Online Anonymity in Deliberative Democracy
Disinhibition and Contestation or Deindividuation and Conformity?

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Abstract: As the prevalence of online communication alters the dynamics of political communication, the question arises how online anonymity affects processes of democratic deliberation. Theoretical discussions about deliberative democracy attribute high value to diversity and claim that contestation is necessary in the face of inequality and oppression. This paper investigates whether online anonymity is conducive to deliberative democracy by disinhibiting the democratic subject and thus facilitating subversion or whether anonymity harms deliberation by amplifying tendencies of submission and conformity through deindividuation. To explore this question, the paper draws on two opposing theses from social psychology – disinhibition vs. deindividuation – and the respective empirical studies. The results reveal that both subversion and submission is afforded by online anonymity – disinhibition and deindividuation do not oppose each other. Which of the two effects comes into play depends on the specific contextual conditions of deliberation.

1 Introduction

The nature of politics and deliberation changes in the face of the emerging digital age. Taking into account the substantive changes brought about by social media, the internet of things, cloud computing, and big data, democracy in the 21st century must be characterised as digital democracy. Anonymity is a crucial factor of online communication. In placing distance between interlocutors and obscuring some aspects of personal identity, while revealing or constructing others, it alters dynamics in political debates online (Akdeniz 2002; Barendt 2016; Leitner 2015). Digital communication more generally, and online anonymity in particular, has been discussed in deliberative democratic theory (Barber 1997; Bohman 2004; Buchstein 1997; Saco 2002; Ward 1997). These discussions mostly focus on questions of inclusion and exclusion, with optimists seeing the potential for an inclusive public sphere free from domination arising, while pessimists point to hate speech, bullying, and other forms of
discrimination on the internet. Another aspect prominent in democratic theory and a central aspect in many definitions of democracy, the question of subversion and submission or contestation and conformity, remain mostly unaddressed.

Contestation of unequal power structures in society (Mansbridge 1996), the subversion of hegemonic discourses (Dryzek 2000), a rightful place for disagreement (Gutman & Thompson 1990, 1996), and a diversity of opinions rather than homogeneity (Young 1996, 2000) is of central concern in debates about deliberative democracy. In order to generate inclusive spaces, domination needs to be confronted. Diversity of opinion and identities is a necessary precondition for deliberation. It is through a multiplicity of perspectives that an exchange of ideas and arguments is possible (Young 1997b).

Just like inclusion and exclusion, the dynamics of subversion and submission are profoundly affected by online anonymity. Two contrary interpretations are possible: On the one hand, online anonymity might contribute to subversion and thus might be conducive to deliberation. Through its disinhibiting effects, it liberates the democratic subject from social constraints and facilitates the ventilation of true sentiments, thus contesting unequal power relations and contributing to a diversity of opinions and identities. On the other hand, however, online anonymity might amplify tendencies of submission. It strips the democratic subject of its individuality and makes it more easy to conform to group dynamics or submit to strong group leaders. Group identity thus overtakes individual identity. So is online anonymity conducive to or harmful for deliberative democracy?

This paper makes a first step toward an understanding of the interplay of online anonymity and the dynamics of subversion and submission in deliberation. By drawing on empirical research in the field of social psychology, it explores the question whether online anonymity leads to subversion and thus contributes to democratic diversity or to submission thus counteracting deliberative ideals. In order to answer this question, two theses from social psychology and their respective empirical findings are examined: The disinhibition effect (Suler 2004) describes online anonymity as liberating and thus contributing to contestation, while theories of deindividuation (Lea & Spears 1991, Postmes & Spears 1998; Spears et al. 1990) point to anonymity’s conformist effects. The first part of this paper generates the theoretical outlook of this study. It first summarises debates of contestation as value of deliberative democracy. Then next it takes the theories of contestation in deliberation online and discusses conceptions of subversion in digital communication. In the second part of this paper, both the disinhibition and the deindividuation theses will be explored along empirical findings from social
psychology. This is followed by concluding remarks answering the question whether online anonymity contributes to submission or subversion in deliberation.

2 Contestation as value in deliberative and digital democracy

The following sections of this paper lay the theoretical groundwork for this study. The first section explores the value of contestation, conflict, and diversity in deliberative democracy. The second sections takes these discussions online and situates deliberative contestation in digital democracy.

2.1 The place of conflict and contestation in deliberative democracy

Deliberative democracy is often perceived as communicative praxis aiming at consensual decision making. This has lead agonistic democratic theorists to criticise deliberation for its homogenising and conformist tendencies, which prove especially problematic in the context of structurally disadvantaged social groups (e.g. Mouffe 1999). While there is some truth to this claim, as some theorists, especially in early discussions of deliberative democracy, idealised consensus seeking, deliberative democratic theory has come a long way. Agonistic theory has had its influence on conceptions of deliberative democracy externally, and discussions of difference democracy (Gould 1996, Mansbridge 1983, 2012; Young 1990, 2000) have influenced it from within. Deliberative democracy, even in its original meaning, is built on the premises of a diverse society, in which multiple stand points and various identities enter into discussion. The notion of diversity is at the core of deliberation as a deliberative exchange of ideas is only possible if different perspectives come to bear. And an exchange of different viewpoints in political debates inevitably entails normative disagreement and conflict (Gutman & Thompson 1995). Today the role of conflict and contestation is an acknowledged part of deliberation. John Dryzek, for example, develops “a conception of democracy that emphasizes the construction of public opinion through the contestation of discourses” (Dryzek 2000, p.4) and Archon Fung calls for “airing of conflict and tension” (Fung 2003, p.344) as part of deliberative democracy.

Most notably, the significance of contestation in deliberative democracy has been developed by difference democrats. This feminist strand in and around deliberative democratic theory thoroughly elaborates the value of contestation for democracy. Counterintuitively, allowing for conflict to emerge in deliberation aims at equality among participants. Confrontation appears necessary to draw attention to inequality:
Both in a public forum and in everyday talk, there are justifiable places for
offensiveness, non-cooperation, and the threat of retaliation – even for raucous,
angry, self-centred, bitter talk, aiming at nothing but hurt… These uncivil forms of
talk are also often necessary as means to the end of approaching both liberty and
equality in deliberation. Sometimes only intensity in oppositions can break down
the barriers of the status quo. No one always listens attentively to everyone else,
and members of dominant groups are particularly likely to find they do not need to
listen to members of subordinate groups. So subordinates sometimes need the
battering ram of rage. (Mansbridge 1999, p.223)

According to this argument, not only in deliberative settings themselves, but also in society at
large – or, in Mansbridge’s terms, in the deliberative system – subordinate groups need to
engage in disruptive action, in performative communication of discontent, in order to challenge
structural inequality. To develop a notion of justified conflict in discursive terms, Mansbridge
draws on Foucault’s concept of resistance as a necessary struggle against domination, which
results in the creation of communities of resistance (Mansbridge 1993, p.365). From these
considerations emerges an image of deliberative democracy characterized by conflicting
communities in the context of domination and resistance: Subordinate groups “oscillate
between protected enclaves, in which they can explore their ideas in an environment of mutual
encouragement, and more hostile but also broader surroundings in which they can test those
ideas against the reigning reality” (Mansbridge 1996, p.57).

This image bares clear resemblance with Nancy Fraser’s subordinate counterpublics.
Interestingly, Fraser ties the notion of conflict as the challenging of the dominant by the
subordinate class to competition. She claims that “contestation among competing publics
supposes inter-public discursive interaction” (Fraser 1990, p.68). Similarly, Iris Marion Young
calls for the “contestation of the constituency with itself about the content of a decision-making
agenda” (Young 1997a, p.359). And Mansbridge sees elements of adversary democracy like
voting and party competition as an essential part of the deliberative system. Mansbridge argues
that these competitive modes are necessary to overcome the conformist tendencies of
consensus decision making in deliberation. Where no consensus can be reached on the grounds
of fundamental disagreement, voting needs to be employed to break the deadlock (Mansbridge
Everyday talk and emotive expression on the other hand help to identify conflict (Mansbridge
1999a, p.226). This problem is explored empirically in the study by Karpowitz and Mansbridge
(2005) comparing a consensus oriented and an adversary discursive setting in participatory urban planning. They find that in the case of consensus oriented deliberation conflicts were supressed and dissenting voices marginalized. In the adversary process, consisting of public hearings, citizens aired their anger and conflicts took centre stage.

Difference democrats reconcile deliberative norms with notions of conflict and contestation. Young addresses one of the defining elements of deliberative democracy – reason giving –, which is often seen in opposition to contestation. The rational argument appears in opposition to emotive modes of subversion. Young argues, however:

Especially under circumstances where there are serious conflicts that arise from structural positions of privilege and disadvantage, and/or where a subordinated, less powerful or minority group finds its interests ignored in public debate, members of such groups do not violate norms of reasonableness if they engage in serious disruptive actions, or express their claims with angry accusations. Disorderliness is an important tool of critical communication aimed at calling attention to the unreasonableness of others. (Young 2000, p.48f)

In her much quoted essay “Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy”, Young (2001) engages in a fictive dialogue between an activist and a deliberative democrat. Young constructs ideal positions of the deliberative democrat, who strives to change the system from within by persuading those in power to go a path of progressive reform, and the activist who criticizes the deliberative democrat for affirming the system through cooperation and calls for disruptive action, open conflict and civil disobedience. In conclusion, Young calls for an alternative, critical conception of democracy, encompassing both cooperation and conflict.

2.2 Contestation and conflict in digital democracy

The notion of conflict and contestation as necessary part of deliberation developed by difference democrats, is also prevalent in current discussions on digital democratic subjectivity. The literature on current social movements engagement on and through the internet observes the creation of collective identities (Gerbaudo 2015; Kavada 2015, 2012) and emotive populist strategies (Gerbaudo 2017) to contest neoliberal hegemony.

While conflict and contestation appear as evident elements of digital activism, Engin Isin and Evelyn Ruppert (2015) characterize the democratic subject as digital citizen challenging the given order through rights claims. In Being Digital Citizens Egin Isin and Evelyn Ruppert share
the focus on citizenship in and through the internet with Papacharissi (2010, p.80ff) and Dahlgren (2009, p.57ff). They thoroughly elaborate and expand the concept, however, in terms of conflict and contestation. Digital citizens come into being through the performative act of rights claims in and through the internet as digital space enmeshed with analogous space. By claiming “I, we, or they have the right to”, marginalized groups who are currently not the bearers of the according rights, demand inclusion. The concept of citizenship, however, does not afford contestation only, but rather it is defined by a dichotomy of submission and subversion; citizens are *subjects to power* (submission) and simultaneously *subjects of power* (subversion). In order to make right claims, subjects need to submit – or in other words, are subjected – to a discursive constructs of existing rights and hegemonic discourses. By contesting specific exiting norms, the normative context surrounding this norm needs to be accepted – at least to a certain degree.

Isin and Ruppert’s understanding of citizenship as submission and subversion is built on Judith Butler’s (1993) theory of performativity. Performance is only possible within a hegemonic discursive structure by citation and repetition. This only leaves certain spaces for contesting this structure from within by resignification. Thus, discourses constructing and surrounding citizenship, need to be accepted to demand inclusion and challenge the system from within. Digital citizens perform their selves online through digital acts like sharing, tweeting, liking, messaging, blogging, coding, downloading, posting, following, friend etc. These acts result in callings upon others as activists, participants, friends or adversaries. They also create openings to resignify meaning through hacking, communing, and whistleblowing and closings through filtering and tracking by private enterprises and state governments. In this context of contestation, the citizen comes into being as both empowered and restrained by means of digital communication.

The perspective of digital contestation is also at the core of Lincoln Dahlberg’s (2011, 2007a, 2007b) extensive work, which aims at a radicalization of deliberative public sphere concepts through the employment of agonistic (Mouffe 2000) and difference democratic (Fraser 1990) perspectives. Online public spheres are framed as site of discursive struggle. Mainstream media and elite actors dominate the political discourse creating a hegemony. Digital media, however, give marginalized groups new opportunities to organize in counterpublics, develop counter-discourses, connect to other subjugated groups, and contest discursive hegemony (cf. Downey & Fenton 2003). These counterpublics, or “communities of resistance” as Mansbridge (1993, p.365) calls them, can be recognized in websites of fat, anorexic, and trans people developing
alternative body images (Daniels 2009; Gies 2008; Monaghan 2005). They are also reflected in Marianne Franklin’s work on postcolonial cyberspace where Pacific Island inhabitants and their overseas diasporas form digital communities to articulate a common identity (Franklin 2007, 2003). In her more current writing, Franklin explores how homeless people, despite their restricted access to the internet, create digital communities (Franklin 2013, p.93ff).

As Dahlberg mentions, these counterpublics can serve mobilization for analogous action or for new forms of online engagement like electronic civil disobedience and online sit-ins. These participatory modes can best be exemplified by the online collectivity Anonymous, which assaults its opponents by Distributed Denial of Service attacks (DDoS), consisting of website requests in such high numbers that servers cannot respond and websites become unavailable, often compared to sit-ins or occupations. Defacing as another method of attack consists of hacking opponents’ websites and putting an alternative image or message on it mostly mocking the opponent (Asenbaum 2017, p.10; Jarvis 2014, p.12ff; Klein 2015, p.9). Anonymous can, however, not only be perceived as challenging hegemony through its obvious confrontational acts, but also through its dramatic performance of anonymity, resisting the hegemonic discourse of identification, authentication (clear names), and competition (number of likes, retweets, followers etc.) on social media (Cambre 2014, p.305; Halpin 2012, p.19; McDonald 2015, p.979).

3 Disinhibition vs. deindividuation: Psychological explanations and empirical findings

After having elaborated the value of contestation, conflict, and diversity in deliberative and digital democracy, the question arises whether online anonymity contributes to acts of subversion or might lead to submission. The study of social psychology can provide valuable insight into deliberative interaction. Two contradictory psychological models exist explaining anonymous online behaviour. John Suler’s (2004) heavily cited disinhibition effect explains the function of online anonymity in setting free users’ individual desires, fears, and aggressions, which in the light of deliberative democracy’s ideal of diversity and subversion opens up promising perspectives. At the same time, however, Russel Spears and Tom Postmes (1998) formulated the deindividuation thesis: online anonymity contributes to conformist behaviour in groups, who rather follow group dynamics and salient group identities than express individuality. This section will explore both theses theoretically and empirically.
3.1 Subversion through disinhibition

John Suler’s (2004) disinhibition effect has become one of the most cited essays in research on online anonymity. Suler does not primarily focus on anonymity, but on online communication more generally. The observed disinhibition effect is explained along six factors: anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority. Not coincidentally, it seems, is anonymity prime among them. The lack of identifiability affords users to express deep emotions, which can have both positive and negative effects on their interlocutors.

When people have the opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting out. Whatever they say or do can’t be directly linked to the rest of their lives. In a process of dissociation, they don’t have to own their behavior by acknowledging it within the full context of an integrated online/offline identity. The online self becomes a compartmentalized self. (Suler 2004, p.322)

Other factors in Suler’s model – invisibility, asynchronicity, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority – are closely associated with anonymity: They explain a subjectively perceived distance between interlocutors as crucial for explaining their altered online behaviour. Anonymity appears as primarily liberating, which contributes to the expression of both aggressive and benign sentiments. The logic describing a sequential connection between liberation to contestation facilitated by anonymity has been affirmed in various empirical studies.

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, they would cover up in face-to-face communication.
These qualitative findings are confirmed by a wealth of 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 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.

Many other experimental studies confirms higher levels of participation under anonymity (Fredheim & Moore 2015; Haines et al. 2014; 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 under the condition of anonymity than under clear names (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 does not only apply 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: “By disassociating individuals from their comments and buffering group members from one another, anonymity appears to have reduced behavioral constraints on group members and led them to contribute more freely, and less inhibitedly to the group discussion.” Moreover, “[they] felt they could more safely make critical comments or ask questions about proposed solutions than identified group members” (Jessup et al. 1990, p.318f).

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 and thus resisted to conform to group opinion (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 students’ 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: “For example, Just Another Wolf opened many of his messages with ‘Grrday’ or ‘Howlo’ and sent
his journals as text wrapped around elaborate ASCII figures of a wolf. Tiger and Cougar joked about eating Rabbit for dinner” (Chester & Gwynne 1998).

### 3.2 Submission through deindividuation

While the studies cited above have promising implications for online deliberation, another theoretical model emerging in psychology explains anonymity as leading to the opposite effect: Anonymity deindividuates and depersonalises internet users and thus affords conformist behaviour. The discussion of deindividuation through anonymity predates the internet and originally revolved around the anonymising effects of large crowds. Group dynamics in combination with diffused responsibility and a lack of identifiability of individuals in large crowds affords anti-social and sometimes inhumane behaviour as exemplified by lynch mobs and the like. Early discussions of deindividuation – emerging in the context of the totalitarian movements of the 1930s in Europe – focused on anti-normative, irrational, and emotionally driven actions by crowds in which individuals submerge and render to group dynamics or strong leaders (e.g. Le Bon 2009 [1896]).

Current models clarify that it is neither only negative behaviour, which is emulated, nor are crowds always deindividuating, but can have the opposite effect. Stephen Reicher (1987, 1984) argues that whether individuals conform to group dynamics under the condition of anonymity depends on the salience of identity aspects that both the individual and the group have in common. In other words, anonymity leads individuals to submit to a group if that group is defined by a strong group identity. These ideas, developed for large crowds, were then adopted for online anonymity by Russell Spears et al. (1990), Martin Lear and Spears (1991), and further developed by Tom Postmes and Spears (1998) resulting in the SIDE model (Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects). Empirical studies in accordance with this model, show that online anonymity can have clear deindividuating effects, leading to conformity and submission in groups. A lack of multiple identity markers in anonymous online communication can contribute to stereotypical thinking – both regarding others and oneself.

In an experimental study, Coleman et al. (1999) compare anonymous online with face to face small group discussions. A post-experimental questionnaire and conversation analysis showed that participants in the anonymous group were less concerned about being judged by others, felt less concerned about personal evaluation, felt less viewed as an individual, submerged in the discussion more, and thought of their group more as a team than individuals. The authors
explain this by a greater focus on the task at hand when interlocutors are not physically present and identifiable:

Perhaps with the common thread of the discussion being more salient than identifying personal information, a sense of self developed more slowly than when individual differences are noticeable. With the task as the object of attention, strong ties to a state of deindividuation become evident: individuality is tacitly devalued in the name of a common purpose. (Coleman et al. 1999, p.61)

The study by Coleman et al. (1999) points not only to deindividuation by focusing on content rather than other participants, but also as building a group identity that gains salience in contrast with individual identity. Other studies point to a similar effect consisting of stereotyping of others and oneself. 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 perceived each other in more stereotypic terms (Atkinson & DePalma 2008). It appears that the absence of a complex set of identity information provided in face to face communication results in stereotyping along the few identity markers available in anonymous online communication.

In an experiment actively evoking national identity, British participants conducted online chats with supposed German participants. These discussions were framed as international dialogue. While half of the small groups were visually anonymous and only interacted via textual chats, the other half could see their interlocutors in a silent live video additionally to the textual exchange. As a result, British participants perceived their supposedly German interlocutors in more stereotypical terms under the condition of visual anonymity. What is more, visually anonymous groups also developed greater group cohesion, thus identifying with their British group members more than participants in groups who saw each others faces via video (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 connotated with masculinity (introduction of a car free zone). Again, stereotyping did not only affect others. Men categorised themselves in more stereotypical terms under conditions of anonymity, thus conforming to dominant gender identities. 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 Conclusion

Empirical findings on anonymous online communication support both theses: online anonymity leads to both, disinhibition and subversion on the one hand, and deindividuation and submission on the other. How is this possible? I contend, that the contradiction of the disinhibition and the deindividuation theses rests on a false binary. Disinhibition and deindividuation are not opposed to each other, but go hand in hand. It is only through disinhibition – through the elevation of the pressure to be individual, compete for recognition and respect, and stand out through individual achievement – that deindividuation and submission to group dynamics come into effect. Anonymity thus liberates in both cases. It liberates from social constraints and lets people speak their mind, contesting hegemonic discourse. It also liberates to give in to group dynamics and follow strong leaders, which often proves more comfortable than fighting for what is right. Submission as effect of anonymity has not only been found in the empirical studies in social psychology cited above, but has also been observed in social movements, which provide anonymity either through online communication or simply by their large size. Often individuals participate for the social benefits of community and friendship while political goals might appear less important. Anonymity makes it easier to go with the flow of group think in crowds, swarms, and collectives.

If anonymity can lead to both, subversion and submission, the question arises, in which cases which of the effects come to bear. One explanation for the apparent contradiction could be found in the contextual conditions of the specific deliberative setting interacting with anonymity. Reicher, Spears, Lea, and Postmes argue that the salience of group identity is crucial. Drawing on multiple identities, individuals’ behaviour results from creating associations with one of these, in the experiment achieved through priming and/or through their visibility. So, in cases where democratic contestation took place, there was no salient group identity available. This explanation has some credibility not only taking into account the empirical results of experiments using the SIDE model but also looking at the those studies finding subversion as a result of online anonymity. However, it is quite likely that the salience of group identity is not the only explanatory factor. Other contextual conditions remain to be explored.

Anonymity’s disinhibition effect proves liberating in any case, whether it frees democratic subject to contest hegemony and thus contributes to diversity in deliberation or it affords individuals to go with the flow of group dynamics. The effects of these liberating qualities of anonymity for others is more ambiguous, however. While disinhibition can contribute to more
honest discussions, the airing of deep emotions, and diversity, it can also facilitate attacks on marginalised groups in society. Anonymity thus proves to be a deeply contradictory phenomenon, which provides both benefits and obstacles to deliberative democracy.

References


