Online anonymity isn't as easy as the firms offering privacy apps want you to think

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You can Whisper it, but don't expect it or you to stay secret forever. Credit: Malcolm Campbell, CC BY-SA

In a post-Snowden world, anonymity is what people want online. Smartphone apps offering anonymous messaging are popping up everywhere – Secret, Whisper and now Yik Yak. The latest additions to

privacy-protecting technology, they claim to provide anonymous, location-based confession, expression, and discussion platforms.

But there are two major issues with these apps: the false sense of anonymity security they provide, and their potential as platforms for bullying.

Coming back to bite you

Anonymising social media apps such as these are run from a platform that is immediately identifying: your personal smartphone. Significant amounts of data about your identity and location are often used by these apps, not only to geo-locate you for things that are location-sensitive, such as locally restricted posts, but to track you as a unique user by associating your posts and data with unique identifiers such as your device's internet IP address, phone IMEI number, and usage patterns. These can be used to block abusive users, send push notifications, track software errors, show personalised adverts, or enable other features.

Not only does this mean that users are not actually anonymous, but that the company can be asked to hand over this data by law enforcement or government officials. In fact, each of these three "anonymous" apps include statements in their privacy policies to this effect.

This is dangerous when, for example, Whisper claims to be able to protect whistleblowers through the anonymity it provides – this is simply not true. Fortunately the other apps don't make such strong claims, but can still lure you into a false sense of security that what you say won't come back to bite you later.

If you wish to be anonymous online, apps like this won't give it to you. In fact, no apps on smartphones really can. True anonymity consists in technical and identity anonymity. This means finding a way to prevent

tracking through geo-location, IP address, phone identification or usage patterns. This requires more robust but more difficult to use technologies such as Tor, and the skill to use them properly. Until then, all you have is "pseudonymity", and app-makers' promises that they will "make it hard" for others to access your data.

Of course, anonymous apps' actual lack of anonymity can help with the second problem, that of their potential use for bullying. These apps are aimed at young people who are particularly vulnerable to online bullying. Yik Yak has attempted to address this, after much criticism for allowing bullying to take place by geofencing schools, prohibiting use of the app within a school area.

However, this doesn't stop bullying away from schools. Yik Yak has tried to counter this by removing negatively rated posts, blocking users that frequently post negative content, introducing rules prohibiting bullying, and relying on peer review of posts to ensure problems are flagged up. But there's still been significant problems with abuse.

Whisper also has moderators that respond to negative content, tracking problem users and banning them. Secret, which uses similar methods, including algorithmic detection of bullying, user flagging, and moderation, is reported to have problems countering bullies. So is it so bad that these apps aren't truly anonymous? At least then bullies, which can cause so much grief, can be dissuaded from their activities or brought to justice. But there are situations where, as a society, anonymity is needed or desired for good reasons – in oppressive areas, to reach out to people for advice, to blow the whistle.

Society won't allow anonymity

This illustrates the problems with anonymous smartphone apps to begin with – they can never be fully anonymous partly because society won't

let them. Society will want safeguards against bullies or threatening behaviour to be built into any easy-to-access social media technology that is used by children and young adults. Inevitably that requires removing much of any anonymising aspects. This sort of technology also never works well with the requirements of start-up companies, because at some point the start-up needs to make money, and that is often based on knowledge about their user base.

It is also a reminder that the technology we develop is never value-neutral. Society shapes technology, which in turn shapes society. Sometimes these values conflict, and it's hard to know how to prioritise. Anonymity is a very difficult problem in itself: app developers shouldn't muddy the waters offering anonymity when they can't deliver, and they should also be very clear as to the reasons for not offering that anonymity.

Users who wish to remain anonymous should beware of "too easy to be true" offerings and stick to tried and tested methods, else what they say under the guise of "anonymity" might just come back to bite them.

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