

Freedom of anonymity is not freedom of speech, yet it serves all the wrong purposes for it to be seen as the same thing

Adam Tugwell | 7 February 2023



A few days ago, I watched Emily Atack's BBC Documentary about online abuse. Through all of the inappropriate, to unpalatable, to offensive, to harmful, to absolutely wrong stories and anecdotes that Emily and those she spoke to revealed, it was the words of one of the male respondents in a discussion group that spoke loudest. When asked why men do it, he replied; because they can.

Whilst the behaviour of anyone who causes the kind of mental distress and fear that so many clearly are, needs to be punished appropriately, my real concern is that punishment or focusing upon it as the effect that it is, rather than the real gate opener or cause to this problem, means that the focus is being pushed further and further away from the real issue

– which is being avoided, because our politicians don't want to upset their friends, or attempt to deal with any issue they believe likely will show them in a negative light.

The inability of our entire political class to be the public representatives that they regularly insist they are and that we should all be able to expect them to be, is mind blowing.

Throw a virus they know nothing about into the mix and they can bring life to a standstill in moments. Ask them to take the necessary steps to legislate the removal of the biggest cause of online threats to individuals, and its more than their 'job' is worth.

With things as they are today, the failure of the issue of online anonymity and the role it plays in online abuse to gain any real traction, probably means that there are a significant number of online abusers already on a pathway to carrying out much more serious crimes against others.

They will also arguably do massive but avoidable damage to themselves – all because the will and respect for the responsibility to the public they represent isn't there on the part of legislators (MPs) who could solve this all very quickly.

Indeed, all they would need do would be to make it law for everyone using any kind of social media platform to be registered with an independent body – even if they then continue to publish and communicate under some kind of assumed name.

Yes, that independent body would need to be independent of a system of government that is increasingly displaying dystopian overtures. But it would also need to be independent of the Tech companies, who through their collaboration with the establishment and silent banning of dissenting voices, have already shown that they cannot act with integrity in any matter where they would be self-policed.

Freedom of speech is about the content of words, not who spoke them. Yet in this current climate, the terms freedom of speech and freedom of anonymity have become alarmingly interchangeable when they don't in any way relate to the same thing.

The failure of the establishment to recognise and regulate to reduce unrecorded anonymity to its absolute minimum literally means that the parallel universe which is the internet and world of apps is a place where behaviour that would already be punishable in the 'real world' is being exploited by people online, who believe they have impunity against punishment for doing the same things.

With a disintegrating public sector, court system and police service, surely making it clear that everyone is simple to identify, and potentially has to abide by a code of conduct, even if they are overtly anonymous, would mean that abuse would almost disappear overnight. Meanwhile, those who genuinely need anonymity, would still be able to speak freely – as in any free speaking society, it is only right and fair that they should?

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