

with again” and consequently are “more rough” with anonymous contributors (P7). This narrative suggests that those who can’t be identified are treated as second-class citizens of the community—taken less seriously at the outset and unable to move through the steps people typically go through as they become more central members of the community.

On some of the projects we spoke with, contributors who do not register cannot engage with other members using project-supported communication channels or get credit for their work. Some interview participants reported a preference for allowing only registered volunteers to get involved because of a perception by project leaders that “people will be better if they are logged in” (P3). Another described the value of registering (even with a pseudonym) to establish consistent identity:

I think the value of registration, generally, is to establish consistent identity. Whether that identity is pseudonymous or not, or anonymous or not... It just helps to establish identity when you are communicating with someone on a regular basis. (P6)

In general, although allowing anonymous contributions appeared to lower barriers, anonymous participation was often perceived to have negative effects on efforts to serve more established contributors and help people become part of a project community. For example, interview participants at multiple sites reported that supporting a better contributor experience and engagement for regular contributors equated with less privacy. Logging in with a persistent identity was seen as necessary for tailored feedback to improve quality of contribution, engagement, and efficiency:

I might see that you’re getting bored and decide to send you something more interesting to work on... we’re just assuming that if you’re not logged in, you’re getting random work. And none of the optimization happens to you. (P3)

Data about contributors can also be used to assess the quality of contributions. Interview participants suggested that having access to contributors’ histories is useful for understanding their commitment to the project both to reward them and to customize tasks based on their “abilities and their talents”:

At the moment, there are a couple of projects that will give feedback to the [contributors] dependent on their type of contributions, and we’re hoping to be able to provide, in the future, interventions for the individuals. So for example... things like badges for particular contributions. Obviously, if you weren’t logged in, you wouldn’t be able to build a profile of the contributions that an individual is making and be able to reward them. Also, if you were looking to do something more interesting in a project, such as passing tasks to an individual based on their abilities

and their talents. And you wouldn’t be able to do that if they weren’t logged in. (P2)

Low Quality Contribution Threats. Because the sites we studied exist to support collaborative production, low quality contributions are a threat to their success. People sometimes make low quality contributions such as buggy code or inaccurate data (which are rooted out by community and project leader oversight), but interview participants generally did not attribute these contributions to anonymous contributors. Rather, as one participant put it: “I can’t imagine people deliberately not logging in to be able to give contributions that are of poorer quality. That’s not really something that’s come up” (P2). An interview participant from a different field site said that low quality contributions were often by “people who either don’t know the rules, and then eventually follow them or choose to ignore them, but don’t care enough and keep coming back” (P7) regardless of identity status. Another participant reported that they don’t trust people who contribute to projects anonymously and suspect other people don’t either. They explained that some people:

explicitly don’t create an online identity within the community... I think that a lot of people distrust them. I certainly can say I distrust them. That’s not to say that I assume that every single person who does that is doing it with bad intentions. I assume that many of them have perfectly good reasons to do that. But, they’re an unknown quantity... trust is developed over time and through a history of interactions. Demonstrations of good intentions and proficiency and expertise and buy-in. By not having a persistent identity, there’s no way to establish that. (P9)

Findings: Implications for Contributor Data and Privacy Enhancing Technologies

The types of threats described above have implications for how service providers approach the question of collecting and storing contributor data and their perceptions of privacy enhancing technologies that allow contributors to achieve different degrees of anonymity. During interviews, we prompted participants to reflect on the kinds of contributor data they collect and store, and on anonymous contributions involving the use of Tor in particular, to elicit their thoughts on different types of anonymous participation.

Because service providers largely reported the value of anonymity as lowering barriers to contributing (rather than safeguarding identity) they tended not to equate anonymous participation with privacy enhancing tools like anonymous proxies. When prompted, one interview participant explained that “[i]f we can’t connect a thing that was added to an identity, then we have very little way to identify the likely motivation behind the contribution, which ends up being a really useful shorthand for vetting the quality of the

contribution” (P9). An interview participant with experience in developing privacy technologies summed up a critical problem for sites in general that want to allow contributions from anonymous proxies: “the biggest challenge that any corporation faces with privacy tools is that they’re not able to tell the difference between malicious [and non-malicious activity] this is what they’re trying to solve, that they’re not able to identify malicious activity versus real user interaction” (P11). Despite the fact that anonymous contributors were not described as common sources of low quality contributions, they were viewed by one site as a potential threat because service providers often relied on IP data as a tool to help identify and eliminate sources of bad contributions. In one case, an interview participant explained that:

We don’t have a lot of high profile abuse coming in over Tor. We don’t have any high profile abuse effectively at any time, from any user. So we don’t have to make a lot of hard decisions. I guess it’s easy for us to say we love our anonymous and Tor [contributors], but I’m pretty sure we would fight pretty hard for people’s ability to access using any system if it came to it. (P5)

Despite the apparent conflict with some of their pragmatic concerns, interview participants unanimously spoke of a commitment to privacy and touted the value of privacy enhancing technologies. Some participants expressed the belief that contributing to their projects was not something that would occasion the need for anonymity. As one participant put it, “we’ve always thought of anonymous users as the crowd of people who haven’t bothered to log in as opposed to a group of people who have chosen for whatever reason to be more anonymous on the internet and then thus using Tor or whatever” (P3). This perception of the contributor as not getting around to logging in fits neatly within the policy of not requiring users to log in to make it “as simple as possible” (P2) to contribute. It underscores service providers’ own concerns, and their difficulty imagining a broader range of experiences that might prompt their contributors to seek out anonymity. The idea that anonymity might be required elsewhere “on the internet” but not on their sites is mirrored in another interview participant’s belief that their site is “maybe different from other services” and that contributors are “probably not trying to hide their identity from us, they are just trying to hide their identity from other people on the internet” (P5). However, this same participant explained that their site had been approached by a government request for contributor records—one they successfully fought. This experience did not elicit reflection on reasons that people might wish to remain anonymous on their site.

The sites we spoke with had different policies for IP collection and storage. At least one site made the decision to hash IPs to protect user data from public exposure and government

surveillance. An interview participant from a site that doesn’t hash IPs acknowledged that it had caused some controversy, but also felt that IP hashing would prevent them from effectively addressing abuse. Another participant opined that “I think sort of our internal approach, was if we are not comfortable publishing this data in some form, then we should be very reluctant to collect it in the first place” (P7).

Several interview participants also said storing IPs is ineffective for addressing persistent abuse and limits contribution tracking. When someone is abusive toward other contributors, service providers may ban the offending IP address, but sometimes find that committed offenders find a way to return. Multiple sites acknowledged that anonymous contributions make it difficult to track contributor behavior or keep accurate contributor counts if they use a different IP for each session.

A Contradiction of Perspectives

We found that one of the biggest threats service providers perceive is when contributors make remarks that target the identity of another individual. These threats can trigger changes to policy at two levels. First, they may change what information the community decides to share (e.g., IP addresses) as a consequence of these threats. Second, service providers may decide to require or collect contributor data like IP address or real names to deal with harassment, although concealing their identity is precisely how contributors often avoid or respond to harassment by others.

The contradiction implicit in service providers requiring identifying data to address harassment and contributors concealing these same data to avoid harassment is an important tension identified in our analysis. Prior research has demonstrated that contributors to open collaboration projects who face risks include people whose identities create vulnerabilities; for instance, being female, being from an ethnic minority, or being transgender [11]. Other research has also identified cases in which open collaboration projects may exclude contributors who require privacy because it conflicts with norms of transparency. For example, in their study of a citizen science project, Bowser et al. found that the norm of “openness” is defined by those who feel that people who are “extremely privacy-conscious” simply cannot contribute and prompts the authors to label the community as a “self-selecting” group. [4].

5 STUDY 2: DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Our initial study raised questions about the role that perceived contributor identity plays in shaping policy. To test and provide context for our interpretations of interview data and further explore (mis)alignment between contributor and service provider perspectives, we collected and analyzed mailing list discussions related to anonymous contributions

Table 2: Counts of threads and messages that included contributor or organizational perspectives

Total Number of Threads	35
threads w. contributor perspective	6 (17.1%)
Total Number of Messages	605
messages w. contributor perspective	35 (5.8%)
messages w. organization perspective	541 (89.4%)
messages w. neither perspective	29 (4.8%)

to English language Wikipedia. Critical discourse analysis is useful for looking at language relative to social, political, and cultural formations [34]. We consider how language used to construct the contributor-identity mediates relations of power and privilege in policy decisions.

Our prior analysis of interviews sensitized us to the divergent perspectives of service providers and their contributors. “Perspective-taking” became a sensitizing concept [3] that informed our analysis of posts in that we considered cases where organization or contributor perspectives informed discussions about anonymous contributions. These two categories of perspective taking constitute a concise codebook:

- *contributor perspective-taking*: consideration for the motives, knowledge, and needs of the contributor. E.g., if a message considers that a contributor might want to remain anonymous to avoid harassment.
- *organization perspective-taking*: consideration for the motives, knowledge, and needs of the organization. E.g., if a message talks about the threat of vandalism.

As the first author examined policy-related discourse and decisions to identify rhetorical strategies and outcomes, the codebook was used to determine the prevalence and rhetorical roles for each type of perspective-taking.

Findings

Our analysis of the mailing list threads supports our findings that service provider perspective-taking tends to support policies that overlook the identity-related vulnerabilities that contributors report [11]. Most debates about anonymous participation invoked the organization perspective (See Table 2), often centered on lowering barriers to participation and ensuring that contributors have a clear path from peripheral to core participation. The invocation of “vandal” to describe problematic anonymous contributors frequently swayed policy discussions whereas the conceptualization of anonymous contributors as vulnerable individuals coping with identity-related threats was rarely evoked and garnered little sympathy when it was.

When the perspective of contributors was taken into consideration, it was mainly to discuss anonymity as a privacy

strategy, with many comments pointing out that it is safer to login than to publicly expose one’s IP address. There was little discussion of threats that might prompt privacy seeking and when it was discussed, those who invoked the organizational perspective often did not feel that the benefit of providing more stringent protections for contributors who felt vulnerable outweighed the costs associated with such measures.

In the next sections, we describe these perspectives in more depth by analyzing discourse about specific policies. In doing so, we look at the ways in which contributor-identity is conceptualized to support certain groups over others. We adopt the Wikipedian nomenclature of referring to contributors who edit while not logged into an account as “anons.”

Banning Anonymous Edits. A proposal to ban anonymous edits resulted in articulations of why anons are valuable. When doubts were raised that anonymous contributions should be allowed at all, others responded that anons are valuable because they may eventually create accounts while “vandals” wouldn’t—an allusion to a popular stance that IP/anonymous edits make vandals easier to spot. Other arguments elaborate on how low barriers to participation make it easy for “newbies” to contribute by making anonymous edits before deciding to register.

Appreciation of anons has clear limits. They are valued insofar as they eventually legitimize themselves by creating a persistent identity that differentiates them from vandals. Additionally, some posters expressed views that anons should not have the same status as registered contributors and that anonymity cannot support the kind of trust necessary to build a reliable encyclopedia. The conceptualization of anons as having potential but not legitimate membership echoes service provider interview descriptions of anonymous contributors as second-class citizens.

New Article Creation. There were several instances of Wikipedians discussing whether to bar anons from specific tasks like creating articles and whether to hide “red links” (an affordance for new article creation) from them to limit vandalism and shift their focus to editing existing articles. While hiding red links is framed as a soft method of discouraging page creation, the argument was raised that it appears to go against wiki values and that Wikipedia’s success owes a lot to contributions from anons. Others point out that anons have the right to edit, but that they should prioritize improvement of existing articles. In this argument, the fact that anons have demonstrated value in building Wikipedia doesn’t translate into a right to choose the nature of future contributions. Someone proposed that a kinder and more effective approach than excluding anons from creating articles might be to display the reason for deletion if a new article disappears. If an anonymous “newbie” sees that their

newly created article was deleted for suspected vandalism, they might understand what happened and modify their behavior. In this case, the conceptualization of the anon as a valuable “newbie” who does not know how to participate effectively overpowers the “vandal” narrative resulting in softer, preemptive policies.

Blocking Anonymous Proxies. In one discussion, Wikipedia’s blocking policy is challenged. Specifically, it is pointed out that some sysops routinely block contributors who use anonymous IPs and an argument is raised equating editing anonymously with the right to free speech. The community is mostly outspoken in their rejection of this assertion, arguing that the law does not require Wikipedia to do anything. Although there ensues general agreement that concealing one’s identity promotes expression of diverse political ideas, and that Wikipedia should encourage that, there is a strong push to separate Wikipedia from any legal obligation to protect free speech. Although posters believe that Wikipedia should attempt to protect anonymous free speech, it should only do so insofar as does not harm Wikipedia itself.

Several other threads arise that discuss blocking anonymous proxies. One raises the question whether there are valid uses for anonymous proxies and posits that, because they are only used by people who are interested in doing nefarious things, a permanent block on all anonymous proxies would not be amiss. A further observation is made that concerns about contributor safety do not make valid use cases for determining Wikipedia policy or design—a view that goes largely uncontested.

These reflections on specific policy discussions provide insight into and concrete examples of the ways that organization perspective-taking result in policies that don’t allow for certain types of anonymous contribution with implications for potential contributors who perceive threats.

6 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We have described three major types of threats perceived by service providers who support open collaboration projects and explained how these threats affect service provider decisions about collecting and storing contributor data and how to handle privacy enhancing technologies. We also show how threats are linked to policies and technical decisions that limit anonymous participation and suggest that limitations stem from the way that contributors are conceptualized by service providers.

From these findings, we draw three key insights. The first is that with few exceptions, anonymity seekers—for example unregistered contributors or Tor users—are not perceived to pose the greatest threats to sites with whose representatives we spoke. Anonymous users were not discussed as frequently as registered users when it comes to violations

of community norms, the most commonly described type of threat. Second, concerns about maintaining sustainable participation levels by diverse contributors led open collaboration service providers to accommodate some forms of anonymous contributions. That is, more permissive policies about anonymous contributions were seen as advancing service providers’ goal of lowering barriers to contribution, but less permissive policies allowed service providers to improve contributors’ experiences and protect community norms. Third, the service providers with whom we spoke tend to emphasize the value of anonymity as it affects the process of entry to open collaboration projects and only secondarily as a protection once members have joined.

We triangulated these findings in our analysis of mailing list posts: contributors to policy discussions almost always consider the perspective of the organization and not the contributor, resulting in support for policies that don’t support certain types of anonymous participation. These findings lend further weight to our interpretation that how contributors are conceptualized and the identities bestowed upon them by service providers influences what protections they are entitled to and plays a role in policy decision-making.

Identities and Perspectives in Future Work

We framed identity as a pluralistic concept and perspective-taking as a window to understanding how identities are constructed and used by others. This proved to be a productive analytic lens for understanding how open collaboration projects can reproduce and reify systems of inequity through the development of privacy-related norms and policies that privilege the experiences of some contributors over others.

While attempting to lower barriers to participation for their imagined contributor base, service providers also unwittingly erect barriers for others, particularly individuals with more stringent privacy requirements. We argue that this is the result of a narrative around anons as a type of contributor who may require lower barriers to participation in order to get comfortable contributing (e.g., make “newbie” mistakes under the cloak of anonymity), but do not require anonymity as a prerequisite to full participation (e.g., conceal their location for reasons of safety). From prior work, we know that identity facets like race, gender, or sexual orientation can create vulnerabilities that cause people to seek anonymity or curtail their online contributions to protect themselves. For example, in a study of contributors’ privacy strategies, an open collaboration contributor reported using Tor to avoid being outed to his/her/their employer, and another took death and rape threats seriously enough to reduce their editing activity on Wikipedia [11]. These contributors’ experiences suggest that seeking anonymity is an important tool for some would-be contributors; yet, we found that such identity-based vulnerabilities are not often understood

by service providers or may not be perceived as legitimate. Service providers' decisions and interpretations of anonymous users' motivations are largely grounded in a narrative that reflects the experiences of more visible and arguably privileged contributors.

Anonymous users by definition have limited ability to control perceptions of who they are and what their goals are. Our next steps include better characterizing not only contributions of anonymous contributors as a class, but also the ways that individual anons might signal good faith, interest and goals in the absence of a persistent identity. In the first case, we aim to test interpretations of why people seek anonymity with a larger population through natural experiments that compare the type and quality of anonymous or pseudonymous contributions to open collaboration projects in different conditions. In the second case, design experimentation is useful for exploring how “anonymous” contributors to projects might be supported in making more informed choices about revealing forms of identity knowledge and how they might signal their intentions.

As long as little is known about anonymous contributors, their motivations, and the value of their work in open collaboration projects, it is unsurprising that service providers reason from their own experiences and those of central project contributors when considering anonymity seekers. The relative invisibility of anonymous contributors also raises the more general question of how well they are represented in the construction of social norms and technical requirements.

Norms as Analytical Tools

Social norms are a powerful concept in the HCI literature, underpinning important insights about a range of online phenomena. Although they are important features of social systems, when norms become a dominant analytical yardstick by which to assess the “fit” of computing systems with social phenomena like standards of privacy, our conceptual tools may become complicit in erecting selective barriers to participation.

Our studies rendered visible the ways that service providers perceive contributors and threats differently than contributors view themselves, as reported in the literature. These divergent narratives highlighted the limitations of shared norms and expectations as analytical tools. We suggest that, for open collaboration projects, shared social norms can be most useful in understanding the experiences of central community members whose ability to participate with minimal risk helps stabilize the systems in the first place. Conversely, shared norms as analytical tools leave out perspectives of those who may have been alienated from the norm articulation process, calling into question the value of frames that are grounded in community articulation of norms. As a final note, we observe that without using analytical frames that

explicitly consider perceptions of risk and threats as a feature of participation, researchers of sociotechnical systems—like service providers—are likely to overlook certain experiences.

7 CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Our findings are grounded in the experiences of a small sample of decision makers and online discussions of central community members; however, the experiences and values interview participants reported and posted about were mutually supportive of the interpretations presented in this paper. Overall, the service providers with whom we spoke value anonymous contributions and do not see them as a threat to their sites, but neither do they prioritize anonymity in the same ways that people seeking to contribute anonymously do. Our findings illuminated perceived threats and the conceptualizations of contributors that inform open collaboration service providers' decisions about privacy-related technologies and policies. We conclude by raising a critique of social norms as a tool for understanding privacy concerns.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by the National Science Foundation (awards CNS-1703736 and CNS-1703049).

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