
Anonymity, Pseudonymity, and Gender Categorization as Social Justice Issues in HCI

Oliver L. Haimson

Department of Informatics
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA USA
ohaimson@uci.edu

Nazanin Andalibi

College of Computing and
Informatics
Drexel University
Philadelphia, PA USA
naz@drexel.edu

Copyright 2016 held by Owner/Author.

Abstract

In this paper we present two features that are imperative to inclusive design of social media sites: people's right to be anonymous or pseudonymous, and people's right to reject gender categorization. We argue that these are social justice issues that must be taken into account when designing social media sites.

Author Keywords

Social media; anonymity; pseudonymity; gender categorization; social justice; design.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

"...technologies are often designed with particular types of users in mind – when you are not the user the designer had in mind, you can become frustrated because the piece of technology seems to resist you."
- Ilana Gershon [5]

When social websites are designed, who is left out? In this paper we present two design requirements for inclusive online spaces: right to represent an

anonymous or pseudonymous online identity, and right to not be categorized by gender.

Anonymity and Pseudonymity

The right to anonymity and pseudonymity online is a social justice issue. In this paper, we focus on names as one factor that could signal levels of identifiability, though there are other factors that can identify individuals. There are many reasons why a person may not want to or be willing to disclose their actual name in an online context: She may be a survivor of intimate partner violence, and not want to be further harassed online by her ex-partner [4]. She may use online platforms to express radical activist content that would not be acceptable to her boss and coworkers. She may be living under an oppressive regime which does not tolerate opposing views that one needs to express [e.g., 11]. She may want to display several different identities online, rather than just one [9]. Whatever the circumstance, it is unjust to deny users the ability to represent themselves with a name and online profile(s) of their choosing that they feel represents them best in a particular context. What do we lose when prominent social media platforms require users to display their “real” names and identities? Who is excluded or put in danger when such policies are enforced worldwide without consideration of the implications for particular marginalized or oppressed groups?

Rejecting Gender Categorization

The right to reject being categorized by gender online is a social justice issue. Many online social media sites require users to assign certain categorical attributes to their profile (e.g., gender) that may hinder not only online self-presentation but also the user’s ability to feel included on a particular site. Requiring users to

provide gender information, particularly when only offering binary gender options, will exclude many users who do not fit into that categorization scheme or who do not wish to disclose their gender. Some reasons one may not wish to disclose their gender include fear of harassment for being a woman or being trans, being in a transitional period as part of a gender change, wishing to avoid ad targeting, and privacy concerns more broadly. Currently, three out of the ten most popular social media sites require users to choose either Male or Female at sign up [2]¹. Site designers must consider who is excluded when gender categories are mandated.

Discussion

What do we lose when prominent social media sites require users to present “real” names and identities? First, we lose the ability of online spaces to act as “identity workshops” [3] where identity experimentation can take place². Second, we lose the ability to self-disclose sensitive information and receive support without the stigma that may occur when disclosing such information using a real name [1,10]. Finally, we lose the ability to post radical or anti-governmental political views and engage in activism without it being linked back to our professional or personal identities. There remains real power in being able to act anonymously, and inclusive design *must* account for this.

¹ Some sites include more gender profile options after sign up, imposing binary gender only at sign up.

² However, anonymity cannot make issues of gender and race inequality disappear in online spaces [7,8], and may not be as liberatory as earlier argued by Bruckman [3], Turkle [12], and others.

What do we lose when gender categorization is mandated on social media sites? We lose online participation and engagement from a small, marginalized group (those with non-binary genders) [6] and from others who do not wish to disclose their gender in online platforms. But beyond that, we lose inclusivity of online platforms, which is about gender now and in this paper, but may be about another category at a future time. There is no actual reason why gender categorization is necessary on social media sites [2], and the benefits of requiring it do not outweigh the costs associated with excluding certain users.

Increasingly, social websites want their users to disclose more and more information about themselves. What happens when information that could be used to imply extremely personal things about people and potentially make them vulnerable are mandatory to disclose? What if those who do disclose systematically benefit from doing so, for example by being shown more reliable or valuable information? Inclusive design must consider the ways that mandatory disclosure of personal information can privilege certain users, and the fact that information that many do not consider personal or sensitive (e.g., name and gender) is in fact a sensitive disclosure for others.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented people's rights to anonymity/pseudonymity and rights to reject gender categorization on online platforms as social justice issues. Socially just design can and should take these issues into account to reduce oppression of marginalized people.

References

1. Nazanin Andalibi, Oliver L. Haimson, Munmun De Choudhury, and Andrea Forte. 2016. Understanding Social Media Disclosures of Sexual Abuse Through the Lenses of Support Seeking and Anonymity. *Proceedings of ACM CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*.
2. Rena Bivens and Oliver L. Haimson. Baking Gender into Social Media Design: Programming Practices, Data Collection, and Ad Targeting. *Social Media + Society* (under review).
3. Amy Bruckman. 1992. Identity Workshop.
4. Jill P. Dimond, Casey Fiesler, and Amy S. Bruckman. 2011. Domestic violence and information communication technologies. *Interacting with Computers* 23, 5: 413–421. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.intcom.2011.04.006>
5. Ilana Gershon. 2011. *The Breakup 2.0: Disconnecting over New Media*. Cornell University Press.
6. Oliver L. Haimson, Jed R. Brubaker, Courtney Loder, Lynn Dombrowski, and Gillian R. Hayes. 2015. User Response to Facebook's Custom Gender Options. *iConference 2015 Proceedings*. Retrieved September 7, 2015 from <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/73701>
7. Lori Kendall. 1998. Meaning and Identity in "Cyberspace": The Performance of Gender, Class, and Race Online. *Symbolic Interaction* 21, 2: 129–153. <http://doi.org/10.1525/si.1998.21.2.129>
8. Lisa Nakamura. 2013. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. Routledge.
9. Allucquère Rosanne Stone. 1996. *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*. MIT Press.

10. John Suler. 2004. The Online Disinhibition Effect. *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 7, 3: 321–326. <http://doi.org/10.1089/1094931041291295>
11. E Tanner. 2001. Chilean conversations: Internet forum participants debate Augusto Pinochet's detention. *Journal of Communication* 51, 2: 383–403. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2001.tb02886.x>
12. Sherry Turkle. 2011. *Life on the Screen*. Simon and Schuster.