The Mask of the Honorable Citizen

Why the Venetians of Old would have known how to communicate and how to do do business anonymously on the web
About the Author

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Anonymity under Suspicion

- Ability to speak freely without wearing a mask is understood as an achievement of democracy
- Bans to wear masks when taking part in public demonstrations are common
- Refusal to show face – e.g. for religious or cultural reasons – raises suspicion
  – Burka discussion
Anonymity under Suspicion

„What if a masked biker runs into me on the street and I do not see her or his face?“

„Those who don‘t show their face when saying their opinions are cowards!“

„They must have something to hide!“

Sweden thinks about ban on cash…
Internet Anonymity

On the internet, the image of anonymity is different (at least among many netizens)

Surveillance is even easier than in the real world

Customer and user profiling, tracing and dragnet investigations by „masked“ or hidden stakeholders are common, therefore the average user must have a chance to act anonymously.
Internet Anonymity

- Only anonymity guarantees balance of power on the net
- Anonymity is understood as a warrantor of the freedom of speech
Another Time – Another Culture

Imagine that you were walking around in your hometown wearing a mask hiding your face, your body and your clothes...

- How would people on the street react?
- Would you be able to do business?
- How would you feel joining a neighbourhood meeting that way?
- What would you think about politicians in parliament speaking that way?
Another Time – Another Culture

In old Venice, wearing a combination of mask and disguise during daily life and work was common among the citizens.

The use of these masks was based on an anonymity concept which was regulated by government and widely accepted for several hundred years.
Another Time – Another Culture

During political negotiations and discussions in parliamentary institutions, the citizens of Venice not only wore masks, they also spoke with an altered voice. Only the arguments should speak for themselves.
Another Time – Another Culture

The mask and disguise that made „incognito“ living possible was called „Bauta e volto“.

– Etymology: Same root as German „behüten“, „to protect“
– Hood, made of silk, covered the head down to the shoulders
– Face covered by „volto“ or „larve“
– Tricorn hat
Another Time – Another Culture

Pietro Longhi
„Il Ridotto“
(The Casino)
Another Time – Another Culture
How the Bauta was used

A mask for daily life

- Leaves mouth part free. Speaking, eating and drinking was possible.
- Hides clothing
- No problem to walk swiftly
- Eyes unhindered. Person behind mask sees everything.
How the Bauta was used

Commonly used for…

– A visit to the Casino (mask mandatory!)
– Different types of adventures (Think of Casanova!)
– First negotiations with unknown traders from abroad (until their intentions and trustworthiness were proved)

Would love to suggest this to amazon and its affiliates 😊
How the Bauta was used

Commonly used for…

– Certain types of governmental events (conferences, elections – mask mandatory to guarantee egality throughout stakeholder group)

Used by noble citizens of Venice only

(those by the way who were accountable and credit-worthy)
From the user‘s perspective

- Convenient device
- Anonymity guaranteed
- „I am a Citizen of Venice“
- „I can hide what I want to hide –like all my friends and peers!“
- „Negligible, understandable restrictions are to obtain while wearing it, I will obey them“
From the user‘s perspective

- „I will not be allowed to wear weapons along with it.“
- No limitation of business or personal life
- Reduces risks during first negotiations with strangers, „I won‘t get involved too easily!“
- Respect guaranteed
- „My arguments will speak for themselves. “
From the user’s perspective

„I know when to mask and when to unmask.“
„My political arguments will be heard.“
Seen from the outside

Seen by Venetians and friends of Venice:

– Bearer of mask is Venetian citizen, a peer
– Anonymity is guaranteed by law
– In political life, bearer of mask will not profit inadequately from his or her money or position
– No weapons
– „I know how to meet and greet.“
  („Signora (!) Maschera“)
Seen from the outside

Seen by Venetians and friends of Venice:
– „He or she has something to hide – just like me“
– „A masked person will not behave antisocial, or I will call the police and other people will help me.“
Seen from the outside

Completely different to Anglo-American „public life“ model:
In public, the Venetians made themselves irrecognizable
Seen from the outside

Seen by Others:

– „They all must have something to hide, and that must be unethical!“
– „They will behave antisocial, so beware!“
– „A nation of pirates and hedonists!“

Isn‘t that comparable to how older generations see internet geeks?
Internet vs. Venice

The Streets of Venice
- Everybody knows everybody, and the streets and waterways are narrow
- Every now and then, you have to communicate with strangers from other cultures
- Multicultural, multilingual environment
- Palaver culture

The Internet world
- No chance to know who is spying on you
- Every now and then, you have to communicate with strangers from other cultures
- Multicultural, multilingual environment
- Palaver culture
Internet vs. Venice

The Streets of Venice
- Politics, business and entertainment interwoven
- Anonymity is part of culture
  - > Carnival

The Internet world
- Politics, business and entertainment interwoven
- Anonymity is part of culture
  - > Newsgroups, Image Boards…
Other areas of interrelation

Flash-Mobs: Anonymous groups, formed by „image boards“, tend to wear masks when entering reality
Why did it work?

- Anonymity was understood as a right and a warrantor of democracy and freedom.
- Ethical and political framework valued the use of the Bauta as an „anonymizer“.
- Strong psychological contracts compensated for the risk of antisocial behavior. With wearing the Bauta, responsibility, honour and the dignity of the nation were strongly associated.
Why did it work?

- **Shared ethics**

- **Strong incentive:** The Advantages of being allowed to wear the Bauta were strongly bound to staying within the predefined limits of a well-defined role. If you misbehaved, there was a risk of being unmasked and outlawed!

- **Acceptance** is the key factor!
Something to learn from it?

Paradoxon: As long as society tends to see anonymous internet users as potential criminals or traitors and as long as anonymity is understood as a second-choice exception from responsible social life, wearing a virtual mask will always mean stepping out of the limits of civilisation.

So mistrust in anonymity fosters its misuse!
Acceptance of anonymity can only be brought forward by society, but governments may help by setting simple rules and supporting the right to act anonymously.

Venice had a good success with supporting anonymity, but taking every chance to combat and prosecute misuse whenever it occurred. Risk management seems to have worked.
Unsorted thoughts

How do we detect weapons of anonymous internet users? We have malware scanners, and the financial industry has brilliant behaviour-based fraud detection in place. Check for bad behaviour, not for the identity of users.

Please do not ask me now if I would say that old Venice would have been the perfect market for new generation body scanners !!!
Unsorted thoughts

- Prove credit-worthiness without revealing personal information. It works.
- Discuss aspects of anonymity in schools. Do not devalue it automatically.