

Google Moves to Destroy Online Anonymity ... Unintentionally Helping Authoritarian Governments

By [Global Research News](#) and [Washington's Blog](#)

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Governments Move to Destroy Online Anonymity

Some of the world's leading social critics and political critics have used pen names.

As Tyler Durden of Zero Hedge [points out](#) (edited slightly for readability):

Though often maligned (typically by those frustrated by an inability to engage in ad hominem attacks), anonymous speech has a long and storied history in the United States. Used by the likes of Mark Twain (aka Samuel Langhorne Clemens) to criticize common ignorance, and perhaps most famously by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay (aka publius) to write the Federalist Papers, we think ourselves in good company in using one or another nom de plume.

Particularly in light of an emerging trend against vocalizing public dissent in the United States, we believe in the critical importance of anonymity and its role in dissident speech.

Like [the Economist magazine](#), we also believe that keeping authorship anonymous moves the focus of discussion to the content of speech and away from the speaker - as it should be. We believe not only that you should be comfortable with anonymous speech in such an environment, but that you should be suspicious of any speech that isn't.

But governments - especially authoritarian governments - hate anonymity.

A soon-to-be-released book by Google executive Eric Schmidt - called "The New Digital Age" - describes the desire of authoritarian governments to destroy anonymity. The Wall Street Journal [provides](#) an excerpt:

Some governments will consider it too risky to have thousands of anonymous, untraceable and unverified citizens - "hidden people"; they'll want to know who is associated with each [online account](#), and will require verification at a state level, in order to exert control over the virtual world.

Last December, China started requiring all web users to [register using their real names](#).

But the U.S. is quickly moving in the same direction. As Gene Howington [reported](#) last year:

Do you have a right to anonymous political free speech?

According to the Supreme Court, you do. According to the Department of [Homeland Security](#), you don't. They've hired General Dynamics to track U.S. citizens exercising this critical civil right.

The history of anonymous political free speech in America dates back to our founding. The seminal essays found in "The Federalist Papers" were written by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay under the nom de plume of "Publius" although this was not [confirmed](#) until a list of authorship compiled by Hamilton was posthumously released to the public. As [previously discussed](#) on this blog, the right to anonymous political free speech has been addressed by the Supreme Court. Most notably in the cases of *Talley v. California*, 362 U.S. 60 (1960) and *McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission*, 514 U.S. 334 (1995). In *Talley*, Justice Hugo Black writing for the majority said that, "Anonymous pamphlets, leaflets, brochures and even books have played an important role in the progress of mankind. Persecuted groups and sects from time to time throughout history have been able to criticize oppressive practices and laws either anonymously or not at all." In *McIntyre*, Justice John Paul Stevens writing for the majority said that, "Anonymity is a shield from the tyranny of the majority. [...] an author's decision to remain anonymous, like other decisions concerning omissions or additions to the content of a publication, is an aspect of the freedom of speech protected by the First Amendment." That seems clear enough in defining that citizens do have a Constitutionally protected right to anonymous political free speech.

The full DHS policy statement regarding its activities can be viewed in the [DHS Privacy Compliance Review of the NOC Media Monitoring Initiative \(November 15, 2011\)](#), but rt.com's summary spells out the basics:

"Under the National Operations Center (NOC)'s [Media Monitoring Initiative](#) that came out of DHS headquarters in November, Washington has the written permission to retain data on users of social media and online networking platforms.

Specifically, the DHS announced the NCO and its Office of Operations Coordination and Planning (OPS) can collect [personal information](#) from news anchors, journalists, reporters or anyone who may use "traditional and/or [social media](#) in real time to keep their audience situationally aware and informed."

According to the Department of Homeland Security's own definition of personal identifiable information, or PII, such data could consist of any intellect "that permits the identity of an individual to be directly or indirectly inferred, including any information which is linked or linkable to that individual." Previously established guidelines within the administration say that data could only be collected under authorization set forth by written code, but the new provisions in the NOC's write-up means that any reporter, whether someone along the lines of Walter Cronkite or a budding blogger, can be victimized by the agency.

Also included in the roster of those subjected to the spying are government officials, domestic or not, who make public statements, private sector employees that do the same and "persons known to have been involved in major crimes of Homeland Security interest," which to itself opens up the possibilities even wider.

The department says that they will only scour publically-made info available while retaining data, but it doesn't help but raise suspicion as to why the government is going out of their way to

spend time, money and resources on watching over those that helped bring news to the masses.” - [rt.com](#)

This question about the right to anonymous political free speech is also asked over the background of the Electronic Privacy Information Center filing a FOIA request against the DHS to find out the details of the agency’s social network monitoring program.

As part of recent disclosures related to the EPIC suit, it is revealed that the DHS has hired and instructed General Dynamics to monitor political dissent and the dissenters. The range of websites listed as being monitored is quite impressive. Notably, [jonathanturley.org](#) is not on this list [Howington’s essay is a guest blog on constitutional law professor Jonathan Turley’s website], but equally of note is that this list is by the DHS’ own admission “representative” and not “comprehensive”.

Some of the more high profile and highly trafficked sites being monitored include the comments sections of The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, Newsweek, the Huffington Post, the Drudge Report, Wired, and ABC News. In addition, social networking sites Facebook, MySpace and Twitter are being monitored. For the first time, the public not only has an idea who the DHS is pursuing with their surveillance and where, but what they are looking for as well. General Dynamics contract requires them to “[identify] media reports that reflect adversely on the U.S. Government, DHS, or prevent, protect, respond government activities.” The DHS also instructed General Dynamics to generate “reports on DHS, Components, and other Federal Agencies: positive and negative reports on FEMA, CIA, CBP, ICE, etc. as well as organizations outside the DHS.” In other words, the DHS wants to know who you are if you say anything critical about the government.

Anybody thinking of the name “Goebbels” at this point is not out of line.

Indeed, valuing online privacy could even get you labeled as a [potential terrorist](#).

Google Moving to Help Destroy Anonymity

Google’s motto is “[Do No Evil](#)”. And Google [notes](#) in a patent application:

When users reveal their identities on the internet, it leaves them more vulnerable to stalking, identity theft and harassment.

So you might assume that Google is fighting to protect anonymity on the web.

But Schmidt’s new book reveals that Google will support the destruction of anonymity (via Wall Street Journal):

Within search results, information tied to verified online profiles will be ranked higher than content without such verification, which will result in most users naturally clicking on the top (verified) results. The true cost of remaining anonymous, then, might be irrelevance.

Search Engine Journal [explains](#):

[Passages from Schmidt's book] confirm what many industry writers have been passionately clattering away about for months now. **Google+ is an identity verification network. As the network continues to grow, content associated with a verified identity will rise to the top of Google search rankings.**

(Google+ is now the world's [second most popular social network](#).)

In other words, Schmidt acknowledges (in the first quote above) that authoritarians want to destroy anonymity ... and Google will help them do so.

We are **not** saying that Google likes authoritarians. ([Potential ties](#) between [Google and the government](#) are [beyond the scope](#) of this essay.) However, Google will do business with *anyone* ... and will [cowtow to authoritarians](#) they happen to do business with.

Google is doing this to make money. Remember, Google [gathers information across all of its platforms](#), and personalizes search engine results based upon [what you've looked for in past searches](#).

After all, Google is primary an advertising company ... not a search company. See [this](#), [this](#), [this](#) and [this](#).

As the Daily Mail [reported](#) last year:

A former Google executive has lambasted his ex-employer ... claiming that the search company has been turned into an 'ad company' obsessed with harvesting people's private information.

James Whittaker, a current Partner Development Manager at Microsoft and ex-Engineering Director at Google, posted the 1328-word attack on Google on his Microsoft blog this week.

'Perhaps Google is right,' writes Whittaker, 'Perhaps the future lies in learning as much about people's personal lives as possible.'

'The Google I was passionate about was a technology company. The Google I left was an advertising company.'

The move comes in the wake of Google's controversial new 'privacy policy', which allowed the search giant to 'pool' information from 60 separate services including Gmail, Google Search and Android phones, to create 'personalised' advertising.

The bottom line is that anonymity reduces Google's ability to monetize personal information and sell it to its advertisers. So Google is on a campaign to destroy anonymity ... and unintentionally helping tyrants in the process.

As [INeedHits](#) laments:

We knew a day would come when privacy was a thing of the past, but Schmidt clearly spells out that day is sooner than we had expected.

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