterred from spreading misinformation because there is virtually no consequence to being caught spreading misinformation.
Let’s look at a real example of doxxing that will help contextualize these differences. Recently, several Harvard students have been doxxed for being “affiliated with student groups that signed onto a controversial statement on Hamas’ attack on Israel” (Hill, “As Students Face…”). The students, who expressed views condemning Israel’s violence against Gaza were pronounced as “Harvard’s Leading Anti-semites” and had their faces plastered on a truck that drove around the great Boston area, eventually making its way to the Harvard campus. Harvard Crimson also reported that “at least four online sites had listed the personal information of students linked to clubs that had signed onto the statement, including full names, class years, past employment, social media profiles, photos, and hometowns” (Negussie). Because they were doxxed, several students disaffiliated from their social groups (Hill, “Harvard Students Doxxed…”). Other students who share pro-Palestine views probably hid their views in fear of being doxxed themselves.

The response to this doxxing was overwhelmingly focused not on the controversial views of the students, but rather on how immoral the doxxing was. In fact, many people, including the Harvard administration and Harvard Hillel, condemned the truck operator and came to the defense of the doxxed students (Hill, “As Students Face…”). By bringing shame upon those who dox, others will be deterred from doxxing. Therefore, the silencing that stems from doxxing is easier to combat than silencing that stems from anonymity, which makes silencing that stems from anonymity more dangerous than silencing that stems from transparency.

I will move onto another objection. People might argue against my claim that transparency will make the internet a more inclusive space by citing the fact that misinformation and hate will exist on the internet regardless of whether anonymity exists or not. Reducing anonymity would do nothing to combat transparent hate speech, because there are people who
use their real-life identity on the internet and say awful things. This is a valid point. However, like I suggested when discussing how a code of conduct is not a good deterrent, people who are willing to share hate and misinformation transparently are not the target of reducing anonymity. This objection misses an important aspect of my thesis; reducing anonymity will deter those who would not share hate and misinformation if not for anonymity. The internet will never be rid of people who openly share discriminatory views. My claim is that transparency makes the internet a little bit more inclusive. The people who are motivated to spread misinformation and hate because they can do so anonymously would be deterred.

**Beliefs Can Harm**

Recall that my argument that transparency makes the internet a more inclusive place by reducing people’s biases was in response to Frost-Arnold’s idea that anonymity eliminates testimonial injustice. People might suggest that my argument is unrealistic and too hopeful. People have plenty of opportunity in the real world to interact with people of different backgrounds, yet negative biases are still prevalent in our society. Thus, interacting transparently with people of different backgrounds on the internet may not reduce bias in the long run. Eliminating testimonial injustice through anonymity is a sure sound way to combat epistemic harm now.

As pragmatic as this objection sounds, there are several problems with it. First, while testimonial injustice may be eliminated on the internet, like the objection suggests, it would still exist in real life. The majority of our interactions with people still occur without anonymity, and many people will commit testimonial injustice in person. We have to start somewhere; forcing
people to confront their biases on the internet could be the start to reducing biases in the real world.

Further, harmful biases are wrong in itself. In “The Wrongs of Racist Beliefs,” Rima Basu argues that racists beliefs are intrinsically wrong, regardless of whether they lead to action. Basu suggests that people do not want to be thought of as one way when they are not, especially when the thoughts are negative. She gives the example of a security guard, Jake, who believes that a customer, Jada, has just stolen a purse. Jake doesn’t care about the store, so he decides not to stop Jada, acting as if he did not believe that she stole the purse (Basu, 2505). However, Jada did not steal the purse. Even though Jada suffered no harm through action, it seems intuitive that she was still wronged. Jada would not want people to think that she steals things when she doesn’t. Most people would sympathize with Jada, and feel wronged when others think unjustified negative beliefs about them. Similarly, even though the harms of testimonial injustice wouldn’t manifest on the internet, these harmful beliefs exist, and are wronging people.

It is worth acknowledging that some parts of Basu’s argument are controversial. She argues that racist beliefs can be harmful even if there is evidence that supports the belief. Not relying on evidence goes against an important and well-endorsed epistemic practice. She admits that her argument will be hard to swallow for some people, especially for those who are trying to navigate their world based on what they believe is credible evidence (Basu 2512, 2513). Basu writes that “racism is an unfortunate part of the fabric of our world,” and that “there may be morally objectionable beliefs that are well-supported by the evidence” (Basu, 2498). In order to not have racist beliefs, we may have to go against evidence that we may think is credible. Thus, she would probably agree that while having these beliefs is morally wrong, having these beliefs manifest in the real world is even worse. If we admit that some harms, like having rationally
racist impulses, are unavoidable, then the next best thing to do is to ensure that those impulses do not lead to action. People have a duty to actively fight against racist impulses and biases, which anonymity on the internet seems to inhibit.

**The Importance of a New Way to View Standpoints**

I have two final objections to consider. First, people may suggest that my argument places immense pressure and responsibility on marginalized voices. Essentially, I am asking people who rely on anonymity to accept the possible harms that may come from them sharing their experience with their real-life identity in order for internet users to benefit. I acknowledge that this is a big ask. Our world is full of hate; there will always be people who have discriminating views. In order for that to change, it seems like those who are victimized by those views have to stand up and fight for themselves.

Second, others may suggest that I am heavily influenced by Western ideals, and that I am not taking into account the needs of those who benefit from anonymity enough, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper. I grew up in the US, and my values and morals are heavily influenced by liberal democratic views. I value individual freedoms, such as my right to free speech, my right to vote and other guaranteed civil liberties. However, other countries, particularly in regions like the Middle East or Eastern Asia, may not guarantee the same kinds of civil liberties to their citizens. Communist countries believe that the preservation of a social order is more important than individual freedoms. Critics could argue that I am playing into a Western superiority complex, and that I do not have the standpoint to make arguments about another culture or way of life.
I think both of these claims are valid. I can never imagine what it feels like to be oppressed in the way that members of the LGBTQ+ community in Syria are oppressed. Nor can I imagine what it must feel like to have to rely on anonymity in order to share my everyday experience on the internet. Thus, I sympathize with these objections, and admit that I am both relying heavily on the strength and courage of the marginalized and downplaying the reality of those who rely on anonymity.

However, I do not believe that these claims should stop me from putting forth this thesis. Recall the note that I made at the beginning of this paper. I cited Tilton, who suggests that marginalized standpoints are achievable through hard work. I think her argument is especially relevant to these objections. How would the internet look if more people endorsed Tilton’s view on standpoints? To return to the fake blog, perhaps Macmaster would not have had to post through a pseudonym to share his knowledge. He only did so because he was not getting the attention nor the credit for his advocacy for the LGBTQ community (Javanmardi). He would not have to defer to Syrian LGBTQ members in order to fulfill his desire for social change. Similarly, I wouldn’t have to put immense pressure and responsibility on the marginalized if people in socially dominant positions took the time and energy to achieve a marginalized standpoint, and used the power from their dominant positions to fight for social justice. While coming to understand a marginalized standpoint through study is certainly different from coming to understand a marginalized standpoint through experience, it is dangerous to suggest that we should always defer to those who have had first hand experience to share their views.
Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that the epistemic harms of anonymity are worse than the epistemic harms of transparency because the presence of misinformation on the internet does more harm to the production of knowledge than the absence of reliable information does. By leading people to form false beliefs, misinformation on the internet perpetuates a never ending cycle of epistemic harm. Transparency certainly has its shortcomings. Marginalized people face a disproportionate burden of having to be brave and bear the consequences of sharing uncommon and novel experiences. However, the long-term benefits of transparency and the changing nature of standpoints may help alleviate some of this burden. I hope I have convinced you, the reader, that this discussion of internet anonymity and the effect it has on internet-users’ ability to gain knowledge has very important implications on our everyday lives. I hope you are convinced that posting something on the internet anonymously has a vaster negative impact than people ever imagined.
References


