

Anonymity and Social Networking Sites

In today's fast-paced, high-tech world, A.A. members are accessing the Internet in ever-growing numbers and in ways that couldn't have been imagined even ten years ago. Chatting online with members halfway around the globe has become more and more commonplace, and a tremendous amount of information about alcoholism and A.A. is often just a click of the mouse away. However, with the breadth and scope of the Internet have come challenges, and protecting A.A.'s Traditions online is an important subject to many in the Fellowship.

As with many topics of concern throughout A.A., G.S.O. has developed a set of A.A. Guidelines on the Internet (MG-18) based on the shared experience of A.A. members, groups and committees, covering many of the questions this new technology gives rise to. One such area of concern is the question of anonymity online, particularly as it relates to social networking Web sites, a question which has prompted a more careful look at A.A.'s existing literature and how A.A.'s Traditions can best apply to this popular medium.

“What is the purpose of anonymity in Alcoholics Anonymous?” and “Why is it often referred to as the greatest single protection the Fellowship has to assure its continued existence and growth?”

These questions from the A.A. General Service Conference-approved pamphlet, “Understanding Anonymity,” lie at the heart of any discussion about A.A.'s Tradition of Anonymity, whether the discussion centers on a newspaper article or an Internet Web site featuring full names or full-face pictures of A.A. members.

“If we look at the history of A.A., from its beginning in 1935 until now,” the pamphlet continues, “it is clear that anonymity serves two different yet equally vital functions:

“At the personal level, anonymity provides protection for all members from identification as alcoholics, a safeguard often of special importance to newcomers.

“At the level of press, radio, TV, films and new media technologies such as the Internet, anonymity stresses the equality in the Fellowship of all members by putting the brake on those who might otherwise exploit their A.A. affiliation to achieve recognition, power, or personal gain.”

Regarding the specific question, “What about anonymity online?” the A.A. Guidelines on the Internet state: “An A.A. Web site is a public medium, which has the potential for reaching the broadest possible audience and, therefore, requires the same safeguards that we use at the level of press, radio, and film.”

Nevertheless, G.S.O. has received numerous communications from concerned A.A. members regarding anonymity breaks online, inappropriate use of the A.A. name, and copyrighted/trademarked materials being improperly used on social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and others. These Web sites offer individuals the chance to post a great deal of personal information about themselves (and

others), and these Web sites often allow users to create social networking “groups” and “events” for like-minded individuals.

Some members do not post anything that is reflective of A.A. in their personal profiles or “status updates,” while others feel it is alright to do so, so long as A.A. is not specifically mentioned.

Says one A.A. member, however, “I typed ‘Alcoholics Anonymous’ in one of the social networking sites and a group came up with over 6,600 members. It assured ‘a safe place to discuss’ so I thought it was okay. Then I clicked to see who the members were and the page opened to show me first and last names, many with photos.”

From there, depending on people’s privacy settings, one could easily see personal information about these people, their families and friends. “I was taught the importance of our Traditions,” the concerned A.A. member relates, “and about keeping this Fellowship the way we found it.... This page is not what A.A. is about, in my opinion.”

Some A.A. members feel that social networking sites are a private venue; other members strongly disagree and view them as a public setting. G.S.O.’s A.A. Guidelines on the Internet, state that social networking Web sites “are public in nature.”

After being alerted to an anonymity break G.S.O. normally forwards the matter to the delegate in the area where the member resides, for the delegate to handle as he or she sees fit. (The area delegate usually sends a loving reminder to the member about the importance of our Eleventh Tradition.)

Regarding the Internet, the current method of handling anonymity breaks at the public level doesn’t apply well on social networking Web sites. Given the popularity achieved by the Internet and the vast numbers of people involved, the question of anonymity has become more and more relevant, and as shared experience within the Fellowship accrues on this rapidly evolving medium of communication, greater focus is being brought to what Bill W. described as “the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions.”

As with most matters in A.A., regardless of how the Internet and new technology have opened up the kinds of connections one A.A. member and another can share, there is great benefit to be found in careful thought and prudent evaluation of a situation that causes concern for so many. Speaking to A.A. sponsors and friends about how to apply A.A.’s Traditions online hopefully will provide individual members who are utilizing this technology with a greater understanding of how we present ourselves as A.A. members to anyone—be they A.A. member or non-A.A. member—who may “walk” unannounced into the rooms of the Internet’s many social networking sites.

As presented in the pamphlet “Understanding Anonymity,” regarding anonymity online, the collective conscience of the A.A. Fellowship, as expressed through its Conference-approved literature, suggest that “Publicly accessible aspects of the Internet such as Web sites featuring text, graphics, audio and video ought to be considered another form of ‘public media.’ Thus, they need to be treated in the same manner as press, radio, TV and films. This means that full names and faces should not be used. However, the level of anonymity in e-mail, online meetings and chat rooms would be a personal decision.”