

Anonymity, scoundrels, and free speech

July 31 2017, by David Bradley

Christoph Bezemek of the Institute of Public Law and Political Science, at the University of Graz, Austria, tells a tale of his school history teacher who purported that only "scoundrels" sent letters to a newspaper anonymously. His teacher's argument being that public discourse as a democratic society's bonding agent and so those who wish their voice to be heard should not hide behind a veil of anonymity. And yet, in a free society, surely one should have the right to a voice whether anonymous or not, after all throughout history often the messenger was at the lethal end of the phrase: the pen is mightier than the sword.

In the modern world, where everyone is a messenger thanks to online social networking and social media, there seems an even greater need to protect the right of an individual to remain anonymous in public discourse if they chose to do so and perhaps even to have the prerogative to encrypt their message and so limit its audience. This does not necessarily conflict with the notion of civic courage,

Being anonymous is often the only way to honourably, rather than perniciously, spread an opinion especially when faced with fraudulent scoundrels who hold power. There is a long tradition of anonymous pamphleteering that continues onto today's digital age. At least in democratic nations, it is established sufficiently that the principle of anonymous [free speech](#) lies at the very core of that democracy. Everyone should have the right to free speech and to whether or not they make their name public in their declarations. Whether they are anonymous or not we all have the right to listen or to ignore them.

As governments start to ban encryption technology and [virtual private networks](#) (VPNs) or request technology companies to grant them "backdoor access" into computer systems, we must be vigilant that free [speech](#) may still be exercised, whether openly or anonymously; even if by scoundrels.

More information: Christoph Bezemek. Behind a veil of obscurity - anonymity, encryption, free speech and privacy, *International Journal of Technology Policy and Law* (2017). [DOI: 10.1504/IJTPL.2017.085232](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJTPL.2017.085232)

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