Why YouTube should remain anonymous

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Warning: Reading comments may cause alarm at the state of humanity.

Anyone who has ever spent any time on YouTube reading the comments is familiar with—as Slate [1] calls it-- the “abandon all hope ye who enter here” atmosphere of the community.
When you dare scroll down past the episode of Hogan’s Heroes you’ve been watching, you’ll find all manner of misogynistic, racist, homophobic, anti-liberal, anti-conservative, anti-religion, and pretty much any other insulting thing you could ever think to read, plus a number of things that are simply nonsensical babble. It’s where humanity comes to die—or at least where people go to troll fellow readers into thinking humanity has died.

Earlier this week, Google – YouTube’s parent company – told YouTube to figure it out. Currently, the only available option to stop the madness is to disable the comments altogether, which Google feels stifles the community conversation.

The controversy
YouTube’s solution is to require people to use their real names instead of handles. For example, IheartECN4eva—not my actual handle—would become Kasey Panetta. When anyone with an account attempts to comment on a video, they’ll be prompted to either pony up their real identity or link their YouTube account to their Google+ account, which will import a picture and name from their profile. Users have the option to opt out if the handle is for business purposes, they’ve established a “following” under that handle, they’re unsure of the change, or several other reasons. It should be noted Google tried to do something similar in 2011, but faced a large backlash [2] from critics.

State your name and opinion
This is a touchy subject for journalists. I enjoy the opportunity to interact with the ECN community via the comments, but those comments are usually well-thought out criticisms of my opinions or the product in question. Plus, they’re easily monitored. It’s much different on YouTube, where the commenters are seemingly

endless and basically go unchecked.

The original form of comments—the Letter to The Editor—required writers to use their real names for a reason. Requiring a name removes the barrier of anonymity which encourages ugly comments.

Commenters tend to be a vocal minority; they often morph into a kind of sick floor show for others on the site. On the one hand, people should have to take responsibility for the things they say online. If nothing else, it will eliminate trolls—those who make inflammatory comments to get a rise out of people. Yes, the internet is a public forum for discussion, but if you want to voice an opinion, you should be prepared to answer for it. Plus, racial slurs and sexist comments don't really encourage a valid and worthwhile dialog.

One prevalent argument in defense of the comments is anyone willing to put a video on YouTube should have tough enough skin to deal with any comments thrown at them. The counterargument being, when do we say when?

Consider the case of Anita Sarkeesian [3], a scholar who started a Kickstarter campaign [3] to fund her research regarding women in video games. When the video was posted to YouTube, it garnered some of the most vile, atrocious, and threatening comments - you can find a list her kickstarter page as it's too vile to post here - I've ever encountered. Anita didn't have the option of anonymity, but if these commenters had been forced to use their real names, would it have limited the amount of animosity and threats emanating from their comments? Clearly, since some people did use their real names, it's not going to completely eliminate the problem, but it might become less frequent. The encouraging ending to this story was people came out of the woodwork to support Anita and her project, calling out her attackers and funding – and then some - her videos.

When you frame the argument like that, it's pretty hard to argue against using real names. Until, of course, you consider the issue of privacy.

The pros of privacy

Anonymity is a double-edged sword when it comes to the internet. Yes, it protects the attacker, but it also protects a normal commenter. There is so much information—an uncomfortable amount of information—available online about individuals. You never know what people are going to find and how they might use it against you -- particularly if it links to your Google+ account. It's inevitable that commenters will turn on each other; should YouTube make it easier for people to take their battles offline? Naming names makes people vulnerable to attacks that would otherwise require some effort on the part of the attacker. It's a Pandora's box of potential privacy problems.

Look at sites like Reddit, where a large community of computer-savvy people have literally terrorized individuals they deemed in the wrong. This type of vigilante justice is intimidating and scary for a normal viewer or even a professional. People should not be scared to voice their opinions—particularly on a touchy subject; that isn't going to encourage any sort of meaningful discourse. As history has shown,

fear does not inspire conversation, it stifles it.

You shouldn't be scared to comment on a YouTube video because someone might figure out where you live or who you are. If the handle provides just a hint of protection for commenters, it might be worth keeping.

What do you think?
Obviously, I'm divided on this issue. As a journalist, I voluntarily attach my name to my opinion as part of the job, and I've taken some flak from commenters, but it's a hazard of the job. I'm not sure that standard should apply across the board. For me, it raises particularly concerning issues regarding stalking and the safety of minors. On the other hand, I'm a proponent of the old "say what you mean and mean what you say" philosophy, so I want to support this measure, but I just can't move solidly in line behind it.

I think YouTube has two options at this point. They can heavily, heavily monitor their comments, which is probably impossible given the amount of traffic on the site, or they can just let people keep their handles. I'm not entirely sold on the idea that this is an effective way to force solid discourse or that reasonable discourse is even a feasible option for this particular site. It's a tough decision…I'm not sure the risks are worth the reward.

Leave your opinions—*nicely, please*—in the comments.

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