

Anonymous at the Level of Press, Radio, Films...and Facebook.

An issue that gets brought up often surrounding the Traditions has to do with something that the Traditions don't even address: anonymity as it relates to the internet. While I find the Traditions to be of the utmost importance for the survival of AA as a whole, I also recognize that they were written in an era when methods of communication were fairly limited, which consequently left some holes for the AA of today to fill in. Specific to this discussion is the 11th Tradition, which states that "our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films." I remember when I first started thinking about anonymity and the internet. Turning to the pamphlet "Understanding Anonymity," I looked for answers. The pamphlet states that websites should be considered public media, and therefore we shouldn't use our full name or images on any public site. It goes on to say that "...the level of anonymity in emails, online meetings, and chat rooms would be a personal decision."

At first glance, this seems pretty clear: no full names or pictures on any publically accessible website, but chat rooms, online meetings, and emails, are acceptable places to break our own anonymity, if we wish to. The pamphlet is trying to set up a distinction between a "private" and "public" internet. Unfortunately, it falls well short of comprehensively defining this distinction. One could easily say that breaking anonymity on a national news organization's site is forbidden, but a break in an email to a friend is acceptable. A personal blog that is publically searchable would also fall into the "public" category.

But what about sites such as Facebook and MySpace? These widely-used "social networking" sites have their own security protocols, some of which are fully customizable by the individual users. They have their own levels of public and private, further complicating the issue. For instance, I can set my personal Facebook page to be viewed by my "friends" only, preventing anyone else from seeing the information listed. Can I break my anonymity on this level, where only my friends can see? Wouldn't this be merely the virtual equivalent of gathering all of my friends in a room and telling them I am in AA?

Facebook has "groups" where likeminded people can "sign up" and post messages on discussion boards. There are many of these twelve step-related groups on both Facebook and MySpace. There are multiple unmoderated groups titled "Alcoholics Anonymous," one with over 9,000 members. Any Facebook member can access this group and its member list, most of whom use their full names (as Facebook requires for all of its members). One could argue that this is a public break because it falls un-

der the banner Alcoholics Anonymous. Interestingly, other Facebook groups by the same name appear to have been started as a joke, perhaps to poke fun at alcoholics, but were quickly co-opted by actual AA members and are used for discussions about sobriety. But what about the "Friends of Bill W." group that has over 12,000 members? It is public (to members of Facebook), but specifically states that it is not affiliated with any organization.

I think that the solution here has more to do with Tradition 6 than with Tradition 11. Calling a Facebook group "Alcoholics Anonymous" implies affiliation, despite disclaimers to the contrary (as offered by one of the groups). If they all were titled something like "Friends of Bill W." or "Alcoholics in Recovery," then we would be killing two birds with one stone: ending affiliation with AA and allowing group members to not worry about breaking their anonymity at a public level for merely joining the group. Each individual would be responsible for maintaining their own anonymity in these groups in group discussions, but they would no longer have to worry about their anonymity being broken just for joining the group.

A major issue here is that many of these groups are orphaned, meaning that they were set up by an individual and then abandoned, essentially leaving them unmoderated and making it impossible to change things like the name of the group and descriptive text on the main page.

The most recent edition of BOX 459 has an article devoted entirely to this discussion. It ends up saying that shared experience will help bring about resolution. There is no consensus among AA members as to whether or not social networking sites are public or private. The "Guideline" paper on the internet released by GSO provides some clarification. It says that while social networking sites require a user to sign up, the sites are essentially public beyond the initial registration. Therefore any disclosure of our AA membership in public groups, message boards, or on someone else's "wall" should be avoided.

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Anonymous at the Level of Press, Radio, Films...and Facebook, Cont'd

Facebook has responded over the years to many users' demands for increased privacy and individual control over that privacy. This serves to benefit AA members, as well. Here are some tips I have compiled for anonymity-protected usage of Facebook:

- Don't join any group with "Alcoholics Anonymous" in its name, regardless of whether or not there is a disclaimer.
- If you choose to join a group for people in recovery, don't disclose that you are an AA member in any of the discussions you participate in. Talk in general terms about meetings, recovery, and steps, without mentioning specific names of organizations.
- If you choose to "out" yourself on your profile page, make sure the page is accessible to only your friends, and not to the general Facebook public.
- When creating an AA-related "event" on Facebook, make sure that it is private so that invitees don't have their anonymity broken when they decide to attend (Facebook posts an update to a member's page if they accept an invitation to an event).
- For extra privacy, make the guest list of an AA-related event hidden, so that guests aren't outed to anyone else viewing the event.
- Never break another member's anonymity without their permission. Don't post a message on someone's "wall" regarding meetings, sobriety, or AA. Just because you might not care if your friends know that you're in AA doesn't give you the right to break your friends' anonymity.
- When publishing pictures to Facebook, don't publish pictures from AA functions with your friends in them, unless you have their permission. Make sure that these pictures are only viewable by your friends only.
- Be cautious using anything recovery-related on MySpace, as MySpace doesn't offer anywhere near the amount of privacy control that Facebook does.

Many of us want AA to stay exactly the same as it was when it was founded, but this discussion brings out the shortcomings of this view. At the time the Traditions were published, this conversation about anonymity would be inconceivable. As our world changes and evolves, AA, too, must change and evolve. AA members must meet new challenges head-on, inside and outside of AA. Just as we tackle our own personal issues through shared experience, open-mindedness, and a willingness to change, we must meet new AA challenges the same way. AA must evolve with the times, or else it won't be prepared to meet the "certain trials and low spots ahead."

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