How being anonymous online reveals our ugliest thoughts

New study indicates that online forums need tighter control to stamp out abusive language.



Anonymity disinhibits us from aiming foul language at other users. Photo: AP

Before the dawn of the internet, we were largely unable to voice controversial opinions without fear of losing popularity. Political viewpoints, taboo language and scathing criticisms would either be shared in close quarters or not shared at all.

Now, in an age dominated by social media, the situation is very different. Current social issues are met with outrage and hostility among hordes of online users, exercising their free speech with extreme aggression. Everybody can hide on the internet – which is a huge problem for targets of abuse.

A recent study on social media has highlighted the appalling standard of debate that online anonymity allows. In a comparison between comment threads discussing Islamic State on social site Facebook (where users’ identities are exposed) and video sharing site YouTube (where users hide their identities), it was found that insults were 91% more frequent on YouTube, while swearing was an incredible 150% more common. Nearly one-fifth of the YouTube comments contained an insult of some kind, a figure that shows just how widely spread the hostility is.

These results give us a glimpse of the ugly social environment created by anonymous channels like YouTube, and clearly action must be taken to deal with it. But how? Before we can prevent online abuse, we need to understand it.

Anonymity is dangerous because it lets us break the conventions of language. When nobody knows who we are, and we don’t know who anyone else is, it’s a level playing field. Nobody has established power through their status, and on top of that, there are no consequences if we choose not to conform to the majority viewpoint. In fact, there are no consequences for anything we say. We won’t make or lose friends no matter what we tell someone, and we’re protected from the impact our words have on our chosen target. There’s no hierarchy, no social relationship and no consequence.

These ideas are supported by a group of 17-18 year old students who participated in a survey of online behaviour. The students were asked about how their language changes during anonymous conversation and online conflict, as well as their identity preferences. One respondent, Harry, wrote that being anonymous allowed him to mask his “vicious and aggressive traits”. Another student, Katie, said she would “care less about offending” with a hidden identity, and that “people don’t know who you are so you can say what you want”.

Harry and Katie are not uncommon in their behaviour, but while they might be slightly nastier with hidden identities, others, known as “trolls” use the powers of anonymity and free speech to systematically provoke, harass and bully people they’ve never met. With the damage they cause, trolls cannot be left alone by online moderators.

However, simply removing anonymity will not prevent online abuse. Despite YouTube comments containing more hostile language than Facebook in the study, approximately 1o% of Facebook comments contained insults, with a similar proportion of expletives (swear words). There are clearly further reasons for such high proportions of hostile language.

Stricter moderation and blocking of consistent abusers is necessary for friendlier discussion channels on the internet. The research is clear – hidden behind their computer screens, web users are turning free speech into hate speech, and change is due.

**578 words**

How "care in the community" overlooks people with learning disabilities

The government and social care sector must do more to deliver true community integration.



Paid-for care cannot replace friendships or real community connections. Photo: Getty

Just twenty years ago, thousands of people with learning disabilities were living in NHS hospitals. Segregated from society, the long-stay residents were incarcerated in these institutions, many of which had begun life as the asylums of Victorian England.

Since the introduction of “care in the community” which triggered the closure of these institutions and the creation of the [learning disability charity Brandon Trust](http://www.brandontrust.org/) and other organisations, there are now an estimated 1.5m people with learning disabilities living with their families, in private rented housing, social housing or small supported housing schemes in communities across the UK.

This represents huge progress. But it’s not enough. Some 2,600 people with learning disabilities remain in long-stay state-funded Assessment and Treatment facilities. What’s more, the reality for many of those now living in the community remains a lack of connectedness to the very communities in which they live.

At Brandon Trust, we commissioned new research to explore to what extent people with learning disabilities are truly "integrated" into their communities. The results, published as part of our 20th anniversary report [*Finding Freedom*](http://www.brandontrust.org/20th-anniversary-report.aspx) out tomorrow confirm what the social care sector is often afraid to admit – that people with learning disabilities are largely invisible in our society.

According to the research, more than half the population do not know anyone with a learning disability. Of those who do, the most common reason (32 per cent) was because they are a neighbour suggesting that any relationship is accidental rather than because they share some activity or interest in common. Most shockingly, of those people who do know someone, 24 per cent see them less than once a year. On a more positive note, 91 per cent of the public asked say this group of people should have more opportunities to build relationships in the community.

When people with learning disabilities not only live in a community but are truly connected to it, through their interests, friendships and by building their independence, the results are extraordinary.

Take Jade, who two years ago spent most of her time alone in her room in a supported housing scheme and described herself as "down all the time". She now enjoys a packed social diary that includes everything from singing in a community choir to eating out with friends in town. She takes the bus on her own, which she thought she could never do, and has even developed a love of tree climbing thanks to a new volunteering role.

But her experience is the exception, not the rule. Scratch under the surface of “care in the community” and the reality for most people with a learning – despite the fact they live in a town, village or – is “care without the community”. Instead of encouraging independence and social or economic integration, support often simply perpetuates an individual’s dependence on health or social care organisations.

Paid-for care cannot replace friendships or real community connections. People with learning disabilities need relationships, hobbies, jobs and education. Care providers have to be braver in order to facilitate this, relinquishing control of their traditional role as care givers and acting instead as community connectors. This is a cultural issue for the care sector. It demands leaders set the tone, alter their organisation’s ethos and reassure their workforce about the benefits of change. Risk is not a reason to deny people choice and freedom.

Commissioners too need to be less risk averse and to recognise the merits of supporting people to do the things they can do, increasing their independence and ultimately reducing their need for paid for support. The focus should be on what people with learning disabilities can offer, rather than what they need.  Success therefore should be judged on how much less help – and funding – people with learning disabilities need.

Lastly, government needs to do more to champion the social care workforce, promoting recruitment, retention and leadership in social care as it has done with the education sector.

In a world where we face a crisis of rising social care costs with the aging population, integration is the key not only to a better life for people with learning disabilities but also to ensuring maximum impact from the increasingly stretched burden on the taxpayer to provide care.

**Notes:**

* *Modal auxiliaries of certainty (“care sector* ***must*** *do more”, “focus* ***should*** *be on”)*
* *Colloquial language (“take Jade”, “what’s more”)*
* *Mix of statistics and quotes (“91% of the public”, “‘down all the time’”)*
* *Inclusive address (“****we*** *face a crisis”, “invisible in* ***our*** *society”)*
* *Emotive modifiers (“shockingly”, “extraordinary”)*
* *Triadic structures (“recruitment, retention and leadership”)*
* *Political/economic lexis (“state-funded”, “care sector”, “taxpayer”, “workforce”)*
* *Repetition and manipulation of key phrase (“care in/without the community”)*
* *Latinate lexis (“relinquishing”, “commissioned”, “perpetuates”)*
* *Short paragraph structure*