

# REVISITING E-TOPIA: THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS ON ONLINE ANONYMITY

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### ABSTRACT:

As social hierarchies along identity markers of gender, race, age etc. are replicated within participatory spaces, the question arises as to how online participation and its modes of identity reconfiguration might affect this dilemma. This paper first revisits the discussions about cyberdemocracy in the 1990s, which focused on the liberating effects of anonymity facilitating an inclusive sphere of equals. It then moves on to the arguments of cyberfeminist debates, criticizing the naivety of cyberdemocracy by pointing to the persistence of offline inequalities in cyberspace. Current discussions pick up this criticism and focus on visual re-embodiment and the persistence of identity online. After giving an overview of these theoretical debates, the paper turns to empirical findings on the effects of online anonymity. Various studies from different disciplines show that anonymity has both democratic and anti-democratic effects. It both liberates the democratic subjects and at the same time contributes to new modes of domination. Thus, the theoretical accounts of optimistic cyberdemocrats and pessimistic cyberfeminists together contribute to a holistic understanding of online anonymity in participatory spaces.

Keywords: Anonymity, democratic subjectivity, online participation, digital democracy, cyberfeminism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Current studies in democratic theory and praxis observe the emergence of novel participatory spaces in response to the crises of representative democracy (Cornwall 2003; Gaventa 2006). On the one hand, democratic innovations, like participatory budgets, mini-publics, referendums, and open assemblies, are created by state actors and invite citizens for collaborative decision making (Smith 2009; Fung & Wright 2001). On the other hand, social movements, civic initiatives, and civil society organisations claim space through unconventional participatory means like flash mobs, occupations, demonstrations, and graffiti (della Porta & Rucht 2013; della Porta 2007). Both invited and claimed spaces develop new modes of deliberation and democratic decision making resulting in a vivid public sphere.

These participatory spaces are, however, situated in a context of structural inequalities as economic resources, education, and respect enabling participation are distributed unevenly along the lines of social categories like class, gender, sexuality, race, physical ability, age etc. Discussions about deliberative democracy have pointed out this problem decades ago. Most prominently among deliberative theorists, *difference democrats* like Iris Marion Young (1990, 2000), Jane Mansbridge (1991), and Carol Gould (1996) have articulated the problem of *internal exclusion*: Hierarchies within societies are reproduced in participatory spaces as arguments and ideas contributed by participants associated with marginalized groups are faced with lower levels of respect and appreciation (Young 2000). Inequalities cannot be left behind at the doorstep but rather are deeply inscribed in patterns of language and everyday performances of the self. To counter such inequalities, difference democrats propose to articulate difference and claim identity by engaging in a *politics of presence* through representation and visibility (Phillips 1995).

Discussions of difference democracy are, however, yet to acknowledge new participatory modes facilitated by digital communication. The internet does not present just another communicative tool, but it is rather in the process of permeating our everyday lives, resulting in novel configurations of democratic subjectivity. As our communicative practices are altered, so is the way we construct others and ourselves. The *Internet of Things* changes the nature of the world wide web from a network connected through wires to personal computer to a network of objects like smartphones, smartwatches, tablets, laptops, wireless headsets... and refrigerators, door locks, light bulbs, smart TVs etc. wirelessly connected through cloud computing. The Internet of Things does not only change our communicative behaviour, it also influences how we see ourselves as we construct our identities as digital performances in and through the internet. Social media generate new platforms of digital self-presentation and smart phone apps alter the perception of our physical bodies as they count steps, report body weight, and recommend exercise routines. The resulting reconstruction of democratic subjectivity through the digital evokes the powerful metaphor of the cyborg (Haraway 1991).

Donna Haraway's prescient topos of the cyborg points to the importance of revisiting cyberdemocratic thought developed from the late 1970s until today. These discussions were characterised by an early enthusiasm that imagined cyberspace as an alternative sphere of equals. What might be called "e-topia" was based on the obscuration of physically embodied identity markers of gender, race, age etc. tied to "real world" inequalities. Thus, everyday cyborgization and the construction of new selves online are facilitated by the negation of identity and its digital reconstruction. This paper investigates both the democratic and anti-democratic aspects of online anonymity and explores its potential for novel participatory spaces on the internet. Central to this investigation is the question: Can online anonymity contribute to internal inclusion? While anonymity appears in stark contradiction to difference democrats call to claim and promote corporeal identities, the following discussions will show some common ground. First, this paper will revisit the cyberdemocratic discourse on anonymity from the late 1970s and trace it until today. Early cyberdemocratic thought has often been characterized as naïve because of its visionary and often enthusiastic character. The second part of this paper, thus, summarizes the findings of empirical research on online anonymity. Both cyberdemocratic thought and empirical findings will then be discussed in the context of difference democrats' call for inclusion by claiming difference and performing diversity in participatory spaces.

## 2. THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF DEMOCRATIC SUBJECTIVITY IN AND THROUGH THE DIGITAL

*The radio is one-sided when it should be two-. It is purely an apparatus for distribution, for mere sharing out. So here is a positive suggestion: change this apparatus over from distribution to communication. The radio would be the finest possible communication apparatus in public life, a vast network of pipes. That is to say, it would be if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him.*

Bertolt Brecht, 1932

Technological progress has always inspired imaginations of democratic futures. Bertold Brecht's vision of a decentralized multi-user network of communication via radio frequencies developed in the early 1930s (quotation above) bears remarkable reminiscences with today's notion of the web 2.0. With the spread of television starting in the 1950s conceptions of *teledemocracy* emerged imagining telephone voting after political debates and later via teletext (Arterton 1987). Starting in the late 1970s discussions about *cyberdemocracy* – later reframed in the term *electronic democracy* and today mostly referred to as *digital democracy* – envisioned the internet as generating a new democratic public sphere (Vedel 2006). The theoretical work on the respective new technologies did not only result in new societal imaginations but also in reconfigurations of democratic subjectivity. Online anonymity is at the centre of the reconfigured democratic subject.

## 2.1 Postmodern discussions of cyberdemocracy: Anonymity and disembodiment in cyberspace

*The Network Nation* by Starr Roxanne Hiltz and Murray Turoff published in 1978 – eighteen years before Castells' *Network Society* – proves incredibly foresighted. Across more than 500 pages the book provides detailed empirical work on computer conferencing – comparable to current synchronous online chats. The book situates its analysis between optimism and pessimism, acknowledging the central question of who controls new communication technologies as previous struggles for property and civil rights are followed by the battle for information rights (ibid., p.16). Hiltz and Turoff's political and empirical analyses are in line with current debates – almost 40 years ahead of their time. In contrast to this currency, their descriptions of the use of computer networks oddly stands out: "Imagine that you are seated in front of a computer terminal, which is like an electronic typewriter, with either a long scroll of typed output ('hard copy') or a TV-like screen (a cathode-ray tube, or CRT) for display, or both. The terminal is connected to an ordinary telephone" (Hiltz & Turoff 1978, p.7). The unfamiliarity of the audience of the book with electronic technology prompted the authors to give detailed accounts of the surface of the computer, realizing the electronic tool as an object of interaction.

Hiltz and Turoff's *The Network Nation* extensively elaborates online anonymity and its contradictory effects:

General appearance, such as height, weight, and other culturally determined aspects of "attractiveness" and the clothes, makeup, jewelry, and other props used by persons to present themselves to others, provide an important filtering context for face-to-face communication. So do the visibly apparent cues that are provided by sex, age, and race and by visually apparent physical handicaps. In general, those aspects of self that are devalued by a culture – such as being black, female, old, "ugly", or disabled – have the effect of acting as a general stigma... [Through online anonymity, however,] it is the content of the communication that can be focused on, without any irrelevant status cues distorting the reception of the information, especially if anonymity makes even the sex of the contributor unknown. (Hiltz & Turoff 1978, p.78, 91)

According to Hiltz and Turoff, online anonymity has not only positive effects, however. On the one hand anonymity creates a safe space that enables participants to "feel more free to express disagreement or suggest potentially unpopular ideas" (ibid., p.27). On the other hand, however, both anonymity and the tedious textual medium lacking nonverbal cues of communication lead to anger and frustration resulting in the expression of aggression. Similarly, while on a positive note anonymity facilitates identity play: "A pen name is like a mask or a costume; it helps people to play a role in a conference" (ibid., p.95f), on a negative note, different, ephemeral pen names can be used for deliberate deception.

Anonymity's affordance of deception is also discussed in Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* (1993). Already in 1991 in the essay "The Great Equalizer" Rheingold described the internet as promoting a shift in power balance between citizens and governments as grass roots movements and civil society would use the new means of communication to feed their ideas into the political discourse. In *The Virtual Community* Rheingold also addresses negative political implications of the internet. The chapter "Disinformocracy" (p.276ff) extensively elaborates the dangers of commodification of the cyberdemocratic public sphere and government surveillance. The focus of the book, however, are Rheingold's personal experiences of the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), one of the oldest virtual communities with discussion forums on different topics. In discussion with strangers, new ties and friendships emerge. Anonymity is a core feature of this kind of textual interaction. "Mask and self-disclosures are part of the grammar of cyberspace, the way quick cuts and intense images are part of the grammar of television. The grammar of CMC media involves a syntax of identity play: new identities, false identities, multiple identities, exploratory identities, are available in different manifestations of the medium" (Rheingold 1993, p.147).

While Rheingold welcomes the fluidity of identity boundaries in digital communication, he conceptualises digital identity performances that diverge from analogous identity as deception. Biological men taking on women's personae online are perceived as imposters (ibid., p.164ff). To illustrate this, Rheingold tells a story that is cited again and again in many cyberdemocratic texts. An online character called Joan in some accounts (Poster 1997, p.222f; Rheingold 1993, p.164f; Turkle 1995, p.228f) and Julie Graham in others (Stone 1991, pp.82ff; Wajcman 2004, p.68) claiming to be a New York psychologist who had been paralyzed and muted in a car accident had won the trust of several women in online communities, sharing intimate details about themselves. As it later turned out that Joan/Julie really was Alex (Lewin in Wajcman 2004), a psychiatrist with curiosity for women's private lives, many users felt exploited and betrayed.

In *Life on the Screen* Sherry Turkle tells the same story. While she also frames the story of Joan/Alex as deception (Turkle 1995, p.228f), her approach is more differentiated. She observes how internet users "use the anonymity of cyberspace to project alternate personae" (Turkle 1995, p.209). These online personae are not perceived as fake but living a true aspect of the self, which is hidden in common public interaction. Thus "donning a mask, adopting a persona, is a step toward reaching a deeper truth about the real" (Turkle 1995, p.216). Through computer mediated communication the lines between analogous reality and digital reality blur. What is real is a matter of subjective perception. It is not defined by whether communication is technologically mediated or not. In an interview, a teenage girl complained about her friends disappearing behind computer screens: "Now they just want to talk online. It used to be that things weren't so artificial. We phoned each other every afternoon" (cited in Turkle 1995, p.237). While the interviewee perceives telephone conversations as real – as they are conveyed through an old, naturalised medium – online communication appears as fake and isolating. These shifts in the perception of reality do not indicate that the virtual is just as real as analogous reality. Rather online subjectivity is situated in a liminal space between the real and the artificial. "In the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and the virtual, unsure of our footing, inventing ourselves as we go along" (Turkle 1995, p.10).

*Life on the Screen* thoroughly investigates MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons/Domains) through qualitative interviews and ethnography. MUDs are online spaces for synchronous textual role play, where users collectively create an interactive story. In joint and one-on-one conversations, they construct online personae and objects, and navigate their way through textual sceneries. As in analogous role play or improvisational theatre, participants can investigate and experiment with sides of their personality which are usually hidden behind a coherent public persona. Some users even claim that their online identities feel more real than their analogous identities: "I feel very different online. I am a lot more outgoing, less inhibited. I would say I feel more like myself. But that's a contradiction. I feel more like who I wish I was. I'm just hoping that face-to-face I can find a way to spend some time being the online me" (MUD player cited in Turkle 1995, p.179). And another user explains: "I am not one thing, I am many things. Each part gets to be more fully expressed in MUDs than in the real world. So even though I play more than one self on MUDs, I feel more like 'myself' when I'm MUDding" (user cited in Turkle 1995, p.185). Turkle investigates online role play as therapeutic activity, in which hidden and underdeveloped qualities can be practiced and eventually carried over into analogous interaction (ibid., p.189ff).

In MUDs identities are multiple and ephemeral so that users do not have to commit to one identity performance. This also includes the common practice of gender change, as users define the sex of their characters as female, male or neuter. As Turkle tries performing male characters online she feels freer, more confident, and relieved of certain social pressures (ibid., p.210ff). Another female interviewee reports that by using male characters she felt that her firm and strict attitude was appreciated and not perceived as "bitchy" (ibid., p.221). A male user, on the other hand, reported feeling relieved of competitiveness and that he could engage in more cooperative interaction without being perceived as too soft or effeminate (ibid., p.216ff). Thus, either changing gender identity or interacting as neuter character can relieve from gender stereotypes (cf. Bruckman 1996).

Turkle's notion of the decentred, multiple self is deeply rooted in postmodern thought. The rhizomatic structure of the internet itself embodies the fragmentation of the online self. The parallel development of poststructuralism and the internet from the 1960s onwards appears as no coincidence. The increased popular use of online communication since the 1990s grounds poststructuralist ideas of identity construction and makes them more comprehensible for many (ibid., p.15ff). Turkle illustrates this by the curious digital object called a "window".

This kind of cycling through MUDs and RL [real life] is made possible by the existence of those boxed-off areas on the screen, commonly called windows. Windows provide a way for a computer to place you in several contexts at the same time... [W]indows have become a powerful metaphor for thinking about the self as multiple, distributed system... The life practice of windows is that of a decentred self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time. (Turkle 1995, p.13f)

Arguably the most elaborate attempt at developing a postmodern theory of new information and communication technologies is presented in the work of media theorist Mark Poster (1990, 1995, 2001). In *The Second Media Age* (1995) Poster moves from Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas to Foucault, Baudrillard and others, discussing controversies, differences and similarities between the German post-Marxist Frankfurt School and French poststructuralism. Putting these theories in relation to new media allows him to develop a critical theory for the information age. His main focus lies on novel subject constitutions through computer mediated language in the second media age which is, in contrast to modern media communication, characterised by decentralised horizontal interaction between equal senders and receivers. Following other poststructuralist thinkers, language is key in the formation of subjectivity. The reconfiguration of language through technology thus explains novel constitutions of identity and agency.

[T]he mode of information enacts a radical reconfiguration of language, one which constitutes subjects outside the pattern of the rational, autonomous individual. This familiar modern subject is displaced by the mode of information in favour of one that is multiplied, disseminated and decentered, continuously interpellated as an unstable identity. At the level of culture, this instability poses both dangers and challenges which, if they become part of a political movement, or are connected with the politics of feminism, ethnic/racial minorities, gay and lesbian positions, may lead to a fundamental challenge to modern social institutions and structures. (Poster 1995, p.57)

The modern subject of the Enlightenment period is constructed as autonomous, individual thinker with a critical distance to the object of communication: the written word on paper. As producer of communication this subject has sole control of its well reflected expressions as it ponders in isolation and reifies its utterances on (more or less) permanent materiality. The subject as reader, on the other hand, is powerless regarding the content of the communication. Upon receiving the written word – again in isolation – it critically interprets the content, striving for correct interpretation in accordance with the original meaning of the author. Thus, senders and receivers of communication are stable entities positioned in time and space through words which function as clear representation of intelligible reality. Senders call upon readers as subjects through their sole authority – thus author – via the word. This configuration drastically changes through digital communication: while the spatial distance between senders and receivers remains consistent – the temporary difference is eliminated. The representational character of the word changes to performativity continuously resituating both senders and receivers in a mutual process of interpellation and self-construction. Thus, "the subject can only be understood as partially stable, as repeatedly reconfiguring at different points of time and space, as non-self-identical and therefore as always partly Other" (Poster 1995, p.59).

Now the question arises what these new subject configurations mean for democracy. Again, Poster elaborates both negative and positive implications. To illustrate the dangers of online communication like Turkle he employs Foucault's (1979) Panopticon as metaphor for surveillance. He further expands this concept by explaining it

not as a mere tool – as an object – for control but as a subject co-constructing democratic subjectivity. Through the surveillance of online behaviour, visits of webpages, and buying habits a profile of the subject is constructed which is reflected back to the subject through computerised algorithms by targeted advertising, order of web search results etc. The subject is thus called upon in certain ways serving mostly economic purposes. While interpellation in modernity identified the senders as actors of co-construction, in digital communication the sender remains anonymous as naturalised voice from nowhere (Poster 1995, pp.68f, 78ff).

While Poster's assessment of the power of interpellation through hegemonic forces is bleak, he nevertheless sees great democratic potentials in digital subject constitution. Like Starr and Turoff (1978) and Turkle (1995), Poster explains anonymity as contributing to equality among participants in online discussions (ibid., p.35, 71). This position is expanded in Poster's essay "Cyberdemocracy: The Internet and the Public Sphere" (1997). "On the Internet individuals construct their identities, doing so in relation to ongoing dialogue, not as an act of pure consciousness... [This] does connote a 'democratization' of subject constitution because the acts of course are not limited to one-way address and not constrained by the gender and ethnic traces inscribed in face-to-face communications" (Poster 1997, p.222). These new possibilities of identity constitution can be illustrated with the example of online gender representations. On the one hand, analogous hierarchies are reconstructed online through harassment and insult, on the other, new possibilities of gender experimentation, swapping, mixing and neutralising, emerge. The mere fact that gender has to be actively chosen and can be completely rejected by opting for neuter characters, provides space for resistance to analogous gender binaries and hierarchies. The novel configuration of a democratic public sphere emerging online shows some similarities to the Habermasian ideal, although the rhizomatic character of digital communication structures are much more reminiscent of Fraser's (1990) counterpublics: "Internet communities function as places of difference from and resistance to modern society. In a sense they serve the function of a Habermasian public sphere, however reconfigured, without intentionally or even actually being one. They are places not of the presence of validity-claims or the actuality of critical reason, but of the inscription of new assemblages of self-constitution" (Poster 1997, p.224).

The postmodern discussions of democratic subjectivity in digital communication by Rheingold, Turkle, Landow, Poster and many others (eg. Holmes 1997; Saco 2002; Strate et al. 1996) could be characterised as classical or the golden age of cyberdemocracy. Their work has unfairly been criticised as naïve, as their consideration of negative effects and dystopian dimensions of cyberdemocracy shows. Another criticism stating that classical cyberdemocrats underplay the role of the body in digital communication appears more convincing. Postmodern accounts tend to imagine the subject as a bodiless being in a realm cut off from "real reality". Turkle claims that by employing digital communications "[w]e are able to step through the looking glass" (Turkle 1995, p.9). Employing the metaphor of Wonderland characterises virtual reality as unreal, as a dream from which one can wake up, a separate space one can enter and exit. Elaborating her thesis of the multiple self Turkle cites an interviewee: "Why grant such superior status to the self that has the body when the selves that don't have bodies are able to have different kinds of experiences?" (MUD player cited in Turkle 1995, p.14) thus contributing to a construction of the body as separate from the mind. And Poster speaks of "cyborgs in cyberspace" (Poster 1997 p.223), which positions the emancipatory potential of digital communication in public spheres in cyberspace as separate from the analogous world.

## 2.2 Reconstructing diversity: Of gendered and racialized bodies in cyberspace

From the second half of the 1990s to the early 2000s cyberdemocratic thought was deepened and critically expanded. The critical response to the postmodern disembodied self draws attention to racialized and gendered bodies online. What is interesting about these discussions is that while on the one hand they promote diversity online by creating spaces to perform marginalized identities, very much in line with difference democrats' ideals, on the other hand they support anonymity as identity negation with its liberating effects. The two do not appear as contradictory, but rather as complementary elements of an emancipatory political strategy.

While much of the classical cyberdemocratic work discussed above addresses the category of gender as an example of the fluidity of online identities, Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura shift the focus to Race in *Cyberspace* (2000). In the textual online communication of the 1990s race had become truly invisible, much more so than gender. While on MUDs gender is a required category in a user's character description, race is absent. Moreover, many users in anonymous online spaces ask their interlocutors to identify their "asl": age, sex, and location. The requested basic information excludes race, which might be perceived as an inappropriate or otherwise uncomfortable question to ask. Any expression of race is often perceived as aggressive, controversial, and attention seeking (Kolko 2000, p.213ff), resulting in *default whiteness* (Nakamura 2002, p.46ff). Users whose analogous identities are not white are put under pressure to try to "pass" as white and thus to negate their racial identity. The ideal of equality and inclusion through disembodiment appears to have homogenising and conformist effects. While whites express themselves freely, people of other races are censored in their expression (ibid., p.35). A majority of users also appears not to want to talk about race or racism. It appears as if the internet provided users with the opportunity to finally forget about a topic connoted as problematic, controversial, and divisive. As digital communication technologies are developed, designed and programmed by white, middle class men, this appears as not coincidental (Kolko 2000, p.218ff). Identity negation through online anonymity is not simply an organic practice in accordance with the "nature" of the internet, but it is rather a design choice.

To counter this problem, Kolko, Nakamura and others claim online presence of racial diversity, spaces for expressing difference, and embodying race. The figure of the decentred, fluid and ephemeral self in postmodern discussions is opposed by a need for stability and clear representation in order to build resilient communities (Kolko & Reid 1998). Unlike whites, who wish to explore their multiplicity, many people of other races already experience their identities as unpleasantly fragmented and disoriented and are thus searching for consistent identification and belonging (Nakamura 2002, p.XVI).

While Nakamura and Kolko thoroughly criticise postmodern cyberdemocratic discussions of disembodied, post-racialized selves, they also partly affirm the core ideals of cyberdemocracy. Nakamura claims: “A diversification of the roles that are permitted and played can enable a thought-provoking detachment of race from the body and questioning of the essentialness of race as a category” (Nakamura 2002, p.49). What Nakamura and Kolko criticise are not so much the cyberdemocratic ideals of disembodiment and identity play but rather the actual practice of online communication. What has been termed “identity tourism” – the changing of online identities – does not serve the ideal of experiencing otherness, for example by experiencing discrimination, but rather as reproducing racial stereotypes:

Chat-space participants who take on identities as samurai and geisha constitute the darker side of postmodern identity, since the “fluid selves” they create (and often so lauded by postmodern theorists) are done so in the most regressive and stereotyped of ways. These kinds of racial identity play stand as critique of the notion of the digital citizen as an ideal cogito whose subjectivity is liberated by cyberspace. On the contrary, only too often does one person’s “liberation” constitute another’s recontainment within the realm of racialized discourse. (Nakamura 2002, p.XV)

Users constructing alternative racial identities rely on their limited knowledge and stereotyped conception of other cultures and moreover need to conform to the simplistic modes of online expression. Racial hierarchies are intertwined with gender hierarchies when white men perform heroic samurai while white women perform sexualised docile geishas. Identity tourism as racial identity play does not represent a shift in situatedness as experience of oppression but rather as recreational endeavour experiencing the exotic as oriental Other. The resulting racial stereotyped online personae deter participation of racial minorities and their expression of authentic racial identity (Nakamura 2002; cf. González 2000).

This criticism of online identity play, even though framed as critique of postmodern cyberdemocratic thought, addresses the practices of online interaction, not the theoretical ideal. The ideal itself is rather affirmed as the critique of stereotyping implies a wish of breaking out of confining racial identity constructions. The ideal of fluid identities and exploring different aspects of the self through identity play facilitated by anonymity is compatible with the criticism of the practice of racial stereotyping on the internet, since “performing alternative versions of the self and race jams the ideology-machine” (Nakamura 2002, p.49). Thus, overall the discussion about race in digital communication supports both ideals of online visibility of embodied racial identities and identity play facilitated by anonymity beyond stereotyping identity tourism.

These two tendencies can also be witnessed in feminist discussions regarding online communication. *Cyberfeminism*, like discussions of online race, contributed to cyberdemocratic thought by partially upholding and partially criticising the postmodern ideals. Both affirming the ideal of anonymous and fluid identity creation and claiming difference are prevalent in cyberfeminist thought. Their main contributions can be seen not only in drawing attention to women in relation to new technologies and gender identity formation through them, but also in drawing attention to the materiality of both the physical and online bodies. This is achieved through the explicit recourse to Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” (1991).

Cyberfeminism as movement extends beyond academia and fuses discussions from three sources: feminist Science and Technology Studies (STS), digital artistic spaces like the Old Boys Network ([www.obn.org](http://www.obn.org)) and SubRosa ([cyberfeminism.net](http://cyberfeminism.net)), and digital spaces for women’s empowerment like self-help groups around various topics and peer-to-peer groups conveying technological knowledge and skills. The term cyberfeminism was simultaneously coined by the British cultural theorist Sadie Plant and the Australian art collective VNS Matrix (Volkart 2004, p.97). In their *Cyberfeminist Manifesto* VNS Matrix (1991) writes:

we are the virus of the new world disorder  
rupturing the symbolic from within  
saboteurs of big daddy mainframe  
the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix  
VNS MATRIX

In these few lines, many characteristics of cyberfeminism can be identified. The artistic style is used in a postmodern move to create something new and break up modern logic. The aggressiveness expresses anger and destruction which gives way to the creation of novel configurations of female/feminist subjectivity. This subjectivity is in a somewhat essentializing manner connoted with femininity and the female body.

These notions are also reflected in the academic cyberfeminist debate. Authors like Sadie Plant (1997) draw attention to women’s contributions to the development of technologies, as these innovations were only possible through the productive and reproductive work of women. Digital communication technologies break up the binary gender logics as participants reinvent themselves online. Both Danet (1998) and Sick (2004), explain online avatars as a masquerade resulting in the performance of new gender hybridities and post-gender identities. Blair (1998) describes anonymity’s effect of levelling power relations between men and women. And Volkart (2004) describes the cyberfeminist subject as unruly cyborg, revolting against male domination. This shift in the cyberdemocratic discourse addressing racial and gendered embodiment has a decisive influence on current discussions of digital democratic subjectivity.

### 2.3 Diversity, anonymity, and inclusion through the digital: Current discussion

In contrast to earlier cyberdemocrats, today's discussions incorporate new technological developments like the Internet of Things and broadband connections. The latter are identified as the prime reason for the emergence of new digital corporealities (Daniels 2009; Gies 2008). While writers like Turkle and Rheingold investigated text-only digital spaces, broadband connections enable uploading and sharing images, videos, and voice recordings. The formerly textual body becomes visible and audible. Thus, current online communication is far from being characterized by disembodiment. Rather the most prominent topics discussed and visualized online revolve around the body: sexuality, pornography, and online dating being one set of topics, health, disease and peer support another, and fitness, fashion, and nutrition a third. Even primarily not somatic purposes for online communication, like the connection and everyday communication with friends, family, and colleagues through social networks attain a focus on embodiment through the increasing prioritization of visuals via platforms like Instagram and Snapchat.

This focus of online embodiment is illustrated by several examples. On pro-anorexia websites, mostly young girls suffering from anorexia exchange diet and self-starving tips and share pictures of skinny female bodies as "thinspiration" (Daniels 2009, p.112ff; Gies 2008, p.321). Other websites serve communities of obese men to positively affirm their body image and reinterpret mainstream conceptualizations of fatness (Monaghan 2005). And websites of transgender communities give advice on physical body transformations, hormone therapy etc. In relation to pro-anorexia and trans groups Daniels (2009) argues: "Instead of seeing cyberspace as a place in which to experience the absence of the body... these girls and self-identified women use digital technologies in ways that simultaneously bring the body 'online' (through digital photos uploaded to the web) and take the digital 'offline' (through information gleaned online to transform their embodied selves)" (p.117). Anorexic girls and trans people strive to transform their *physical* bodies *through* the digital, and fat men attain a positive image of their physical body in the analogous world.

The re-embodiment in online communication brought about by new technologies like broadband and cloud computing does not mean, however, that anonymity and the discussions of early cyberdemocrats are obsolete. In an extensive study Tom Boellstorff (2008) investigates identity performance through visual avatars in *Coming of Age in Second Life*. The observations in this book are remarkably reminiscent of those in Turkle's (1995) *Life on the Screen* published 23 years earlier. Although the medium of online role-play had changed profoundly and followed the trend from text-only to a combination of text-based communication through visually embodied avatars, the observations are consistent overall. Participants create multiple, alternative avatars of various sexes, races, and species. While the first and original avatar is mostly seen as primary, other avatars, or "alts", are perceived as alternative and often described by users as masks or costumes thus hinting at the perceived reality of the primary avatar. In interviews and focus groups users state that in *Second Life* they can experiment with aspects of their selves not usually experienced offline. These performances are often perceived as revealing true aspects of the self. Primary avatars are often described as closer to their real self. Digital bodies are thus perceived as more real than analogous ones. A drastic example tells of gender transition. In *Second Life*, the digital avatar Pavia stated: "I'm a man in real life, but about three weeks ago I learned that I'm transsexual... Here in *Second Life* I created something new in myself that I never realized was there before. At first it was just role playing, but then I grew to love Pavia. I kept infusing myself into her, but then something unexpected started to happen: Pavia started coming out in the real world. I became her, she became me" (*Second Life* player cited in Boellstorff 2008, p.138). Thus, the digital identity performance can be more real than the analogous one (cf. Gies 2008, p.314, 317).

## 3 REIFYING DIGITAL ANONYMITY: A REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The discourse on cyberdemocracy and digital democratic subjectivities through anonymity has pointed to several democratic and several anti-democratic aspects of anonymity, revealing its contradictory character. Anonymity appears on the one hand as facilitating inclusion, diversity, subversion, and truth, while affording exclusion, conformity, and deception on the other. Both negative and positive effects have been put to the test in many empirical studies from various academic disciplines using diverse research methods. In the following section these democratic and antidemocratic effects will be summarized and discussed. Since anonymity is highly context dependent, the central question regarding these findings is: which context – or in other words, which participatory design – generates which outcomes? As this study is still in progress a definite answer cannot be given, however, first observations give some indications.

### 3.1 The democratic effects of anonymity in participatory spaces on the internet

The most central theme in cyberdemocratic discussions consists in inclusion and equality facilitated by the concealment of identity markers, which constitute hierarchies in face-to-face communication. This generates a space where participants can utter their opinions freely, without fear that their statements can be tracked back to their analogous public persona, which results in more open and honest discussions. This in turn facilitates a greater plurality of alternative opinions and modes of subversion challenging hegemonic discourses. Here empirical findings for these claims will be summarized before looking at the counter-claims.

Various qualitative studies attest to a feeling of liberation and empowerment experienced by participants interacting anonymously. Chester and Gwynne (1998) conduct a university class online and observe student interaction. In an exercise of self-reflexion students of the Asian minority, making up 20% of the class, report that they feel freer to participate. Moreover, identity play, changing ethnic markers by choice of alias and accent, is observed. Bowker and Tuffin (2003) confirm these results through interviews with physically impaired internet users who experience more equal opportunities for participation communicating anonymously. Johnson (2010) analyses interaction of students in an anonymous asynchronous online forum of a university. Focus groups and qualitative interviews show that users of the forum feel empowered to utter grievances that they would cover up in face-to-face communication.

These qualitative findings are confirmed by quantitative studies. In a survey experiment Joinson (1999) finds significantly higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of social anxiety under the condition of anonymity compared to face-to-face interaction. In an experiment comparing anonymous online discussions with face-to-face discussions, Jong et al. (2013) find that under the condition of anonymity the word count of participants' contributions is distributed significantly more evenly among participants. Dubrovsky et al. (1991) find that while higher status participants (graduate students) dominate by length of word count and by initiating more new ideas over lower status participants (freshmen) in face-to-face discussions, this inequality is mitigated in anonymous synchronous online conversations. In an experiment comparing anonymous discussion groups with groups whose participants are identified with clear names, Clark et al. (2015) find significantly higher levels of participation and expression of opinion under the condition of anonymity. These effects are stronger for female participants. In qualitative follow up interviews female participants state that they feel freer and less judged by others. Higher levels of participation are also found in Ruesch and Märker's (2012) analysis of discussions in the participatory budgets in Gütersloh, Germany. In contrast to the anonymous participation process of 2011, participation decreased in the new participatory budget discussion that required identification in the following year from 1.7 to 0.4% of the population. A wealth of other experimental studies confirms higher levels of participation under anonymity (Fredheim & Moore 2015a and b; Haines et al. 2012; Hiltz et al. 1989; Jessup et al. 1990; Leshed 2009; Rhee & Kim 2009; Wilson & Jessup 1995). Moreover, Yu and Liu (2013) find that 78% of students in an online learning environment prefer anonymity, opposed to 13% favouring clear names.

These liberating aspects of anonymity contribute to disinhibition which lets participants reveal their true sentiments and alternative ideas. In a survey experiment participants reported lower levels of social desirability, thus acting more autonomously and expressing more of their true opinions when they filled in the questionnaire anonymously compared to when they had to state their full name (Joinson 1999). In another experiment comparing online discussions under pseudonyms with face-to-face discussions, Joinson (2001) finds that under anonymity participants shared significantly more personal information about themselves. These findings are confirmed and extended in another experiment by Bargh et al. (2002) differentiating between the "actual self" – the publicly performed persona – and the "true self" consisting of the qualities and aspects participants feel they have but cannot reveal in public. In a reaction time task participants reacted faster to and associated more of their "true self" qualities with themselves after an online anonymous discussion, compared to those completing the task after a face-to-face discussion. A follow-up experiment showed that even their interlocutors associated more of their "true self" qualities with them after anonymous online discussions. This inhibition and self-disclosure effect applies not only in artificial experimental settings. In a content analysis of 154 personal journal blogs Hollenbaugh and Everett (2013) found that bloggers without clear names (pseudonyms or no names) shared more personal information than identified bloggers.

Honesty leads to revealing a greater variety of alternative opinions and identities and contesting hegemonic discourse. In three different experiments with Group Decision Support Systems (GDSS) comparing anonymous discussion groups with those identified with clear names, Jessup et al. (1990), Wilson and Jessup (1995), and Reinig and Mejias (2004) found that anonymous participants generated more original ideas and contributed more critical and probing comments. Compared to these artificial experiments, a survey of Wikipedia editors comparing those contributing under pseudonyms or entirely anonymously with those writing under clear names found that non-identified editors stated more alternative opinions (Tsikerdikis 2013). Similarly, a field experiment comparing the Huffington Post's online forum before and after a clear name requirement was introduced found that when anonymity (pseudonyms) was allowed, users articulated more disagreement. Moreover, discussions shifted from political to non-political topics like sports and fashion (Fredheim & Moore 2015a, 2015b).

Disinhibition does not only reveal alternative ideas but also lets participants perform alternative identities, engage in identity play, and contest hegemonic identity constructions. In a qualitative analysis of an online sexual diversity forum Atkinson and DePalma (2008) observe how participants contest heteronormative identities by constructing queer online personae outside common stereotypes. In their observations of student's online interaction on an online learning platform Chester and Gwynne (1998) report high playfulness and observe the creation of online personae through various self-defined pseudonyms combined with different accents.

### 3.2 The anti-democratic effects of anonymity in participatory spaces on the internet

These positive effects of anonymity contributing to inclusion in participatory spaces are counteracted, however, by negative effects. Disinhibition and liberation of some participants might not only work to include but also to exclude and discriminate others and constitute hierarchies. Comment sections of online newspapers often exhibit a high level of incivility. Insults generally work to exclude their addressees and constitute structural hierarchies when they are addressed to marginalized social groups. The study by Fredheim and Moore (2015a, 2015b) cited above shows that anonymity in news comment sections contributes not only to contestation of hegemonic discourse but also to incivility among participants. The analysis of 42 million comments shows a significant decrease in personal insults after the introduction of a clear name policy. Similarly, a comparison of 900 comments from online newspaper discussion forums that allow anonymity with those with a clear name regulation exhibits 53% uncivil comments under anonymity compared to 29% under clear names (Santana 2014). In qualitative interviews users of a university online forum state that they fear insult by other anonymous users (Johnson 2010). One can assume that this fear is greater among marginalized social groups. In her study of Usenet newsgroups Papacharissi (2004) cautions, however, to interpret any uncivil utterance as discriminatory. Derogatory expressions may well be a part of subversion as they might convey political arguments challenging hegemonic discourses in an uncivil manner.

Exclusion is more problematic where it takes the form of stereotyping others, effectively reconstituting and possibly amplifying offline hierarchies. In the study of the sexual diversity forum mentioned above, not only the contestation of hegemonic identity construction and identity play was observed, but also that participants reproduced offline hierarchies by calling upon each other in stereotypic ways and thus confining each other to common sexual identities (Atkinson & DePalma 2008).

In an experiment actively evoking national identity by putting British participants in online contact with supposed German participants and framing these discussions as international dialogue, participants stereotyped their interlocutors more if they were visually anonymous in comparison to when they could see their interlocutors in a silent live video (while typing) (Lea & Spears 2001). In a comparable experiment, Postmes and Spears (2002) find that men tend to dominate discussions only under the interplay of anonymity, a priming treatment evoking gender stereotypes, and when the discussion topic is connoted with masculinity (in this case the introduction of a car free zone). Apart from stereotyping, other mechanisms of domination come into play in anonymous online communication. A study on the anonymous image and discussion board 4chan shows that even though 90% of users opt for complete anonymity while 10% use pseudonyms, a highly exclusive inside lingo is used to signify status in the hierarchy of this online subculture (Bernstein et al. 2011).

Lastly, several studies on the Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effect (SIDE) show that contrary to the previous discussions on the performance of alternative identities and the diversification of discourses, anonymity also contributes to conformity. The studies by Postmes and Spears (2002) and Lea and Spears (2001) show that stereotyping does not only affect others but also oneself. Both national identity and gender identity contribute to group attraction and a feeling of belonging which results in conformist behaviour. In another experiment Postmes et al. (2001) show that participants in anonymous online chats primed for certain behaviour conform to the priming to a greater extent than participants identified with pictures. In a follow-up experiment, non-primed participants followed the lead of primed participants only under the condition of anonymity.

#### 4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The empirical review above shows that both hopes and concerns of early cyberdemocrats and current digital democrats prove to be well founded. Anonymity thus proves highly ambiguous as it exhibits both democratic and anti-democratic effects in new participatory spaces on the internet. Online anonymity promotes inclusion, equality, honesty, diversity, and contestation on the one hand and exclusion, hierarchies, and submission on the other. The only aspect of anonymity hardly mentioned in empirical studies is deception.

Counter-intuitively, anonymity, consisting of negating identity, can thus contribute to difference democratic ideals of internal inclusion. While difference democrats promote inclusion by means of representation and presence of identity tied to the physical body and the public coherent persona, digital democrats show possible ways of performing multiple and contingent identities and various aspects of the self through anonymity. This is not to say that online anonymity is the solution to structural inequalities inscribed in capitalist societies. It is rather an argument for multiple places both online and offline for identity performance through the physical body and through digital bodies as a step towards a more plural and more inclusive society.

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