

Université Côte d'Azur (LIRCES)/Université Paris-Panthéon-Assas (CERSA - Law & Humanities)

Behind the Cloak of Anonymity: Ethical Agency and Cultural Narratives in the Age of Digital Innovation

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International Conference organized by

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An interdisciplinary research project led by researchers from two laboratories—Daniel HOTARD (CERSA – Law and Humanities) and Suhasini VINCENT (LIRCES)—seeks to better understand “anonymity” in the digital age. At first glance, the concept of “anonymity” may seem simple: any actor who acts without revealing their identity is acting anonymously. However, this superficial simplicity hides considerable technological, social, and political complexity. The forms and uses of “anonymity,” as well as the processes of “anonymization,” are abundant: liberating creative expression; protecting those who challenge the social order; confusing personal activity with systemic activity; confusing the individual with a general category; constructing analytical abstraction... (DeGloma, 2023). Given the complexity that characterizes anonymity in practice, it is worth exploring further the particularities of its narration, its staging, and its political and organizational instrumentation. What conditions make anonymity necessary for expression, cooperation, and judgment? The cultural, ethical, and narrative dimensions of “anonymity” in contemporary digital environments affect both administrative and creative life. With a perspective that combines the techniques of law with those of sociology, political science, cultural studies, and narratology, this project seeks to uncover the cultural transformations that underpin “anonymity” in practice, through its new or emerging instruments and narrative features.

‘Anonymity’ as a Political Instrument, Cultural Practice and Narrative Form

Anonymity in digital and networked spaces functions as both a protective mechanism and a narrative tool — one that enables agency and resistance by allowing individuals to speak or voice dissent without fear of personal repercussions, challenge dominant discourses, and construct alternative identities or counter-narratives. Interestingly, this same anonymity also complicates ethical responsibility, raising questions about accountability, authenticity, and the potential for harm in the absence of identifiable authorship. In an era increasingly shaped by digital surveillance and data extraction, anonymity also emerges as a form of resistance to algorithmic tracking, platform policing, and the erosion of private selfhood. From online forums, activist networks, and gaming communities to whistleblowing platforms, social media, and digital fiction, this project investigates how anonymity functions as both a cultural practice and a narrative form (Boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2015; Nissenbaum, 1999).

This research project also addresses the role of anonymity in digital literary production. Literature today often takes shape in spaces that are non-traditional, decentralized, and collaborative: blogs, fanfiction archives, AI-generated texts, and online communities like Wattpad or Archive of Our Own. Many such texts are published under pseudonyms, avatars, or collective identities, challenging conventional notions of authorship and authority (Jenkins, 2006; Leavitt, 2020). Anonymity allows for experimentation with voice, identity, genre, and social critique — particularly for marginalized authors or politically subversive content — by removing the personal and institutional risks tied to public authorship. Figures like Elena Ferrante, use anonymity not only to avoid fame or surveillance, but to centre the text over the author and to challenge conventional ideas of authority (DeGloma, 2023). On platforms like *Archive of Our Own* or *Wattpad*, writers often publish under pseudonyms, crafting speculative or queer narratives that would be difficult to circulate through mainstream literary channels (Vadde, 2017). Platforms like *Wikileaks* and *SecureDrop* invite whistleblowers to expose misdeeds under the cover of precarious anonymity,

in an effort to shield the whistleblowers from retaliation (Zajacz, 2013; Marcum, 2020; DiSalvo, 2020). In these various ways, anonymity has become a cultural and narrative strategy as its cloak offers creators the space to experiment, resist, and express freely while navigating systems of power, censorship, and exclusion.

Narrating the Hidden in Digital and Artistic Spaces

Anonymity has also long served as a provocative tool in the arts, destabilizing traditional notions of authorship, celebrity, and commodification. Street artists like Banksy and Jean-Michel Basquiat have used anonymity as a shroud for subversive critique and protection from institutional repercussions, forcing audiences and markets to focus on message rather than persona, while simultaneously cultivating a mystique that fuels cultural capital (Ellsworth-Jones, 2012). Collective practices such as the Wu Ming group (Thoburn, 2011) or the Luther Blissett Project likewise embrace anonymity to resist capitalist authorship and foreground collaborative creation (Wright, 2002). In music, pseudonymous or masked figures like Daft Punk, MF DOOM, and Gorillaz construct performative alter-egos that play with identity, spectacle, and authenticity, while in film and digital media, projects such as *Anonymous* (2011) or anonymous YouTube creators deploy concealed authorship as both shield and aesthetic strategy. As for street art on digital media, the works of Banksy and Basquiat, originally conceived as ephemeral graffiti tied to specific urban sites, now circulate globally through photographs, videos, and online platforms that preserve and amplify their anonymous or pseudonymous authorship. This project will examine how such localized acts of resistance are transformed into transnational cultural narratives once they enter digital circulation, often reappearing in the guise of net art collectives (Greene, 2004). These examples highlight how anonymity operates not only as protection or resistance, but also as a deliberate artistic device that unsettles hierarchies of fame, authorship, and market visibility, opening space for new forms of cultural critique and participation.

This project will examine how digital experimental forms—such as autofiction, fanfiction, speculative fiction, science fiction, dystopian narratives, testimonial writing, epistolary fiction, prose poetry, interactive fiction, hypertext narratives, code poetry, AI-generated texts, multimedia storytelling and art—engage with cultural narratives of resistance, whistleblowing, personal testimony, and critique. These experimental forms often blur the lines between fiction and lived experience, inviting readers into intimate, unstable, or contested truths.

Postcolonial Archives: ‘Anonymity’ and Digital Storytelling

In postcolonial countries, the rise of digital storytelling has enabled the creation of new kinds of archives that are oral, multi-medial, and often ephemeral, due to their platform dependency or intentional anonymity (Scott, 2014). While these archives offer powerful alternatives to the erstwhile colonial modes of documentation, their informality means they risk erasure and exclusion from metadata systems. Anonymity, while offering safety and freedom, can make these stories harder to index, authenticate, or sustain in the digital public sphere (Kumar, 2020). Be it Creole or patois in Caribbean storytelling or the Indian folk traditions of *Baul*, *Tamasha*, *Villupaatu* and *Pandavani*, or the Cree and Anishinaabe dialects of the *Canadian Indigenous nations*, these hybrid forms of narrative expression serve to resist colonial language norms as these storytellers often turn to anonymity when addressing sensitive topics like queerness, corruption, or trauma. In India, platforms hosting Dalit narratives and critiques of surveillance systems like Aadhaar highlight how anonymity can both protect and obscure marginalized voices.

The politics of archiving - what is preserved, who is credited, and how stories endure- thus remains central to postcolonial digital storytelling. It would be interesting to explore how anonymity function as both a shield and a strategy for speaking truth without exposure in postcolonial countries? Can it still enable silenced voices to be heard, even when they cannot be named? Are these new archives—often anonymous, informal, and digitally dispersed—capable of sustaining memory, or do they risk repeating the cycles of erasure that have historically silenced subaltern voices?

Analyzing ‘Anonymity’ as a Political Instrument and a Legal Claim

Notions of anonymity have also invested the spheres of law and policy, revealing how acts of concealment and expression can carry normative force. This phenomenon invites dialogue regarding the legal frameworks that govern visibility and rights. Consequently, the study of anonymity emerges as a shared terrain for law and the humanities, where questions of responsibility, identity, and authorship intersect. How is responsibility reconfigured when the speaker is anonymous, and how do these reconfigurations involve both legal reasoning and cultural interpretation?

Recent history offers multiple examples of how anonymity straddles the tension between expression and accountability. These examples, ranging from whistleblowing on Wikileaks to hate speech on Reddit, strategically mobilize theories of opacity and transparency to buttress the exercise of free speech. In such contexts, anonymity becomes a juridical and ethical linchpin for contemporary debates over questions of evidence, authenticity, good faith, and digital rights (Bok, 1989; Martin, 2015). How do these debates engage the wider narratives of digital ethics and agency? How does the law both constrain and legitimize acts of disclosure in an era of digital surveillance and algorithmic governance?

Existing research on anonymity questions whether true anonymity is even possible anymore, given the scope of surveillance technology (Nissenbaum, 1999). To the extent that anonymity remains a social fact (Enguenard & Panicao, 2010), it is not the absence of norms, but rather a space where social identity and group values are renegotiated through the ‘plurality of anonymity’ (Monteiro (2024). On the one hand, anonymity is associated with forms of social resistance (Dupeux, 2022) and socially disruptive impunity (Giusti & Kadige, 2021). On the other hand, anonymity also serves to reinforce conformity to local or community norms rather than to erode accountability (Reicher, Spears & Postmes, 1995; Spears & Postmes, 2015). Could anonymity, as a potentially productive force on digital platforms, foster alternative forms of civic dialogue and collective identity? Might anonymity, rather than being inherently destabilizing, function as a “discourse-enabling device” (Monteiro, 2024) to depolarize and diversify public debate? Seen through this lens, law and culture converge in their struggle to regulate and imagine the ethical limits of hidden voices, balancing anonymity’s risks with the freedom of discourse.

Suggested topics for proposals include :

- Analysing how anonymous narratives are culturally produced, circulated, and received, especially in digital and transmedia contexts (Jenkins, 2006).
- Investigating how anonymous whistleblowers (e.g., Chelsea Manning, Daniel Hale) represent the economy in which bodily vulnerability is the cost of disclosing public danger (Kenny & Fotaki, 2021).
- Exploring how anonymous and pseudonymous voices contribute to cultural imaginaries, particularly in marginalized, activist, or politically repressed communities (Scott, 1990; Haraway, 1991; Lovink, 2002).
- Examining how anonymity shapes literary expression in digital spaces, particularly through forms such as autofiction, fanfiction, and speculative fiction, e-lit of surveillance and control where pseudonymous authors navigate questions of identity, authorship, and narrative authority outside traditional publishing structures.
- Considering how anonymity operates in digital art and online cultural production, where concealed authorship serves as both aesthetic strategy and political resistance (Greene, 2024).
- Investigating how anonymity supports collective authorship and challenges ideas of ownership and surveillance in digital spaces.
- Exploring how postcolonial and diasporic storytellers use anonymity in digital spaces to resist erasure, navigate censorship, and reclaim narrative authority.

Presentations may be given in English or in French, and publication will be considered either in the journal *Cynos* or with *Éditions Panthéon-Assas*. When submitting your proposals, please indicate whether you wish to present your paper in Nice or in Paris. Each presentation will last 20 minutes and will be followed by a discussion.

Proposals of approximately 300 words, accompanied by a short biographical note, should be sent before 15 December 2025 to the organizers: Suhasini Vincent (suhasini.vincent@univ-cotedazur.fr) and Daniel Hotard (daniel.hotard@assas-universite.fr). The conference is planned as a collaborative event between Université Côte d'Azur and Université Paris-Panthéon-Assas.

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