To Identify or Not to Identify, That Is the Question

March 8, 2011

Google recently published a blog post [1] that explained, in no uncertain terms, that the company is committed to supporting individuals who want to browse the web and share information without identifying themselves. The blog post emphasized that the Web should allow three kinds of interactions: anonymous, pseudonymous, and identified. While some online functions may require identity, and while some users may prefer in some situations to link certain online transactions and interactions to their real names, at the same time users should be able to search for information, find locations, send and receive email, and create documents without disclosing their identity to Google, potential government monitors, and other users.

As Internet users are increasingly prompted to link their real name identities to their online activities (through services such as Facebook Connect and Facebook's new comments feature [2]), many are speculating whether the Internet will cease to remain a place where individuals can access information and engage in various activities without identifying themselves. Some voices are arguing that, in order to achieve public policy goals such as cybersecurity, pseudonymity and anonymity have no place online. Others predict that market driven developments such as personalization and user uptake of the social Web will lead to a Web where all or most online activity is linked to one's real-world identity.

At CDT, we believe that the future of the Internet need not be fully linked and identified. A trustworthy ecosystem can develop in which users can have customized, social experiences while significant opportunities for anonymity and pseudonymity are protected.

Real-name identity models certainly offer users real benefits in some situations – allowing them to find old acquaintances and creating trust in certain social contexts. But many of the services and types of interactions that make the Internet a uniquely powerful tool for information exchange continue to rely on anonymity and pseudonymity.

A mom may anonymously query search engines for sensitive health information, while a rural teen who is questioning his sexuality may correspond pseudonymously on public message boards with people who can offer support that his family cannot. Human rights activists may use cloud-based services to collaborate on documents of protest or use their phones, with anonymously-purchased SIM cards, to find the location of a protest.

That's why we're pleased to see Google working towards a future in which individuals can easily use powerful services while protecting their identities, and we hope that Google will maintain this commitment as it continues [3] its investment in the social web.

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- pseudonymous
- Google
- anonymous

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