

Apps that promise a kind of online anonymity are generating compelling content, despite concerns

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Earlier this year, Annie Hsieh, who works at an Austin startup, downloaded an app called "Secret." What intrigued her was the app's promise of anonymity. It's a social network, not unlike Twitter, where people post things, but without names and with only vague references to locations.

"I thought it would be interesting to see what people share when they were anonymous," Hsieh said.

Hsieh reads a lot more secrets using the app than she posts. But one thing she shared got a lot of attention. "It was about the lingering effects of a traumatic childhood experience," she said. "A lot of people came forward and said they'd had a similar experience and said they had never shared it before but felt compelled to offer support."

Hsieh said she was surprised not just by the outpouring itself but by the idea that it came from virtual strangers, "even though they didn't know who I was."

Welcome to the semi-anonymous Web, where a new generation of apps allow users to let loose with postings they wouldn't dare broadcast to Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn or any number of other public online networks.

In November, San Francisco-based "Secret" launched, joining another app that has been gaining traction for its promise of online anonymity, "Whisper," which launched in 2012. Recently, "Secret" raised \$8.6 million from outside investors, while "Whisper" drew \$21 million in funding. Last week, another anonymous social app, "Yik Yak," focused on texting, raised \$1.5 million.

While the apps have been criticized as potential breeding grounds for cyberbullying, they've grown on the promise of compelling personal anecdotes that don't have a place on the public social Web and for passing along industry gossip, especially in tech-heavy locales such as Austin and Silicon Valley.

Joseph McGlynn III, a doctoral researcher with the Center for Identity at the University of Texas at Austin, has been studying these kinds of apps and says there are good reasons for their existence.

"Apps such as 'Secret' and 'Whisper' are valuable in that they can provide a platform for people to discuss sensitive topics," McGlynn said. Users, he said, can speak more freely with less fear of judgment, retaliation or social alienation.

"Talking about negative or troubling experiences is a cathartic process for many people," McGlynn said. "The ability for people to be part of a community while remaining anonymous is particularly promising."

What do people post on these apps? A lot of it is everyday minutiae, eye-popping sex talk (infidelity and monogamy are constant themes, at least on "Secret") and loose chatter about impending departures at companies such as Google or Nike. During South by Southwest Interactive in March, some early adopters of "Secret" shifted their focus from Silicon Valley to the Austin festival and posted frequent updates about debauched partying and withering criticisms of the fest and people

attending.

But sometimes the ugly Internet can surprise and a harrowing post might take a reader's breath away. Plaintive posts from the lonely and suicidal are often met with comments of deep sympathy and reassurance. One haunting post from a few months back was from a father whose wife was pregnant with a second child. The couple, he posted, had just talked themselves out of an abortion and were now bewildered as to how they would manage with two kids. Other users responded with encouragement and advice.

Typically, the posts aren't the kind you'd find on Twitter or on Facebook, where everything one posts sticks to their identity forever. They could all be made up. There's no way to know. But much of it feels deeply human and frail, bits that would be bulldozed and overanalyzed on the public Web.

Chrys Bader, a co-founder of "Secret," says that humanity is the point.

"Everyone is human at the core, and we all have the same human issues, regardless of where you are and who you are," Bader said. "There's tremendous power in the information because of the way we built it."

"Secret" started with just 100 users, friends of the founders who were testing out the app. Bader said they noticed right away that even in a small, semi-anonymous community, people were coming back again and again to share.

Though Bader says that personal struggles and daily anecdotes make up a lot of "Secret," it's also emerging as an information back channel. Word that the head of Google Plus, Vic Gundotra, was leaving the company began appearing on "Secret" days before it was official. Anonymous gossip, to no one's surprise, spreads fast.

"People are finding out about things first on 'Secret,'" Bader said. He says the company is focused on releasing an Android version and expanding the product globally, especially to countries where there are more restrictions on free speech.

But is anyone every truly anonymous online? Even Bader admits that no online entity is ever 100 percent secure and unhackable. "You're anonymous in the app, but that doesn't mean you're untraceable," he said.

The company does not allow illegal activity through the [app](#) and allows users to flag inappropriate or abusive posts for review.

"Secret" separates the identities of posters from the things they post, making it more difficult for hackers to break in and match up posts with people's personal information, but it's not impossible.

Adam Tyler, chief innovation officer at Austin's CSID, a company that specializes in data breaches and identity protection, said these apps offer a kind of lite, consumer version of what's known online as the "Dark Web."

Services such as "Tor," "I2P" and "Darknet" are often used by those who don't want to be monitored or identified online. But, Tyler said, apps such as "Secret" and "Whisper" are using the "normal Internet" without requiring additional privacy software or services.

"Anonymity is something that can never be guaranteed," Tyler said.

"Anonymity offered by commercial companies located in government-regulated territories is an even harder promise to make."

Hsieh, who continues to use "Secret," says she worries about that and is careful not to overshare.

Because "Secret" relies on a user's phone contacts to mark posts as coming from "friends" or "friends of friends" (you can also choose to view posts near you, and posts from other cities also appear based on popularity) she's even found it easy to bust through the anonymity with her own deduction skills.

"I just saw a post yesterday from someone who said they couldn't post any more secrets because everyone in their office automatically knew it was them," Hsieh said. "It's been kind of easy to guess who's been posting what."

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