

## Who Do You Think You Are?: The Effects of Internet Anonymity on Writing and Identification

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“On The Internet, Nobody Knows You’re A Dog”  
-Peter Steiner

What was the last movie you saw? What did you think? Before you saw the movie, did you read any reviews online? Maybe you clicked through a few pages of reviews on the *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb). Or quite possibly you wanted a little more snobbery critique and read some *Rotten Tomatoes* reviews. *Metacritic* is always there, too, with its heartfelt attempt at becoming a part of the Internet movie review canon. The options are practically unlimited. The rise of Internet culture has made sharing (wannabe) professional and unprofessional opinions almost too easy to ignore. But, the Internet also promises something a little more scandalous: anonymity.

Over the years, my fascination with film has prompted me to read all different kinds of movie reviews, both in print and online. Some of these reviews were written by noted professional critics (Roger Ebert, J. Hoberman, David Denby, etc.). Others, well, not so much. But, I always heeded the warnings and respected the rare positive review. Recently I have come to ask myself, why?

**To identify A with  
B is to make A  
'consubstantial'  
with B.  
-Kenneth Burke**

In 1950, rhetoric and composition scholar Kenneth Burke published one of his most important works: *A Rhetoric of Motives*. For Burke, “to identify A with B is to make A ‘consubstantial’ with B” (21). Consub . . . what? Through shared sensations, concepts, images, ideas, and attitudes, Burke argues that humans are able to understand each other; to become consubstantial. In order to become consubstantial, identities must be present. But, how can identities be present in an anonymous, digital world? Well, they can’t.

So . . . what does Burke have to do with online movie reviews? Well, for one, he established a theory of identity that has remained prevalent to this day. Although he was writing before the invention of the Internet, Burke connected how we act, what we say, and what we do to how we present ourselves to others. Audience matters. This, in turn, relates back to movie reviews because it begs the question, does it matter if we identify with the reviewer?

Certain websites such as *Reddit*, *4Chan*, *Omegele*, and *Chatroulette* (to name a few) all promote the concept of anonymous browsing and posting; So, how has the removal of identity transformed the ways in which we write? More importantly, how does anonymity affect the ways in which we, as readers, receive that information? In this article, I hope to analyze the power of writing on the Internet, especially considering the impact of online word of mouth (WOM) movie reviews have on actual box office numbers for specific films. Through this analysis, I will compare reviewers who remain anonymous to reviewers who choose to identify themselves in order to determine how anonymity transforms opinion-based writing and reception of that writing. Technology comes with a price, and the price we pay as a culture may be the price of identity.

### **I Don’t Want To Know Who You Are. I Don’t Want You To Know Who I Am.**

**Any sort of restriction placed on anonymity would result in a form of digital rebellion with unknown consequences.**

Anonymity was a promise made by the invention of the Internet; without that anonymity, there would be (as many users would argue) a rebellion. What that rebellion would look like, I’m not so sure, but it would happen. Regardless of governmental interference or influence, there always remains a voice (or many voices) fighting for the assurance of free speech through anonymity.

This anonymous communication allows for uncommon and unpopular opinions to surface. Without the fear of any repercussions, the Internet user is able to voice what can be considered “real” and “unedited” comments on societal practices, cultural movements, and even movies. This communication is viewed as

unhampered by prejudices created by race, religion, sex, gender, and limitless other factors that Burke would argue are necessities for consubstantiality.

Anonymity isn't going anywhere. At least according to Internet users who argue for anonymous communication. Although many believe that "big brother is always watching," anonymity and its effects are felt most by the common, everyday user. Most Internet tourists encounter anonymous communication daily without hesitation or a second thought. Anonymity has become a norm on the Internet. Even communication that is based on identification (i.e. *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *LinkedIn*, etc), is subject to suspicion (through problems such as false identities and "catfishing"<sup>1</sup>). Anonymity is expected, but not guaranteed.

To be fair, the Internet is not a completely anonymous entity. Although identity verification protocols are easily avoidable (a working e-mail account is typically the only necessity for verification), many users build an entirely "real" social identity through their profiles. But, when a digital identity is openly linked to a material identity, accountability rears its ugly head. Users are less willing to be inflammatory when their comments can be traced back to their physical person. When repercussions are removed, the actions (or in this case, the writing) transform. And not always for the better.

Anonymous communication takes on many different forms throughout online communication, but movie reviews represent a prime indicator of the power anonymity holds and how well anonymity is received by audiences. The amount of relevance these anonymous opinions hold within our culture can be investigated by examining the sway they hold at the box office.

## Movie Reviews: The Good, The Bad, And The Anonymous

For some, the Internet has become nothing but a cesspool of filth, trolls<sup>2</sup>, and lies. But many others peruse the digital aisles of the Internet without much hesitation. Regardless of how users view the Internet, it holds a great deal of power within our culture. How much power? Well, enough to sway opening weekend and overall box office numbers for specific films. Internet users and moviegoers often read online reviews to determine the worth of a specific movie and are basing their own decisions regarding whether or not to drop at least ten bucks on a night at the movies on the opinions of the anonymous.

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<sup>1</sup>Creating a fake social networking profile in order to deceive other users of the physical identity of the user represented in the profile.

<sup>2</sup>"Trolls" is Internet slang for a person who intentionally starts arguments, posts inflammatory or off-topic comments, and intends to disrupt the online community in order to provoke an emotional response from other users.

WOM reviews have been argued to be the, “single most important factor for long-term success of movies,” or put a little more moderately, “WOM strongly influences moviegoers’ decision for a certain movie” (Kim, N. Park, and S. Park 99–100). Also, according to Chintagunta et al., “the valence of online WOM (mean user rating) has a significant and positive impact on box office earnings” (955). It has even been proven that negative reviews have a greater impact than positive reviews (Chevalier and Mayzlin). These scholars, and many others, have proven that online WOM reviews are often crucial for the success (or failure) of certain films. Regardless of the movie, online film reviews often represent both sides of the extreme polarizing opinions: it is either the best movie a reviewer has ever seen, or he/she thought it was an abominable monstrosity that is consuming the movie culture (and everything in between). Because the Internet has provided the general public a space in which they are able to voice their unadulterated opinions on any subject matter they so choose, it has become much easier to access any opinion that has been released to the digital ether that is the Internet.

After researching almost 1,000 Internet Movie Database reviews of the film *The Big Lebowski* (my personal favorite film of all time), it becomes apparent the differences that exist between anonymous postings and identified reviewers. Figure 1 is a representation of a typical posting by an identified reviewer attempting to build a specific ethos through his identity. The review is long and well-articulated with a language closely related to Standard American English (the normalized language of academic communication). This review would typically be considered similar to professional critic reviews that fill the pages of newspapers and magazines (other mediums in which identity is critical). I investigated further by searching for other reviews written by this same individual—Steve Pulaski—and in his history of almost 1,500 reviews, all were written in a similar fashion. This appears to be the common denominator of identified reviewers.

Established reviewers typically remain active in the review community and work hard to establish a professional “feel” to their reviews. For example, Pulaski’s review of *The Big Lebowski* reads similarly to a professional movie critic review. Not only does Pulaski hit all of the conventions of a typical critic review (connections to past works of the directors/actors; a short, spoiler-free summary of the film’s plot; a strong opinion of the film based on well-articulated reasons and evidence; and a bit of a personal touch), but his grammar, spelling, and syntax feel more “professional” than the typical anonymous reviewer. After analyzing almost 1,000 reviews for *The Big Lebowski*, it became obvious

that without a sense of accountability, digital authors often forgo basic “writing rules” for speed of creation and transfer of information. But, this style of writing also reduces the impact of the review holistically. Imagine a stranger texting you a movie review; that is the feeling these anonymous reviews generate. The more a user is able to “connect” with a reviewer, the more that user can become “consubstantial” with that reviewer. Along with a picture of the supposed reviewer, the bio page reveals even more identifying material that would educate a reader. Although Burke may argue that a short bio page does not equate to any form of consubstantiality, it is more than we should expect from websites that allow for anonymity.

### **Steve Pulaski Review (8 out of 10 stars)**

The Coen Brothers already made a name for themselves after the release of their films like *Raising Arizona*, *Barton Fink*, and most recently *Fargo* in 1996 at the time. So when *The Big Lebowski* came out I'm sure they were all over this film... Besides the strange characters, the plot is equally as weird and is a little hard to elaborate... Both leads in this film are portrayed fantastically and are very funny when on screen alone and simultaneously. Bridges' character “The Dude” is one of the best characters in any Coen Brothers film.

When it comes to Jeff Bridges, I don't know a lot... When he gets into character with the LA slacker accent he can be a thrill to watch. He drops some funny one liners in this picture and is also accompanied greatly by John Goodman who plays Walter. When the duo appear on screen the laughs keep coming and coming and the humor rarely lets up.

The plot involves an unmotivated slacker nicknamed “The Dude” (Bridges) demands Jeffrey Lebowski (The Big Lebowski) to give him a new rug after his was urinated on by two robbers who were looking for a person by the same name as “The Dude's” (Jeffrey Lebowski). His request is declined but he is contacted again when Lebowski's trophy wife is kidnapped and after a series of events The Dude and Walter must return the ransom in order to get the wife back.

... *The Big Lebowski* is a highly enjoyable film. While not being what I expected, it still had a great cast and various scenes with lots of humor. I think I can say, it certainly does abide.

Figure 1: Identified Reviewer

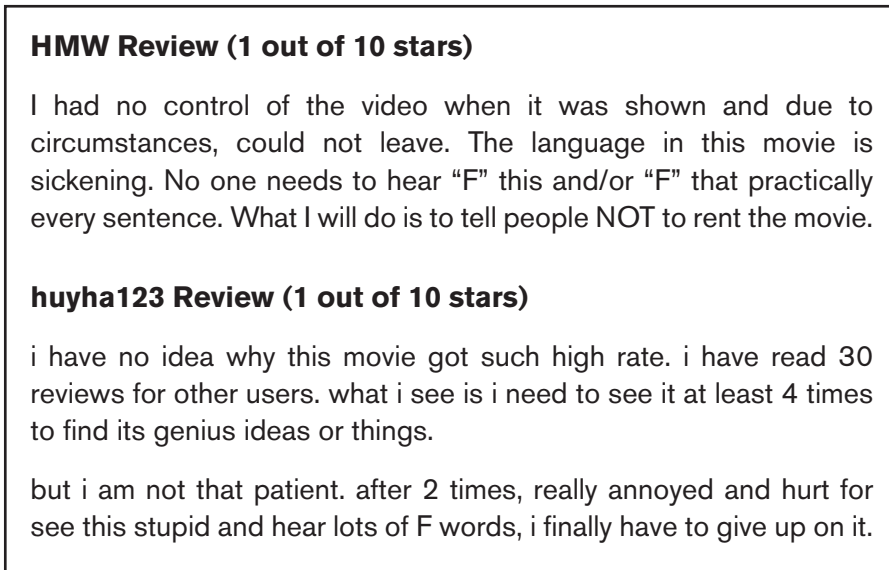


Figure 2: Anonymous Reviewers

On the other hand, Figure 2 represents two typical anonymous reviews that often populate the online movie review forums. Without a name and only a basic location as an identification signifier, not much is revealed as to the identity of these two reviewers. Thus, as anonymity facilitates, the reviews are much more inflammatory without much detail informing the reader as to why or how they came to their conclusions of the specific film. The language is basic with many grammatical, syntax, and spelling errors (something that “trolls” fill their comments with on purpose in order to spur reaction) and the analysis of the film is based solely on personal beliefs. For example, in Figure 2 the reviewer huyha123 opens his review with, “i have no idea why this movie got such high rate.” Although the review is only five sentences long, it is filled with grammar, punctuation, and syntax errors. Another reviewer, HMW, ended his review with the statement that “What I will do is tell people NOT to rent the movie.” This is a typical inflammatory statement that anonymous reviewers are prone to, considering the lack of repercussions for their writing. It is also important to mention that neither of these two reviewers have a profile picture attached to their account, removing even more possible identity markers. Characteristically, anonymous reviewers do not participate in creating as many reviews as the identified reviewers, and these two writers are no exception. huyha123 has only participated in four other reviews and HMW has only reviewed *The Big Lebowski*. Compare this with the nearly 1,500 reviews written by Pulaski and it is easy to understand the importance of creating and substantiating an identity that other users can trust in order for the review to be successful.

Both of these reviews characterize not only polarizing opinions, but also polarizing writing styles, which I believe is the result of anonymity. When a real name, photograph, and a short biography accompany a reviewer, that writer feels a stronger sense of responsibility. No longer is the writer anonymously spouting off offenses intended to irritate or anger the audience, assuming that the biographical information presented is genuine; the author is no longer anonymous and is, thus, accountable for their words. Accountability can change the way an author writes, but it can also change the way an audience reads.

### **“Cool Story, Bro, But I Don’t Write Movie Reviews, So Why Does It Matter?”**

I’ve spent countless hours sinking further and further into my couch while plunging into the murky depths of Netflix. Not to mention the amount of money I throw at my ever-growing movie ticket collection. I like movies. But, I don’t like to tell other anonymous Internet perusing movie watchers what I thought of a movie. So, what does anonymity have to do with me and to all the other silent movie watchers like myself? Well, if you read movie reviews, almost everything.

WOM reviews have caused plenty of films to bomb at the box office. When a film is expected to be received poorly, some major movie production companies will not even allow any pre-screenings with professional movie critics, hoping that opening weekend box office numbers will make up for the myriad of expected bad reviews after the initial release. Some production companies will go as far as leaking the film for illegal download before the theater release date in order to draw some attention. But, sometimes WOM reviews can revive a film from the ever-growing forgotten film graveyard. *Fight Club*, *Office Space*, *Donnie Darko*, and, you guessed it, *The Big Lebowski*, were all box office failures according to their initial and overall ticket sales. So, why can many of us spout off line after line of Tyler Durden’s anti-conformist rantings? And why is a red Swingline stapler a culturally identifiable comedy prop? Answer: word of mouth reviews. Even without the speedy pipeline of the Internet, news spreads fast. One person might enjoy a movie and tell another person about that movie. That person might watch that same movie, enjoy it as well, and tell more people about the movie. And so on, and so forth. This WOM affects the future sales and overall reception of the film holistically. But, without a computer screen to hide behind, reviews are limited to friends and well-respected critics.

When a reader is able to identify with a reviewer, or become consubstantial with a reviewer, it is more likely that the review will be successful in persuading the reader. This is why WOM reviews work so well. When we actually know the reviewer (either personally or through a collection of their other written work), it is easier to not only trust that reviewer, but to also compare our interests and

biases with theirs. Through my own experiences, I would (and still do) tend to seek out the most personally “helpful” reviews found on different review websites. These reviews are (typically) written by identified authors with whom I am familiar. Because of the identifying features in the review, I am able to better identify with the reviewers and relate my own personal beliefs with those of the author. That way, I can realize whether or not I should actually listen to the review based upon my own interests. This is something I was once

### **Michael Neel Review (no star rating)**

The Coen brothers (Joel and Ethan) are the most innovative and, perhaps, the best filmmakers working today. Or they at least rank along side the likes of Martin Scorsese and rising director star Quentin Tarantino. Think about it: *“Blood Simple”* was the best film of 1984; *“Raising Arizona”* was the best film of 1987; *“Miller’s Crossing”* was the best movie of 1990; *“Barton Fink”* was the best movie of 1991; and *“Fargo”* was the best movie of 1996. Now comes their latest effort, *“The Big Lebowski,”* which, while it isn’t in quite the same league as the above films, is still one of the most thoroughly entertaining movies of 1998.

It tells the shambling story of a man named Jeff Lebowski, who calls himself The Dude (Jeff Bridges). The Dude’s apartment gets broken into and a thief urinates on his rug. He finds out that the criminals were not looking for him, but looking for the OTHER Jeff Lebowski, the disabled millionaire (played by David Huddleston). That’s all I can tell you. The rest is really too bizarre and complicated to put into words; but it’s bizarre and complicated in the best ways of the words.

Still, what I’ll remember most about *“The Big Lebowski”* is the outstanding number of utterly terrific performances. Bridges delivers the best performance of his career and probably the best of the year as a bum lie-about who just wants to be left alone. John Goodman is the real comic gem here as the forever-loudmouthed Walter, The Dude’s bowling partner and best friend. Steve Buscemi co-stars as the dimwitted, bug-eyed Donny, the third bowling partner; there’s a small but interestingly offbeat spot for Julianne Moore; and John Torturro stops in, as Jesus the bowler, for what is probably the best walk-on performance in years. If you are a Coen brothers fan or like humor that is distinctly offbeat, you have found your movie. As a rather avid moviegoer, I found the film to be a great exercise in pointless extremities and respectable raunch.

Figure 3: “Helpful” Review



able to do when reviews (typically in newspapers) necessitated identification. With Roger Ebert for example, I was able to base what I knew about him through my own understanding of how he viewed a movie versus how I will view the same movie. Would he have enjoyed *Pacific Rim*?

Based on what I know about him, probably not. But, knowing that, I realize that I should not necessarily base my opinions on his opinions for this specific film because we differ when it comes to our opinions of certain movie genres. Personally, I loved *Pacific Rim*.

The late '90s were a weird few years for WOM film reviews: IMDB was sold to Amazon, Rotten Tomatoes was founded, and Metacritic was nothing more than a twinkle in the eyes of three young programmers. The Internet was a toddler, just learning to walk. As film reviews began to roll in with increasing speed, anonymity prevailed and the friendly critique became “trust a stranger.” But, the trust a stranger technique does not promote consubstantiality, nor does it presuppose a solidified reason as to why we should trust these digital strangers. Identity and the ability to identify with a writer creates somewhat of a relationship between author and audience. It’s a credibility, an ethos that drives a piece of writing. Anonymity may allow for unpredictable and seemingly un-punishable freedom of speech, but it doesn’t promote trust. Your five-year-old cousin’s review of *There Will Be Blood* might not be the most informed or reliable, how do you know that he isn’t on the other end of that screen name that just wrote a (barely literate) scathing review of the film? Well, you don’t. Anonymity not only changes the ways in which we write, but it also changes the ways in which we must read what is written.

### **It’s All Fun And Games Until Someone Is Identified**

Regardless of Burkean concepts of identity and consubstantiality, anonymity presents a myriad of issues facing online communities. How is one able to persuade if identity and identification are not present? Without credibility of an author, how is an audience supposed to accept a piece of writing as an attempt to sway opinions? What place does anonymity have within our culture?

Without an identity to tie a comment or review to, not only do we as an audience lose sight of an ethos that may substantiate the writing as important, but the fear of the unknown also makes a presence. The Internet functions as one of the most important tools of information delivery, while at the same time it functions

**The Internet functions as one of the most important tools of education, while at the same time it functions as a congregation of immoral and unjust actions.**

as a congregation of wild and unruly opinions. We must understand that online anonymity has social and cultural costs. Deception is a problem that presents itself within the realm of anonymity. From the classic “Nigerian Prince” e-mail scandal, to phishing<sup>3</sup> identity theft, to the increasingly more popular “catfishing,” deception runs rampant throughout the digital realm. Along with the various types of deceptions are various reasons for deception. Sometimes the intentions are as simple as identity theft (credit card numbers, e-mail passwords, online bank accounts, etc.), but sometimes the reason is a little more personal. It is almost too easy to create a new “fake” Facebook account, and even something as seemingly harmless as a social network profile can cause insurmountable social damage. With the lack of extensive verification processes as previously mentioned, you can be whoever you want to be online. It is often impossible to know who is actually sitting behind the dimly lit computer screen. There is not much protection available concerning deception, so we must look after each other and ourselves.

## Conclusion

It is clear that anonymity has affected the typified writing styles of specific genres. But, as the writing styles change, the audience reception changes as well. I may have only focused on movie reviews within this article, but the reviews themselves remain as a microcosm of the anonymous communication that occurs daily. Language and writing is an ever-evolving aspect of our culture. Both are affected by cultural transformations, while at the same time both affect cultural transformations. We must understand that writing evolves with our cultural norms and practices. If we do not account for these evolutions, we risk misinterpreting a new writing style or language.

Anonymity is a part of our culture. It is a staple of Internet discourse. Instead of merely accepting it, or tolerating it, we must understand how it functions as its own communicative community. What was the last good movie you saw? Before you answer, tell me a little bit about yourself . . .

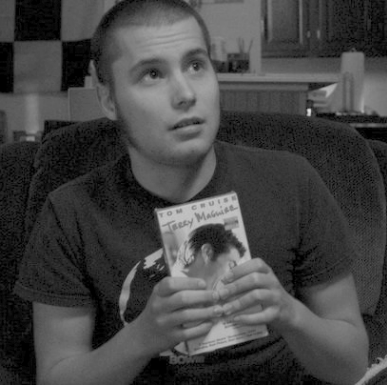
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<sup>3</sup>An attempt by users to acquire personal information such as passwords, user names, credit card information, etc., by masquerading as a trustworthy corporation or person.

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