[The End of Online Anonymity](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/the_end_of_online_anonymity.php%22%20%5Co%20%22Permanent%20link%20to%20The%20End%20of%20Online%20Anonymity) - ARTICLE
By [Sarah Perez](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/author/sarah-perez.php) / December 1, 2008 7:46 AM

It seems we're approaching a new age here on the Internet. Instead being anonymous, faceless IP addresses, social computing and changing technologies have allowed the lines between the "real" world and the "virtual" world to blur. Web 2.0 helped create a world where your identity is revealed in bits and pieces as you share snippets of your life online - a photo here, a Stumble there, a tweet, a Digg, etc. However, the rise of social media is only one of the changes that is busy shaping the new web.

On tomorrow's web, we're no longer going to be anonymous. In fact, one can argue that we're no longer anonymous today, but that's not entirely true. We're still hearing of people hijacking people's names and brands on social networking sites like [Twitter](http://twitter.com/), for example, and any MySpace search for a famous celebrity will return hundreds of results purporting to be the "official" page for that person. But those days of "faking it" may be fading fast.

Being "Fake" Is Now A Crime A [precedent-setting case](http://www.marketingvox.com/watershed-ruling-in-myspace-suicide-case-may-criminalize-fake-net-personas-042175/), the Lori Drew MySpace trial, has just come to an end. If you're unfamiliar, this was a case where an overprotective mom established a fake online identity to bully her daughter's rival. The judge's ruling has now criminalized the act of creating a fake persona online. In the case of Drew, most would agree she deserves the punishment she received. However, the aftershocks of the ruling could very well impact the online identity creation process for years to come if it's not overturned.

"If this verdict stands, it means that every site on the internet gets to define the criminal law," stated senior legal policy analyst Andrew Grossman for the Heritage Foundation. "That's a radical change. What used to be small-stakes contracts become high-stakes criminal prohibitions."

Authenticating The "Real" You To address the needs of sites wanting weed out fake personas, users will have to be authenticated in new ways. Here, companies like Facebook, Google, and others are already in position to offer a solution for making sure people are who they say they are. [Facebook Connect](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/facebook_connect_readies.php), [Google Friend Connect](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/google_friend_connect_manages.php), and [Yahoo's Open Strategy](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/yahoo_opens_yos_to_developers.php), have all been busy trying to grab land on the new frontier of identity management. All of them want to be your de facto online identity provider.

No matter who wins, though, it's anonymity that loses. For the sites that move to these types of authentication methods, no longer will their users be able to create disposable usernames and passwords so they can troll around harassing others and leaving juvenile comments. Instead, all participants are themselves online - and subject to the same standards for behavior that you would expect to see if you encountered them in a real-life public situation.

The Psychological Impacts Of One Identity Even the utopian plans of [OpenID](http://openid.net/), [which MySpace pledged to support](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/myspace_aims_to_win_developers.php), is being embraced by other big names like [Google](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/google_is_now_an_openid_provider.php), [Microsoft](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/microsoft_windows_live_openid.php), Yahoo, and [even President-Elect Obama](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/barack_obamas_changegov_adds_o.php). With this federated identity, one set of credentials can follow you around the net, providing access to hundreds of sites. Although everyday computer users may not understand the technicalities of OpenID, the psychological impact will become apparent.

To the technically unsophisticated, the concept that you are one set of credentials, one username, one person across numerous sites will start people thinking that their activities can be traced, that they are not as anonymous as before...**regardless as to whether or not that is true**.

The User Data Overlords Finally, there is Google, the company we joke around as being "our new overlords." The reality is that we have, in fact, turned over vast amounts of our personal identity to this company in exchange for free webmail with pretty themes, snappy web browsing experiences, free analytics tools, more. As Allen Stern noted this weekend, "[Google Knows Where I Am and Everything I Do](http://www.centernetworks.com/google-online-privacy)." (If you want to jump even deeper down that rabbit hole, take a closer look at [Google's User Data Empire](http://www.slightlyshadyseo.com/index.php/googles-user-data-empire/)).

The terrifying vision of our future that Orwell imagined in his masterpiece, [1984](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nineteen_Eighty-Four), has been surpassed by miles. Big Brother staring at us through TV screens is nothing - instead, we've managed to create a world where we blindly, willingly, hand over our data and personal identities to a publicly traded company because they promised us they were trustworthy. And like [the Eloi people in H.G. Wells' The Time Machine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Time_Machine), everything we need is provided to us - up until the time we become the dinner for the evils that lurk just below the surface.

Struggling To Adapt In many ways, our society will struggle to adapt to the changes imposed by the lack of anonymity. Those embarrassing Facebook photos you got tagged in this weekend could lose you your job and prevent you from getting a new one. But how can we draw the line between what's public and private when so many of us have already decided that it's socially acceptable to shove cameras and video recorders in people's faces (without asking!) and publish the captured images to the net immediately?

The only way to prevent reputations from being damaged in the process is to always "be on your best behavior" in public. Frankly, that's no fun. No more wild boys nights out? No more getting silly and stupid with your friends? No - not unless you're willing to live with the consequences of having it plastered online in the morning.

When we reach the point where online anonymity has ended, instead of getting to be who we really are, the fact that we've become so aware of the fact that we're always being recorded, photographed, tracked, and traced, will have actually created a slightly altered personality instead. Like reality TV show contestants, the act of being observed will change our behavior. Our personal brand image will become our public identity and therefore our identity.

Not All Bad, Just Different The truth is, giving up our online anonymity may not be all bad - we'll have a convenient, portable friend graph, for example. We can burn our notebook filled with our usernames and passwords. Our search data will be easily accessible from one place. But for the convenience of a simple login, searchable personal data and web history, and social networks filled with friends, we'll have exchanged a bit of who we are in the process. We'll pay for our services on the new internet with our identity and personal information. When the companies we sold ourselves to use it for their own benefits, our outrage will come too late. We'll only have ourselves to blame.