

A spot of bother



By [Josh Allen](#)

Tuesday 8 January 2013

‘Spotted: University of York Library’. Yet another dispute between campus’ politically correct ‘Feminazis’ and freedom-loving ‘Banter’? Something of no interest to the apathetic majority of students?

There seems to be no overarching motive behind ‘Spotted’. The overtly political Overheard York account sets out to make a rather crude, sub-South Park libertarian point about the supposed “right to offend”. Overheard aggressively struck back at those who criticised it.

But it seems that whoever is behind ‘Spotted’ realised and regretted that they had created something potentially very open to abuse.

Whilst Overheard went out of its way to attack and provoke a response from those the accounts creators considered their ideological enemies or out to spoil their “fun”. ‘Spotted’ is no more misogynistic than society itself.

But it is this that makes it threatening. Whether we like to admit it or not, most of us are very self-conscious. Very concerned about how we come across to others, we don’t want to feel that we are constantly being judged and sized up.

Doubtless the creators of ‘Spotted’ didn’t realise that once thousands of people had ‘liked’ it that their creation would become an electronic panopticon, 1984 and Brave New World rolled into one.

What probably started as a joke between friends turned over the course of the Christmas holidays into a powerful tool for generating social angst. Whether you’re male or female, if you’re worried that you’re being watched, judged, commented on and laughed at, then a quiet, open-plan library suddenly feels very exposed and public.

Those who argue that ‘Spotted’ was a forum for free speech are very wrong. Free speech can only exist when people trust and respect each other – something which isn’t possible via an anonymous medium.

Take this article. You know who’s written it, you know who’s published it. It has been vetted. The process is transparent. Nobody knows who wrote the comments on Spotted, nobody knows who vets and publishes them. And, in a closed environment like a library, within a community like a university, that suddenly becomes very threatening simply because there is no accountability. The contrast between the open nature of the page and the opacity of how things get on to it is terrifying.

This lack of accountability coupled with the scale of the audience is what really unnerved a great many people about ‘Spotted’. Whereas ‘Overheard’ was very predictable in the sense that its purpose was clear: attacking the objects of the creator’s opprobrium. It was ultimately quite transparent in its purpose and thus easy to dismiss.

‘Spotted’, whilst containing a number of objectionable comments, its open yet utterly opaque format means anyone could become a target. Far more pervasive than a dispute amongst the twitterarti.

Can 'Spotted' find a way to moderate its content so as to overcome its sinister nature? If it can then there might be something for us all to take on board, unless we want life to be a series of Big Brother. Untrammelled pretences of 'freedom of speech', spouting from an opaque, all seeing authority is far more of a threat to individual freedom than politely asking people to observe a few basic social norms, the maintenance of which should concern us all.



3 comments

Josh

8 Jan '13 at 10:52 pm

"Free speech can only exist when people trust and respect each other - something which isn't possible via an anonymous medium."

Very interesting, whether I agree is another thing.

What about a person on twitter, in a absolute monarchy using a anonymous handle to evade punishment? Is that not free speech? Are they not entitled to free speech because they are scared to show who they really are?

Isn't it the point of free speech that it is entitled to everyone, anyhow and isn't and shouldn't be limited by anonymity or 'trust or respect' (whatever that is?).

"Take this article. You know who's written it, you know who's published it. It has been vetted. The process is transparent."

I would argue that 'Spotted' is a better example of free speech than this article because it is unvetted. Your article would have been checked and authorised and then published. Is that 'free-er'? Really?

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Josh A

8 Jan '13 at 11:45 pm

I have since regretted using the word 'vetted', I must say...

I did consider the 'absolute monarchy' example in an earlier draft of this article. And yes, I think that there is something to be said for it. However, I would never argue for absolute freedom of speech, because as I try to argue in the article I think it would probably lead to tyranny.

Whilst politically I would agree with the Twitter user, in Jordan say, using an anonymous handle to express themselves and campaign. And indeed; can see the virtues to doing so at times even in this country. I would argue that for free speech (or do I actually mean toleration of others speech?) to take root in a society it is necessary for people to have a high degree of trust and respect for each other. Our own country's history shows this, as society moved away from being one based upon coercion and explicit policing by force, towards one based upon a more normative and subtle form of policing, so a wider range of discourses and modes of expression have come to be tolerated.

This can only be a good thing. However, as I outlined earlier in this post and (possibly implicitly, I grant that) in the article I do not consider total free speech particularly free at all and thus do not support it. You have to balance it with a right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', to quote the US Bill of Rights. Key to having liberty and happiness I would contend is being able to go about your business with the threat of "social judgement" being passed upon you publically by an anonymous source to suit the agenda of an anonymous editor.

To this end, of course Spotted offers freer speech than Nouse. However, I would argue that Nouse allows for a freer “society” than Spotted, quite simply because there is that accountability, that ‘trust and respect’, which enables people to know where they stand. I would certainly hope that nobody felt threatened or intimidated by this article. However, so long as there are mediums there will be writers and editors and I think that the wider cause of “freedom” is better served by knowing who they are, as opposed to being at their mercy.

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Anonymous

13 Jan '13 at 6:17 pm

Watch out world, I'm commenting with no accountability!

[▲ Report](#)

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