The Mask of the Honorable Citizen

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Abstract

This article explores a very old concept of anonymity in private and business life: The Venetian Bauta mask and disguise which was mainly used during the 18th century. The mask was standardized and its use was regulated by government to give Venetian citizens the freedom to do business, to pursue interests on their own and to take part in political activities without being identified while still being recognized and respected as legitimate and honorable members of the Venetian society. I'd like to find out if this concept could be a paradigm for internet identity management and anonymity concepts. This piece of writing presents work in progress. Research will go on and can be followed on www.licence-to-mask.com.

1 Anonymity under Suspicion

1.1 Real World Anonymity

In modern democratic nation states human beings acting anonymously often raise suspicion. In many countries it is forbidden to wear a mask when taking part in public demonstrations. Democracy itself is understood as a political achievement which allows citizens to speak freely and to stand by their opinion without risking repression. Therefore, a person hiding his or her identity in public puts himself or herself in the position of a potentially dangerous outsider or risks being treated as a malicious coward [Kaba98, p. 17]. In most modern Western societies, the interchange of identification is understood as a gesture of goodwill which reduces the scope for dishonesty and as an enabler of communication [Kaba98]. Any refusal to comply with this practice raises strong feelings and provokes emotional reactions. In 2009 and 2010, these phenomenon added even more contentious issues to the already heated discussion about Muslim women wearing the Burka in public.

In the economic system, the reciprocally revealed identity of contractors is the fundament of accountability and payment. Paying cash while staying an anonymous customer is still widely accepted for smaller transactions, but as using debit and credit cards gets more common day by day there are even first approaches coming up to ban cash to reduce crime. At least the head of the Swedish Work Environment Authority (Arbetsmiljöverket) has already raised the prospect of such a ban on cash to help tackle the problem of robbery in Sweden's retail stores (see http://www.thelocal.se/26072/20100414/). The idea gets strong support by parts of the Swedish police. In general, the common “I have nothing to hide, so why should I care about surveillance?” argument still makes it easy to enforce measures against anonymity and privacy practices in most countries of the world [Solo07]. Worldwide, privacy rights are under pressure.

1.2 Internet Anonymity

On the internet, the situation is a little bit different and much more complicated. The internet is an international, multicultural environment with a very heterogeneous population. Especially many of the older inhabitants and many of the politically active "netizens" think of anonymity in cyberspace as the only real warrantor of privacy and freedom of speech. Internet power users are aware of the fact that surveillance within the modern communication networks is extremely easy to execute as long as the user does not prevent it by the deliberate use of encryption and anonymizing tools and habits. Even members of the youngest user generation, the "digital natives", who for quite a while did not seem to care at all for privacy, start to change their habits of freely providing personal information to anyone after having experienced first bad encounters with different flavors of customer or user profiling on the internet.

So privacy activists, data protection officers and many savvy users today stand united to defend the right to anonymity in the virtual world. On the other side, electronic commerce companies and service providers, copyright advocates, federal prosecutors, members of well-known three letter agencies and the police of many countries strongly argue against anonymity on the internet. From their point of view, anonymity fosters internet-based crime to an extent that already requires countermeasures. Actually there are many types of crime and deception which only work because hiding their identity can be easy for skillful cyber criminals. From personal harassment to industrial espionage und sabotage to robbery, money-laundry and kidnapping [Kaba98, p. 16], the range of internet-based atrocities alleviated by methods of forging the actor's identity covers nearly any type of crime [see also Kaba98, Introduction]. Today child pornography is the worst example, in fact so horrible that today nearly any kind of resistance against measures reducing privacy rights can be broken by just mentioning it.

But does all this really justify any steps to take away of the right to surf the web anonymously? An approach like that would misalign the balance of power on the net as respectable web users would have to give up any chance of avoiding profiling, tracing, targeted advertising and even dragnet investigation done by any business, individual, country, or even criminal organization around the globe. Security measures which discriminate against the honest majority of the internet population may not only interfere with human rights, they also may raise reactance effects strong enough to undermine any regulating influence on internet community in the future.

This article is meant to show that there is an alternative. Unfortunately this alternative does not exist as a simple project outline or set of simple measures. It would require a cultural change, but it is proven by a famous European civilization of the past.

2 Anonymity in Ancient Venice

In old Venice citizens for centuries were used to wear masks in everyday life, not only during carnival times. The reason was simple: This vibrant, international and multicultural business town was crowded and comparatively small [see Karb95, p. 359]. As an island, it was not so easy to leave it. To get somewhere, you had to walk narrow streets or use small boats floating through narrow channels. Most of the noble citizens knew each other. Because of that, it was nearly impossible for them to go to a business meeting, to a friend, to a lover or to the casino without being seen.