X

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A Little Background

Here at In the Library with the Lead Pipe we’ve had several potential guest authors ask us if we would publish their work under pseudonyms or anonymously. Usually the requests we receive to post anonymously are those that are steeped in controversial situations that might have ramifications for the author in her or his work place or career. So far we have turned down all of these requests.

The problem with anonymous and pseudonymous publishing (let’s combine these terms and call them undisclosed publications) is that with this form it is easy for pieces to be unproductive and inappropriate. We at Lead Pipe maintain this blog as a place to think critically about our professional lives and to provide proactive creative solutions to problems and issues in our profession. This goal is posted on our about page: “Our goal is to explore new ideas and start conversations; to document our concerns and argue for solutions.” We thought that the tone of the proposed undisclosed pieces don’t fit with this goal, seeming like complaint pieces with little background supporting evidence, and with little or no creative and critical solutions posed.

Following along these lines we employ a comment policy on the blog, but take no stance as to the identity of the commenter. “We appreciate and invite your comments and discussion about posts on In the Library with the Lead Pipe. Constructive criticism is one of our primary goals, and we applaud it in our readers. Comments that do not maintain a civil tone or that disregard the post’s topic will be deleted. We do not edit comments except by request of the poster.”

Since the idea of undisclosed publication is not new and seems to come to us with some regularity, we thought it deserved a bit of thought, some writing, and frankly a bit more navel gazing or rumination– despite the fact that this is already well-covered (and controversial) territory in our profession. Please note that this piece is written from my viewpoint even though
it was sparked by conversations at Lead Pipe. It does not reflect the ideas of my Lead Pipe colleagues.

I deviate from my Lead Pipe colleagues in that I feel there is no reason for critical thinking and creative solutions to be masked. Anonymity should be a last resort, and there's very little room for last resorts in published professional discourse.

When I started thinking about this post I recalled my readings for Susan Herring’s Gender and Computerization class that I took in graduate school. The advent of Internet technology enabled people to reinvent themselves. It enabled women to adopt male personas and vice versa. Think about Second Life and the avatars that we are able to create for ourselves in virtual worlds. In a virtual world one can be most anything.

But this kind of liberation started before the graphical interface of the Internet appeared in the 1990s. Think about the Telnet era, even then people were presenting themselves via different personas online compared to real life. One of the most liberating things that the Internet offers for many people is the ability to assume a different physicality, identity, and personality. Amy Bruckman discussed this in her 1993 paper, Gender Swapping on the Internet (pdf).

Since the Telnet era undisclosed publication and Internet use has boomed. Blogs and blog comments can be published anonymously; characters in online games provide alternate personalities to the ones we bring to our day jobs. In short, technology allows us to do and say things that we never would do in person. As liberating as this is, it is much easier for us to not be accountable for our actions. It allows us to break social contracts and norms in the manner of rude comments and offering arguments unsupported by any evidence or logical reasoning.

**An Argument Against Undisclosed Discourse**

Hiding our identities allows us to break accepted social practice and there is nothing inherently unethical or wrong with creating a character in Second Life or engaging in gender swapping or other identity experiments online. However, the realm of library professional discourse, i.e. writing critical essays or peer reviewed articles that contribute to the discourse of our profession, is not where this kind of experimentation or use of nondisclosure should occur. Undisclosed publishing can be used to insult, act violently, and lash out in a way that defies our understanding of social contract and accepted norms of professional behavior. It can easily lead down the path of snarky and negative venting that are wholly unproductive.

What happens if you want to retroactively take credit for your previously undisclosed ideas? Walt Crawford tackled this issue in a 2007 piece in eContent. “I have seen more than one case, though, where a pseudonym has gone bad. I’ve seen the retroactive addition of a real-world signature to every post in a blog, including those that might never have been written were they signed originally. Identity revelation can happen because a blogger has a book or article published and is proud of it, referring to it in a manner that makes the blogger’s name obvious. It can happen because the blogger triangulates his identity too narrowly over time.”

Any previously published undisclosed writings may find an author backpedaling when her identity is revealed.

Librarianship has the perfect example of an unproductive undisclosed blogger: The Annoyed Librarian. This undisclosed blogger is currently hosted by Library Journal, a publication that provides news, reviews, and information related to librarianship. The Annoyed Librarian can be snarky and she can be mean. (Try her post about Anarchist Librarians and Library Porn, wherein she calls anarchists simpletons and idiotic.) Personally I think there is a difference between outright calling someone an idiot and having a well thought out argument that leads your readers to their own conclusions. While she does have some good critical ideas they tend to be masked by a breaking of accepted professional social contract.

When an undisclosed writer attacks and contributes unproductively to professional discourse she suffers no consequences. On the flip side, when this same undisclosed author makes
compelling and productive arguments the gravity of those arguments are undermined by the author's previous work. Those who choose to publish under a pseudonym, particularly a pseudonym that becomes known for bullying and counter-productive arguments, are not giving their valid, well considered, well argued, and productive ideas a chance.

Buschman et al, published an editorial in Progressive Librarian on this topic, “The inauthenticity of online interactions is a continuum, stretching from routine use of “handles” instead of names, to elaborate cultivation of false online persona, to abusive anonymity in malicious exchanges.” (p. 6) While Buschman and his colleagues focus their editorial on attacks made by political right-wing library bloggers against those with opposing views, Buschman and his co-authors’ argument is sound. They discuss the long and hard won intellectual freedom that academicians practice and for which librarians and academics continue to fight. “Intellectual freedom is a variant also meant to protect open, public exchange in the interests of an open society and democracy.” (p.4) Hiding one’s identity is not an action that points to open and public exchange.

Will Manley [14] has also taken up the issue of undisclosed discourse in American Libraries [15]. He makes some very interesting points in his editorial column from January 2010. “In a bygone era of accountability, newspapers would not publish a letter without identifying the writer. But today readers are permitted to post anonymous responses to each and every article.” (p. 112 American Libraries, and online [16] ) While Manley points toward the anonymous comments on news web site blogs and political propaganda on the Internet, his point is well taken—the accountability and reliability of a source used to matter. In libraries and for librarians, it still should.

Contrary to Manley’s viewpoint there have been recent articles and blog posts discussing nondisclosure from the journalist’s point of view. [17]Matt Zoller Seitz wrote a nice piece [18] over on Salon.com [19] that, wittily defends anonymous speech online and points to some of the ugliness it can create. “The protective force field of anonymity — or pseudonymity — brings out the worst in some people.”

Seitz satirically writes that he is pro-anonymity for its sheer ugliness: “And yet anonymous comments — all of them, even the written equivalent of high-speed drive-by shootings — serve a useful function. They show us what the species is really like: the full spectrum of human behavior, not just the part that we find reassuring and enlightening.” Do any of us want the comparative equivalent of “high-speed drive-by shootings” in professional library discourse? We are librarians and library workers, not drive-by shooters.

I personally don’t think that American librarianship is ever going to be so controversial that we need to hide our professional identities from one another. (I am aware that this is not the case in all countries, and even professional opinions may have such political ramifications where one’s life might be in danger.) In this point I agree with Joseph S. Fulda, who in The Journal of Information Ethics argues that:

I am in grave doubt as to whether the the rules announced in the third and fourth points [using a pseudonym to argue something verifiable and using impeccable reasoning] can be merged…whether it would be ethical to publish—under the veil of pseudonymity—such an argument…More bluntly, I can see no constructive purpose for such publication, let alone under the veil of pseudonymity…” (p. 82)

Fulda essentially argues that if your argument is sound why would you need to mask yourself from your intended audience? It seems less productive than making a productive argument under the auspices of oneself. When one presents a productive, insightful, and well-reasoned argument it is easier to be given credit and to laud the merits of the author.

Undisclosed publications lack credibility and are prone to counter-productivity. As a teacher and librarian I always encourage my students to consider their source. What authority does that source have to make that argument and those claims? Without knowledge of an author’s expertise, experience, and general knowledge of the subject, how are we to even consider this kind of discourse as valid?

A Brief Tangent on Peer Review

A nuance of professional discourse lies within the traditional model of peer review. Here we have an example of an accepted practice that relies on undisclosed identities. Traditionally peer review occurs in a blind environment where reviewers do not know the identity of the author
and the author does not know the identity of the reviewer. From the lens of traditional peer review it seems that a piece of writing or discourse, no matter the source or author, is judged solely on the value and productivity of its content. If we judge works based on the traditional peer review process it should follow that authorship of these articles is moot and that undisclosed publishing would be accepted practice. But it’s not. (The anonymous peer review argument is possibly how the Journal of Access Services [20] got away with publishing an entire issue [21] dedicated to the Annoyed Librarian’s writings.)

We do not use the traditional peer review model for In the Library with the Lead Pipe. We use a form of open peer review [22] wherein the identity of the author and the identity of the reviewers are known to both parties. This open peer review process means that authors are able to engage in conversations with their reviewers beyond one reading or review of a piece. She might bounce ideas off of a reviewer in the revision process. Moreover, it allows an author publishing at Lead Pipe to find reviewers who have close knowledge of the subject matter at hand.

For example when I wrote about the Google Book Search Settlement [23], I sought to have a reviewer with intricate legal and library knowledge. To this end one of the reviewers for that piece held an MLS and a JD. To me getting feedback from a reviewer that had intricate legal knowledge was paramount. In blind peer review I would not have had this option. I would not have known if my reviewers had any prior knowledge to the issues relating to the Google Book Search settlement, copyright, or law. For me using the open peer review process has improved my writing tenfold. The conversations I’m able to carry with my reviewers, and the substantive feedback I’ve received have far surpassed my albeit limited experience with the traditional peer review process.

The Last Resorts

We (arguably) do not live in a country where we can be arrested for well-reasoned arguments and where bloggers aren’t regularly sent to prison [24]. However, that doesn’t mean that there aren’t consequences for what we say and do publicly, be it in regard to politics or in the workplace. This is where the “last resort” idea comes into play. I think there IS a place for last resort and only last resort author nondisclosure in professional discourse. That place is very small and should be used only when situations are dire. Moreover, political discourse is another arena in which I feel strongly that there is a vast amount of room for undisclosed writing and discourse.

In an ideal world, substantive comments and civil discussion online would not lead to negative consequences in the workplace or professionally. However there are many professionals who do not feel they cannot speak their mind freely. Within their own organizations they might fear recourse if they discuss politics or professional ideas.

Miriam Cook [17] of The Guardian [25] writes in In Defence of Anonymity Online [26] that “Anonymity online sets us free. The facility to create our own content and comment on websites would be far less valuable to us were it restricted to posting under “real” names.” [26] Her argument is based in the political. When people use their real names online to discuss politics, they might suffer repercussions in their place of employ, hence the need for the veil of pseudonymity and anonymity when commenting on news blogs. Consider, for instance, what recently happened to Juan Williams [27]. He was fired from NPR after making comments regarding Muslim people. While I do not agree with the remarks Mr. Williams made, I can see where if he felt the need to express them, his employment would have been protected. Moreover, sometimes remarks can be taken out of context, as has been argued [28] in the case of with Mr. Williams. Ramifications can result in either case.
Undisclosed publication in the United States goes back all the way to the Federalist Papers [29], which were all published with the same moniker—Publius. The authorship of these 85 publications is still disputed today. For perhaps the most theoretical argument about political anonymity, I’d like to turn to anarchist and revolutionary political discourse.

Much but not all of anarchist and revolutionary writing occurs anonymously. The theory follows that by focusing on political actions or events and not on the author, the event takes on more meaning. Rather, the event is not subsumed by the individual identity of the person with the thought or taking the action, or by historical record.

“The most successful poisoning of class oppressors, for example, are those never known as such. Just like the perfect crime, the subversive act seeks to escape all detection, cover its tracks and avoid appearance in the archives; for the perpetrators to strike (anonymously) again. Only those who wish to be martyrs, self-publicists or media personalities would wish to wait around to offer their names and have their picture taken.” Without a Trace [30]. By Anonymous

But not all anarchists have written anonymously, as Alex Gorrion points out [31]. The ability for political discourse and thought to be penned anonymously still remains of huge import to the anarchist (non)community and other revolutionary groups.

Like I mentioned earlier, many people work in environments where it is hard to engage in discourse, even productive and well reasoned discourse, with our fear of recourse. This is probably the case for all of the submissions that have been sent to In the Library with the Lead Pipe requesting undisclosed publication. For me this kind of environment bleeds into professional discourse practices in our individual workplaces; and sometimes that can mean using anonymity as a tool.

Michael Stephens and Michael Casey made this point in the Transparent Library: Six Signposts on the Way, [32]

“Be Willing to Accept Anonymity. Anonymity can encourage people to share observations or ask questions that might otherwise never emerge. Be willing to look past nonconstructive critical statements gathered from staff or the public via surveys, comments, or feedback forms. There may be substance behind the snark to be addressed and used.

Thanks to Photo Phiend on Flickr for use of this image
What about bad or “not so useful” statements or suggestions made by staff? Name-calling, for instance, may not merit an open reply, but it’s best to address even slightly feasible ideas, if only to acknowledge the input and encourage more feedback. Explain why a particular idea might not work at this time, and direct focus to other areas. Or involve staffers in exploring the costs and benefits of particular ideas that might demonstrate their feasibility to all.”

Because of internal politics making anonymous suggestions regarding workflow and organizational changes can be the most productive tactic. Without the political weight of an identity attached those ideas may be more seriously considered when faced only as an idea, not as the person who is the mouthpiece for the idea. Take for example the suggestions of combining the circulation and reference desks into one service desk. An idea such as this might have far-reaching implications for library workflow and management; it can be very controversial. What if it were the reference manager making this suggestion? Or what if it were an hourly student worker? Who we are in the workplace can help and/or hinder change. If we are to think seriously about ideas then sometimes it is best if ideas are just ideas and not attached to identities.

So Where’s the Line?

I’d like to think that most writing and discourse in librarianship is reliable, credible, and contributes to professional discourse. It is via writing and conversation that we are able to propose new ideas, troubleshoot, engage with our professional peers, and create new and exciting work. In an ideal world libraries and librarianship would be havens of open and transparent discourse where we would all be able to contribute productively to improve our communities and workplaces. But it’s not an ideal world so we must accept that undisclosed publication happens.

Contributing to discourse in an undisclosed manner is tricky. It is typically counter-productive. It invites an author to accept no accountability for her words. It can enable her to attack and bully. Or pieces with undisclosed authorship could just become avenues for venting. And although venting can feel good it might be that venting is actually bad for our morale [33].

Sadly many of us work in organizations where there might be real consequences for making our ideas public—no matter how well reasoned they are. For these people writing publications with undisclosed attribution might be the only way to offer their ideas to the discussions happening about libraries and librarianship. Publishing productive commentary in this way should be a last resort. Will you get fired for writing this? Will your career not advance because of what you wrote? Will your idea not be heard if your name (or job status) is attached to the idea? If so, then a last resort might be for you.

Thanks to Michael Casey, Ellie Collier, Hilary Davis, and Amy Hofer for their substantive and insightful comments on this piece. Without their help this article would not have been completed.

References and Citations:


anonymous [26]


You might also be interested in:

- Lead Pipe Debates the Stealth Librarianship Manifesto [35]
- Q&A: Lead Pipe on Professional Development [36]
- Revisiting the ALA Membership Pyramid [37]
- So you want to write about libraries? [38]
- Disappearances [39]

22 Comments To "X"

#1 Comment By Lauren On November 10, 2010 @ 10:14 am

This is a really interesting topic. At the university I received my MLIS at, the director is a tyrant. A lot of faculty have been afraid to speak out non-anonymously because those who have done so are being let go. Myself and a group of students held a forum because the director is shifting the entire program online but won’t admit it to students. We did so using our real names and everything and presented in person. I also feel that things shouldn’t be anonymous when they relate to problems. Also, being anonymous should not give people in our profession a license to be vicious.
“Fulda essentially argues that if your argument is sound why would you need to mask yourself from your intended audience?”

For the very reason that you point out later – “many of us work in organizations where there might be real consequences for making our ideas public–no matter how well reasoned they are.”

that sounds like a sticky situation. I’d love to hear more about how the presentation went.

My fear is that people are too quick to take the “last resort” stance. I think we all as individuals need to consider: Is saying what you feel and arguing it productively really going to have such dire consequences? Sometimes the answer is yes, but I think we too often just FEAR consequences that might not be as serious as we imagine.

What a great post. Thank you for writing this — I have long been dismayed by the acceptance and approval that inappropriate and anonymous librarians have found online.

You are quite right to accept uncredited discourse as a last resort, though my concern is that too often people may assume they are in a position of last resort when they are not.

We as librarians need to foster a culture of productive online discourse and one that discourages the inappropriate use of uncredited writing, especially considering that many librarians today are tasked with educating their users on appropriate use of social media. If we cannot demonstrate appropriate personal and professional behavior online, how can we be expected to pass on that knowledge to others?

Emily, couldn’t agree with you more on the “fear factor,” as it were. While there can be consequences to speaking up, they are frequently not as dire as we imagine them to be. And if they are? Well, as for me, I would consider it a blessing to be let go from an organization that did not respect my right to have an opposing viewpoint (thank goodness this is not currently a problem).

A wonderful, provocative post with an excellent critical analysis. Thanks for bringing up this issue. Now “all” we have to do is figure out how to change the culture of library science so that speaking truth to power, with courtesy, is valued more highly...

Emily,

I believe you further parse the issue well. The purpose of our piece was, as much as anything, to disentangle undisclosed attribution (I like that phrase) from First Amendment rights, intellectual freedom, privacy, and a “right” to secrecy. I think your dividing line of undisclosed attribution as a last resort is a useful one – and I agree with the post that notes that imagined consequences are frequently overblown. Nice work.

We should stand-up for the right to workplace speech. Have the courage to sign when we have convictions.

Anonymous commenters and bloggers like the Annoy[ing] Librarian really do serve as “high-speed drive-by shootings.” Even many of the anonymous comments in The Chronicle, clearly get very out of control, to the point of hate speech and personal attacks.

Hiding identity when engaging in discourse can occasionally serve it’s purpose, as you mention,
and as a last resort, but I agree we will progress further as a profession with open communication.

#10 Comment By Emily Ford On November 11, 2010 @ 9:34 am

Thanks for the compliment. I agree that I think I’d rather not work in an organization where an opposing viewpoint had such dire consequences. Progress cannot happen without respectful and productive disagreement.

#11 Comment By Emily Ford On November 11, 2010 @ 9:37 am

Thanks, John. I do see a difference between privacy (where I live, who are my friends, what is my phone number, etc) and professional discourse.

It can be hard to define the line, however, when it comes to politics and profession sometimes—particularly for people such as myself who feel that being a library worker and engaging professionally in library issues IS political.

#12 Comment By Emily Ford On November 11, 2010 @ 9:38 am

agreed.

#13 Comment By Laura Zeigen On November 11, 2010 @ 10:06 am

“Progress cannot happen without respectful and productive disagreement.”

Agreed, but where did (or were) we supposed to learn this? Sometimes this learning happens in classrooms when teachers are able to facilitate such a discussion. However, aside from anyone who participated in public speaking and formal debate, where is this idea (respectful and productive disagreement as good and a necessary part of progress) taught or embedded? Supposedly it’s a core part of American culture, but too often the “respectful” and “productive” aspects of public discourse don’t make it to the table.

How does a culture (a country or an organization or a profession) transform into one where respectful disagreement is not just “tolerated”, but actively encouraged?

#14 Comment By ellie On November 11, 2010 @ 11:53 am

I think overall I tend to agree, but for me the focus is still on the content not the identity. I don’t think griping or personal attacks are productive and people are more likely to gripe and attack anonymously, but I don’t personally take issue with anonymity itself.

#15 Comment By Jean Costello On November 11, 2010 @ 9:24 pm

Great post! I agree with everything said above.

I also support moderated anonymity – that is, publishing content anonymously, on behalf of someone who feels risk of harm by being identified. I’ve offered anonymity to people who work in libraries that have told me they’d like to offer the type of analysis I do on The Radical Patron blog but cannot for fear of being ostracized by coworkers or censured by management.

What would make anonymity workable in this case, I think, is that authors would not truly be anonymous – I’d know them. My name and photo are on the masthead and I’m not going to publish anything I believe is unproductive or inappropriate.

Would be great if Library Journal used the same judgement.

#16 Comment By Lauren On November 12, 2010 @ 6:06 pm

Unfortunately, not as well as we had hoped. My personal experience was having the director of the program call me a liar for saying I had taken an online class when it was “impossible.” Um, I totally took it online, buddy. Also my advising professor was told that if she published 3 times within the year, her contract was renewed. She published 4 with a 5th one pending and he didn’t renew her contract. Said the “committee” didn’t think she was doing all she should be. She was also one of the professors that agreed with our student presentation.

#17 Comment By Lauren On November 12, 2010 @ 6:10 pm
I wouldn’t like to work in an organization like that either, but what would happen if the place becomes that way? And assuming the economy, finding another job would be difficult? I think it’s a real catch-22. It’s like that George Bush quote that was something along the lines of “if you don’t support the war on terror, you support the terrorists.” No matter what, I shouldn’t have to be bullied into changing my mind.

#18 Comment By Brett Bonfield On November 15, 2010 @ 1:40 pm

Definitely, though I seem to make decisions about what to read based, in part, on the identity of the author. I often find myself scanning an author’s bio, or running a quick profile search, before reading anything the person wrote. Almost always, if the author is anonymous (or even effectively anonymous), I’ll move on to the next thing.

I don’t know that I’d defend my strategy, but with so much available to read I think we have to have short cuts. And, given my reaction the few times I have made exceptions — personally, I think the “Ed Dante” piece in the Chronicle is a total waste of time — I think I’m unlikely to change any time soon.

#19 Comment By John Buschman On November 15, 2010 @ 1:51 pm

I do think we need to be careful in our discussions here about slip-sliding toward excusing anonymity as a necessary by-product. I believe that’s what Emily was trying to help us do with this posting. Having your boss mad at you is quite different than having your career actually, truly threatened. Boss mad doesn’t equal a reason to defend anonymous postings. That we can imagine a threat should not be enshrined *as* *the* *actual* threat. Second, we need to grapple always with the means (technological anonymity) and what it enables (anonymous unaccountable attacks). I think we are at a case where it is in-for-a-penny, then you’re in-for-a-pound in this case: without a fairly bright line, you let a certain LJ-sponsored anonymous blogger/attack specialist into legitimate discourse. Thanks all – a good exchange.

#20 Comment By ellie On November 15, 2010 @ 5:31 pm

I think I probably make more of my what to read decisions based on the identity of the person suggesting that I read the article. I probably don’t even note the author much of the time, though I may note the website that is hosting it. And of course, if something is put forward as “this study shows” then I try to go find the original study, but in terms of “here’s a take on this issue” I suppose I’m a bit of a drive-by reader, skimming for key ideas that make me think, possibly discussing them with whoever is nearby IRL, and moving on.

#21 Comment By Steven V. Kaszynski On January 21, 2011 @ 9:53 am

I just chimed in on this topic at my blog. If you’ve a mind to, have a peek. [40] Cheers.

#22 Pingback By Anonymous Authorship « the Go Librarians On March 21, 2011 @ 10:16 am

[...] professional authorship. On the In the Library with the Lead Pipe blog, Emily Ford outlined her feelings about anonymous and pseudonymous authorship. Emily condemned all forms of professional discourse in [...]
[16] online: http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/columns/thats-news-me
[17] : http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/mariam-cook
[20] Journal of Access Services: http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title%7Econtent=t792306886%7Elink=cover
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