

ANONYMITY on the internet

Grapevine October 2010

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Breaking a Tradition can happen on social networking sites, but it's easily prevented.

THE Traditions are of the utmost importance for the survival of AA as a whole, but they were written in an era when methods of communication were fairly limited, consequently leaving some holes for the AAs of today to fill in. I remember when I first started thinking about anonymity, the Eleventh Tradition and the internet. Turning to the AA World Service pamphlet "Understanding Anonymity," I looked for answers. The pamphlet says that websites should be considered public media, and therefore we shouldn't use our full name or images on any public site. It goes on to say that ". . . the level of anonymity in emails, online meetings, and chat rooms would be a personal decision."

At first glance, this seems pretty clear: no full names or pictures on any publicly accessible website, but chat rooms, online meetings and emails are acceptable places to break our own anonymity, if we wish to. The pamphlet is trying to set up a distinction between "private" and "public" internet usage. Unfortunately, I believe it falls well short of comprehensively defining this distinction. One could easily say that breaking anonymity on a national news organization's site is forbidden, but a break in an email to a friend is acceptable. A personal blog that is publicly searchable would also fall into the "public" category. But what about social networking sites?

These widely used sites have their own security protocols, some of which are fully customizable by the individual users. They have their own levels of public and private, further complicating the issue. For instance, I can set my personal page to be viewed by my "friends" (people I've approved to view my page) only, preventing anyone else from seeing the information listed. Can I break my anonymity on this level, where only my friends can see? Wouldn't this be merely the virtual equivalent of gathering all of my friends in a room and telling them I am in AA?

One popular networking site has "groups" where likeminded people can sign up and post messages on discussion boards. Many of them are twelve-step-related. There are multiple unmoderated groups titled "Alcoholics Anonymous," one with over 9,000 members. Any member can access this group and its member list, most of whom use their full names (a requirement for one social networking site). One could argue that this is a public anonymity break because it falls under the banner of Alcoholics Anonymous. But what about the "Friends of Bill W." group that has over 12,000 members? It is public (to members of the site) but specifically states that it is not affiliated with any organization.

I think that the solution here has more to do with Tradition Six than with Tradition Eleven. Calling a group "Alcoholics Anonymous" implies affiliation, despite disclaimers. If all of these internet groups were titled something like "Friends of Bill W." or "Alcoholics in Recovery," then we would be solving two problems at once: ending affiliation with AA and allowing members to not worry about breaking their anonymity at a public level by merely joining the group. Each individual would be responsible for

maintaining his or her own anonymity in these groups in discussions, but they would no longer have to worry about their anonymity being broken just by joining the group.

At the time the Traditions were published, this conversation about anonymity would have been inconceivable. As our world changes and evolves, AA, too, must change and evolve. AA members must meet new challenges head-on, inside and outside of AA.

Dave S. Suggestions

Dave S., the author of Anonymity on the internet, compiled some tips for anonymity-protected usage of social networking sites:

- Don't join any group with Alcoholics Anonymous in its name, even if there is a disclaimer.
- Don't disclose that you are an AA member if you choose to join a group for people in recovery. Talk in general terms about meetings, recovery and Steps.
- Don't post a message on someone's wall. regarding meetings, sobriety or AA.
- Don't publish pictures from AA functions with your friends in them, unless you have their permission. Make sure that these pictures are viewable by your friends only.
- Do. If you choose to out, yourself on your profile page, make sure the page is accessible only to your friends, not to the general public.
- Do. When creating an AA-related event on the site, make sure that it is private so that invitees don't have their anonymity broken when they decide to attend. Make the guest list of an AA-related event hidden.

Source URL: <https://www.aagrapevine.org/magazine/2010/oct/anonymity-internet>