Anonymity and online communication

Perhaps one of the most controversial elements about communication online is the 'anonymous' character. Before they were anonymous, bullies had to face their victim head-on without concealing their identity. People would always have a face associated closely to what they said and thought. Anonymity on the Internet has become a strange blend of good and evil in this respect because with anonymity, it's easier to say what we want.

High profile issues with Anonymity

One example of how this balance between good and bad can be ethically complex is *Anonymous*. The "hacktivist" (hacker-activist) group, which originated from the online forum 4chan, is the Internet's undercurrent of anarchists and super hackers. The de-centralized 'people's army' works as a leaderless organization to promote awareness about certain things that might otherwise be kept secret, using their anonymity as a shield to protect themselves. Anonymous hackers have the ability to find and publish any private documentation found online, which can demonstrate the controversial issues of its use of anonymity.

Through this, we see that anonymity can yield both good things as well as bad. Anonymous has before released a video bringing to light the sexual assault of a teenage girl, which created public awareness about crimes that often go unnoticed. Yet the debate still remains: to what extent is this a good thing?

Negative implications of anonymity

Anonymity can also allow malicious thoughts and insults to pass unfiltered onto a platform that can be viewed by hundreds of people worldwide. As we can see, a lot of power rests in the hand of the anonymous speaker. The problem is that a person can perform a careless act of cruelty in several quick keystrokes and get away with it without even a trace of shame, guilt or ownership of what they did.

Positive implication of Anonymity

However, anonymity doesn't necessarily equate to harm and deceit; it can protect your identity and prevent the harm and deceit from being targeted specifically at you. Sometimes this lack of identity affords you privacy; you can be secure knowing that your thoughts will not directly tie to your identity, and that personal information will be kept safe—to an extent of course.

Anonymity can encourage people to share their thoughts without feeling that they would be judged or ridiculed, or rather it allows them to feel more comfortable with sharing their ideas

despite other differing opinions.

What does this mean as an internet user?

One of the key things to remember about anonymity is its ubiquity. How do we navigate the terrains of an anonymous-filled online world? One option could be to disable any anonymous questions or comments to your personal space online, whether it is on a blog, a Youtube video, Formspring or Twitter. And if cyberbullying occurs anonymously, it should be reported—and the account should be blocked. But keeping in mind that the use of anonymity is common and widespread, the easiest thing to do is ignore it and move on.

We must acknowledge that it's hard to control anonymity. We cannot oppress it because it is something usually beyond our grasp, and when we try to control it we often fail. What we can learn from this is that we each have our own responsibility to use the anonymous option in the best way we can, without harming others or hurting ourselves. This is true because the only thing you truly have control over is yourself, and your actions. Drawing from the IB learner profile, young students must learn to be caring and principled when it comes to being anonymous online. Nowadays, students have the responsibility to act independently, especially online, and parents have the responsibility to ensure their children are educated about these concepts. Teachers and parents both have a large influence on the behaviour of the students, so a mutual trust should be formed between teachers, parents and students to ensure the students can open up about problems with using anonymity. Since the notion of "anonymity" stems mainly from us, and not faceless evil hacker-groups, the responsibility is placed solely on our shoulders.