

FORD BETS THE
FUTURE ON ITS PAST

Here Comes the Dollar Rebound
Magic Bullet for Melanoma
The Recession of 2008?

OCTOBER 15, 2007 | WWW.FORBES.COM

Forbes

HIDING BEHIND THE NET

ANONYMITY
LETS CREEPS,
CRIMINALS
AND MALICIOUS
MOBS RUN WILD.
HERE'S HOW
TO STOP THEM.

\$4.99 | CANADA \$5.99





Forbes

OCTOBER 15, 2007

It started as privacy protection for the abused, the oppressed and the bashful. Now it shields creeps, criminals and malicious mobs. How to fix it?

By Victoria Murphy Barret

ANONYMITY & THE NET

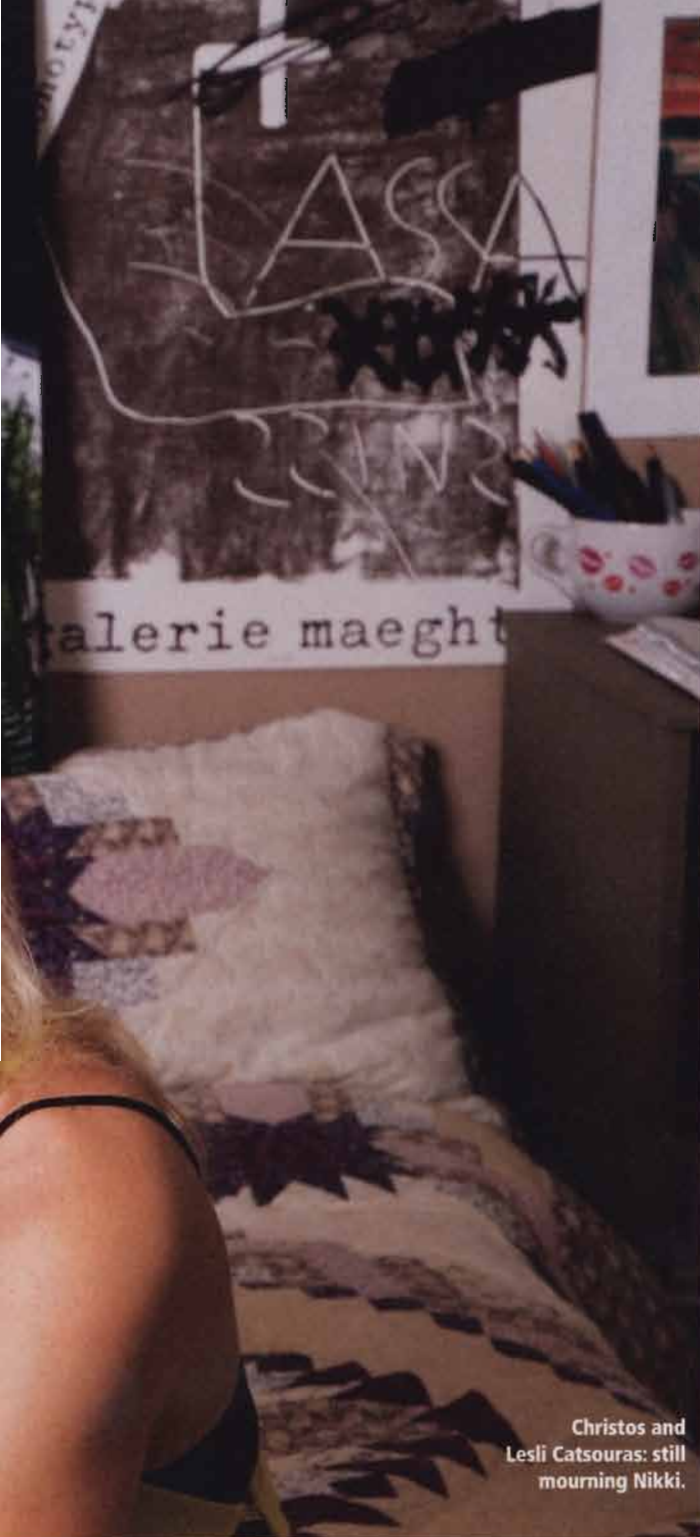


ON HALLOWEEN LAST YEAR, 18-YEAR-OLD NICOLE Catsouras had the urge to go out. She had just started college but her father had confiscated her car keys earlier that day, after a spat. So she sneaked out of the house, grabbed the keys to her dad's Porsche 911 convertible and sped off. Fifteen minutes later Nikki lost control of the car and crashed into a freeway tollbooth at what witnesses said was 100 miles per hour.

She died instantly. The pain of her parents and her three younger sisters continues, deepened by a malicious, masked mob

on the Internet. Gruesome police photos of the carnage, her mangled remains still in the driver's seat, showed up online at Google, Yahoo, News Corp.'s Photobucket and at more than 1,500 other outposts. In chat rooms and on fetishistic car-crash forums, anonymous assailants called Nikki a "spoiled rich girl" who "deserved it."

One post urged cohorts to harass her family, providing the Catsourases' home address in Ladera Ranch, Calif. On MySpace, one member calling himself "Hell Fire" posted the morbid photos laced with his own jeering commentary. Another put up a



Christos and Lesli Catsouras: still mourning Nikki.

new Nikki profile with a ghastly closeup: "What's left of my brain here: As you can see, there wasn't much." When a high school friend uploaded a touching memorial on YouTube, ghouls flooded the page with images of the accident scene.

A month after his daughter died, Christos Catsouras, a real estate agent, clicked on an e-mail from a Web site, hoping for a sales lead. Instead it read: "Whooooo I am here daddy." It came from an anonymous Yahoo account: Im Alive[sic]. He quit his job to avoid the Net and now works as an office manager at much lower pay. "Have these people ever loved? Have they ever

cared?" he asks. "If they had, they wouldn't be doing this to us." Lesli Catsouras had avoided the photos for months, but in February she ran a Google search for an article on their daughter's death—and one click later was horrified to see one. "I've spent 41 years seeing good in the world. Now I see the bad," she says.

The Catsourases have filed a \$20 million lawsuit in Orange County Superior Court against the California Highway Patrol, which admits a staffer wrongfully leaked the photos. The CHP says it has taken "appropriate disciplinary measures" but won't provide the details—because, it says, this would violate employee privacy.

As for the Catsourases' privacy, they couldn't find anyone else to sue. They struggled to wipe the painful photos from the Web—and they were all but ignored. Dozens of pleading e-mails

**"HAVE THESE PEOPLE
EVER LOVED?
HAVE THEY EVER CARED?
IF THEY HAD,
THEY WOULDN'T BE
DOING THIS TO US."**



to Google and MySpace went unanswered, the family says (MySpace insists it replied; Google has no record). Tracking down the anonymous haters proved to be all but impossible. One relative spent a month of 13-hour days lobbying chat rooms, but each time one site took down a photo it emerged elsewhere. Some obligingly removed a picture—then added a link to other sites where onliners could see it.

"Nobody seemed to think it was a big deal, except for us," Lesli says. "These people knew anonymity was their salvation."

Anonymity was built into the Internet's design from the days of its progenitor (Arpanet) in the 1960s. Since then it has become a hallowed birthright synonymous with digital freedom—from oppressive dictators, criminal corporations and book-burning crazies, from judgmental neighbors who abhor a person's sexual preferences or religious beliefs. (A FORBES writer turned anonymity into a game in the parody site the Secret Diary of Steve Jobs, until he was outed in August by the *New York Times*.)

Question this right of Net anonymity and you risk an unmitigated thrashing (anonymously, of course). So maybe we are asking for trouble when we dare to say that Internet anonymity is out of control. Today the Net still protects the abused and the disenfranchised, people who go online for help because they can do so in secret. But it also shields creeps, criminals and pedophiles. It emboldens the mean-spirited and offers them a huge audience for spewing hatred and libel. Caustic cowards are free to one-up one another in invective and vitriol—haters who would tone it down if they had to identify themselves.

A backlash has begun, and it could gain support in Congress and in the courts unless the Internet industry itself finds new

ANONYMITY

fixes. In Pasadena, Calif. a federal appeals court in May reinstated a lawsuit that could make Roommates.com liable for want ads that mention gender and sexual orientation preferences. In Connecticut two women at Yale are suing the AutoAdmit chat board in district court. They want the identity of "Stanfordtroll," who started a mean discussion thread ("Stupid Bitch to Attend Yale Law") saying that one of the women would be sodomized, had herpes, had a lesbian affair with the admissions dean and had botched admissions tests. Another unknown poster wrote of the second student: "I hope she gets raped and dies." One of the plaintiffs says it prevented her from getting jobs.

Meanwhile, attorneys general in all 50 states have allied to push MySpace to begin verifying members' ages. This, after Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal got the site to turn over names of 29,000 sex offenders who had signed up. "Those are the dumb ones who used their real names. Who knows how many falsify their information?" he says. "The Web has a real libertarian mind-set. Individual freedom should be prized and protected so long as no one is harmed. But the question is: What happens when there is harm?"

His answer: a bit less freedom.

This is anathema to Webheads. "People are cruel," says Hemanshu Nigam, chief security officer at MySpace, which requires no ID data for any post. "Anonymity doesn't inspire this, but it does remove the fear to think, to act and to explore." Still, MySpace, in June, launched a phone hotline for complaints about content. "This industry has to work together to find solutions. I hope this can be a call to action," he says.

On the Net, anonymity saves lives. In Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe has made it illegal to criticize the government. An underground activist group called Sokwanele has an anonymous blog that 1,420 other sites link to. It has been cited in the *New York Times* and in the *Guardian* in Britain. "Without the protection of anonymity, we would be arrested," says one Sokwanele contributor. The charge could be treason, the penalty death.

In Illinois a mother of four children, who is bipolar and in an abusive relationship, tells FORBES how she was ready to try suicide by jumping from her third-floor balcony. Then she paused, stepped inside and logged on to a site that had consoled her before: Experience Project. "I can see my children's smiling faces because of EP. Here I could speak freely. No one judged me," she says. At Ivescrewedup.com, run by the Flamingo Road Church in Cooper City, Fla., anonymous posters put up 100 items a day on abortion, eating disorders, drug abuse and more.

Anonymity is key to "renewal and forgiveness, and these are all things that happen online now," says Michael Godwin, a former counsel to the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Democracy requires faith that "even at our self-interested worst, we're basically pretty good. The Web would be un-American without that belief." He adds:

"Unfortunately, some people will be genuinely hurt by this."

Godwin now is general counsel for the parent of Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, which itself got fooled by anonymity. In July 2006 the *New Yorker* profiled the site and quoted an administrator who referees disputes over entries. Wikipedia knew him only as "Essjay," a tenured professor with "a Ph.D. in theology and a degree in canon law." But Essjay actually was a 24-year-old poser who holds no advanced degrees and doesn't teach, according to a correction published by the magazine. He quit, but Wikipedia still doesn't check the credentials of contributors.





Katherine Sierra:
"I was mistaken
in thinking the
Web is self-
policing."

"IT SPIRALED OUT OF CONTROL.
THE WEB
HAS BECOME A TOXIC MIX OF
ANONYMITY
AND PUBLIC FEEDBACK."



Even some Net insiders fret over this. "The Web is just too wild," says Kim Cameron, identity czar at Microsoft, which, like other vendors, is rolling out products aimed at bringing more identity to the Web. Timothy O'Reilly, a publisher and one of the Web's biggest cheerleaders, now calls for guardrails: "The perception right now is that standing up for good things is wussy, but a lot of people want more civility."

Katherine Sierra is one of them, and it was her case that prompted O'Reilly's view. An expert on online communities, she was stunned in March to read an anonymous post on her blog that began: "i hope someone slits your throat. ..." Yet she didn't

delete it—that would undermine free speech. This emboldened others. On a Web site called Meankids a user posted her photo alongside an image of a hangman's noose. "The only thing Kathy has to offer is that noose in her neck size," wrote a poster calling himself "joey." When she asked that the comment be taken down, Meankids refused; it later relented. On the Unclebobisms site, a doctored photo had her gasping for air with sheer panties stretched across her face. Caption: "I dream of Kathy Sierra ... head first."

That disturbing photo was traced to a tech consultant in Arizona, Alan Herrell. In an e-mail to a tech blogger he said the misdeed was the work of a hacker who had broken into his computer. Herrell couldn't be reached for comment. Meanwhile, other posts revealed Sierra's home address in Colorado, information on her ex-husband—even her Social Security number. "It spiraled out of control," she says. "The Web has become a toxic mix of anonymity and public feedback. I was mistaken in thinking it is self-policing." She contacted the FBI but never heard from anyone. She has stopped blogging altogether.

The blogs' vituperative retaliation frightens some victims, such as a corporate recruiter in Malaysia who talked to FORBES but asked to go unnamed in this story. In June she learned that a

making the Net more traceable, but he wouldn't have banned anonymity. "I would have established mechanisms to authenticate computers and individuals. I wouldn't have made this mandatory, but I would have made it possible." Daniel Lynch, who worked on the network in the 1970s, adds: "We were techies, we weren't trying to solve society's ills. I thought this would figure itself out, but it's taking a lot longer than I imagined."

The role of masked identity grew as the Net spread beyond science talk with the launch in 1979 of Usenet message boards, on which users had "handles" à la CB radio, and even more so in 1986 after some developers splintered off to start alternative-lifestyle forums under the suffix .alt. Topics ran from the mundane to the forbidden—how to be fat and happy, marijuana use, the joys of cross-dressing, pedophilia and thousands more. Soon 70% of all forums were under the dot-alt tag.

Then in 1989 the World Wide Web was created, based on the "hypertext markup language" invented by physicist Tim J. Berners-Lee. He made it easy for millions of techno-neophytes to get on the Web. In 1993 a programmer in Finland invented one of the first anonymous mail-

**"EVEN AT OUR SELF-INTERESTED WORST
WE'RE BASICALLY PRETTY GOOD.
THE WEB WOULD BE UN-AMERICAN WITHOUT THAT BELIEF.
UNFORTUNATELY,
SOME PEOPLE WILL BE GENUINELY HURT BY THIS."**

blog on Google's Blogspot site was masquerading as hers, claiming she likes micromanaging, throwing tantrums and being condescending. "I'm part of a global company where reputation is everything," she says. "This could be up there forever." She says Google hasn't answered her e-mails. "Freedom of speech like this is wrong. This is cowardly character assassination."

David L. Sifry, founder of blog-tracking service Technorati, counters: "Taking away anonymity would have a chilling effect on the Web. We'd lose important release valves like whistle-blowing." Though he concedes: "Accountability brings civility." But how to impose accountability—and how did we get here?

What grew into the Net began in the late 1960s as a Cold War-era network that could deliver bare text messages even after a nuclear attack. No one worried about a way to authenticate where a message had begun or who had sent it.

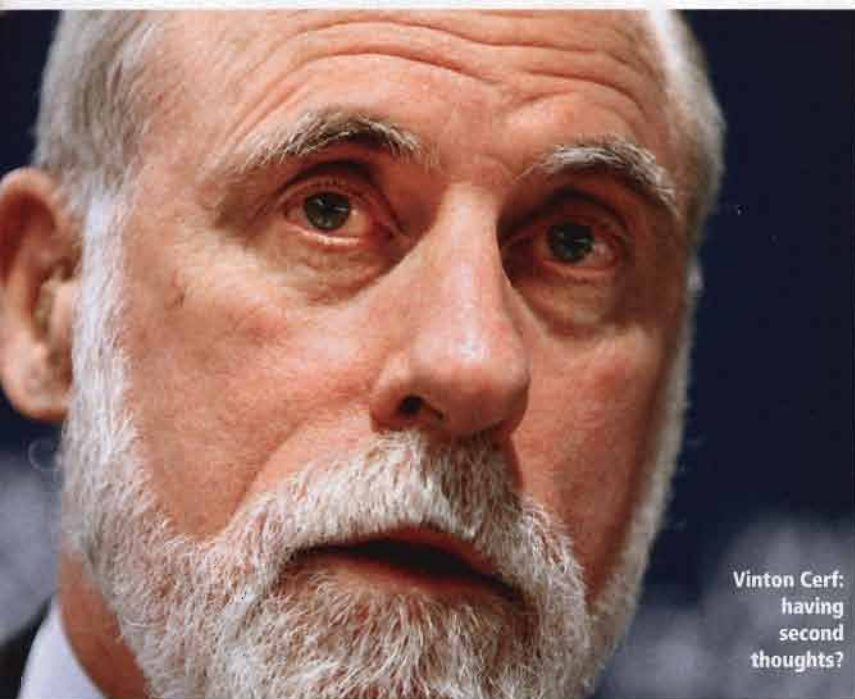
"We weren't sure if any of this stuff would work, and that's what we were focused on," says Vinton Cerf, who helped create the Internet protocol schemes still in use today. He regrets not

ers, letting a user obfuscate the source of messages he posted to a forum.

"People used it to exercise grudges," says Eugene H. Spafford, a Purdue University professor heavily involved in Usenet at the time. When he intervened with a Finland Web host on behalf of a researcher who had come under masked attack online, many of his Usenet peers turned on him. He got dozens of e-mails accusing him of censorship and received two death threats. "I found it ironic that people professing a concern for free speech were threatening to shut me up forever," he says. He resigned from his Usenet role in 1993 amid "rising incivility," he says. "Freedom of speech without any cost can be freedom from thought."

Then came the rise of anonymous chat rooms on America Online in 1994; users could veil themselves in up to five onscreen nicknames. "That was the difference between survival and bankruptcy" for AOL, says David Siminoff, an early investor and now a partner at Venrock. "The gay community came out on AOL, and anonymity was the alcohol in the drinks."

Congress added a splash of impunity to the mix in 1996, when it passed a pro-Internet law known as the Communica-



Vinton Cerf:
having
second
thoughts?

tions Decency Act. Among other provisions the law insulates electronic middlemen from libel suits. The Web site that passively furnishes a vehicle for online postings is deemed to be no more responsible for the resulting content than a phone company is for any criminal conversations that take place over its network.

The effects of masked behavior online grew darker with the rise of blogs (the first one is said to have debuted in late 1997, and a decade later some 70 million exist). It accelerated more recently with the explosion in social network sites such

dropping off ransom notes in my mailboxes. It is such a small fraction of what's going on," he says.

But using anonymity to shield the powerless from oppression and ostracism is vastly different from letting faceless attackers run amok without fear of the reprisals and penalties that would punish them in the real world. In some quarters free expression online could become a tradeoff: Say anything you like, so long as we know who really is saying it. The pendulum of anonymity has begun to swing toward new kinds of restraint.

"Bad citizens will be marginalized on the Web," vows Richard Palmer, a security chief at Cisco Systems. It has a thousand engineers overhauling routers to better discriminate between "good" behavior and "bad" behavior based on constantly changing reputation rankings of computers on the Web, though others say making this work will be all but impossible.

Facebook, with 42 million users, is less wild than its forerunner MySpace, now a unit of News Corp. Facebook limits interactions, based on

member behavior; each user has a score in a system called Karma. Your score goes down if you flirt up ("poke") too many users or if you are over 18 and e-mail a lot of kids.

The privately held site blocks some accounts for suspicious activity (it won't say how many). "We knew this would cause our site to grow more slowly, but we think the world is moving in our direction," says Facebook privacy chief Christopher Kelly. Some smaller sites set up online gated communities. At BlogHer, a female blog network run out of Redwood City, Calif., 60 editors vet postings to stamp out abuse, harass-

□

"THE WEB HAS A REAL LIBERTARIAN MIND-SET. INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM SHOULD BE PRIZED AND PROTECTED SO LONG AS NO ONE IS HARMED.

BUT THE QUESTION IS: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THERE IS HARM?"

as MySpace (with 110 million users). Since 1998 Ican, a policy-making group, has controlled domain registration on the Net, logging new sites in an open database called Whois, but the data isn't verified, and even gobbledygook triggers no alarms.

By the mid-1990s new businesses emerged to ensure anonymity on the Web. One early entry, Anonymizer in San Diego, now provides service at \$30 to \$50 a month to 100,000 customers who surf in secret via 20,000 Net addresses. When a subpoena is served, Anonymizer complies, but "we have no information to divulge," says founder Lance Cottrell. He doesn't store any data on where clients go online. He has no qualms: "I feel the same way I would if I worked at the U.S. Postal Service and people were

ment, stalking and threats.

None of this is moving fast enough for the Catsourases as they mourn Nikki's death and its online aftermath. They spent \$20,000 to hire ReputationDefender of Menlo Park, Calif. to methodically scrub the Web of the ghastly photos, contacting each site and pleading and pressuring. MySpace, Photobucket and most other outlets agreed. Founder Michael Fertik says business is good: 2,000 clients in his first year, sales at \$2 million and rising. "Anonymity on the Web turns too many regular people into beasts," he says. Lesli Catsouras says: "I don't believe in anonymity, not in this country. We're too privileged to allow this to happen. Everyone will get hurt by this. Just watch."

F