

How social media is helping dismantle the stigma of mental illness

[Health & Medicine](#), [Mental Health](#)



“ Social media can help deal with the stigma surrounding mental illness by allowing people anonymity and also offering a forum and a place to connect both for those who want to remain anonymous and those who would speak openly about their experiences. ” – Jackson Wightman, PR Daily What Would Jefferson Say? Jacob Payne, a high-profile political blogger from Kentucky recently filed a lawsuit against an anonymous blogger asking a local judge to order this individual to come forward to identify himself/herself and to cease and desist the publishing of critical comments that Payne considers “ defamatory”. This is just one of many similar legal challenges making their way through the judiciary system in recent years. Every one of these cases questions the basic rights granted by the First Amendment as they may apply to Social Media and the Internet. Each side attempts to argue whether or not anonymous blogging is protected under our Freedom of Speech. Supreme Court justices struggle trying to reconcile twenty-first century Social Media technology with our eighteenth century Constitution.

What are the relevant contexts and the original intent within components of debate separated by more than two centuries of cultural change? This is an especially difficult task since the Web is something that Thomas Jefferson and John Adams could never have even imagined. Having never conceived of such a technology, could they ever have been expected to grant rights and protections about Social Media? And, then there is the issue of anonymity? This they may have given some thought to back in 1776. In fact, a pretty crafty patriot by the name of Francis Marion often went by the name “ Swamp Fox,” and no one but the redcoats seem to complain. By the way, Marion was the character loosely portrayed by Mel Gibson in the “ The

Patriot. " One Person's Challenge is another Person's Opportunity Perhaps, the most important Supreme Court case to date is McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Comm. In that case, The Supreme Court has repeatedly upheld the First Amendment right to speak anonymously: " author is generally free to decide whether or not to disclose his or her true identity. " McIntyre v. Ohio Elections Commission is actually a very critical ruling as it indirectly relates to the use of Social Media as a therapeutic tool to aid in the socialization of those with mental illness.

The protection of anonymity is key in facilitating critical interactions in Social Media. These positive interactions help to break down many of the stigmas associated with mental illness. It is their anonymity that allows the mentally ill to explore the Web, interact with others and openly express themselves in a manner that offers them protection from a variety of internal (psychological) and external threats (stigma). According to Web Rights Guru, Ethan Zuckerman: " Social Media gives people an anonymous forum to talk about the fact they are having difficulties, maybe think out loud, and reflect. Because the Internet has become such an interactive forum they can hear from others and they realize, ' Wow, I am not the only one. ' While the ability to cloak ones identity from the masses when sharing personal experiences on the Web is most desirable for some, regardless of their mental health. But, not everyone with mental illness prefers to remain anonymous in Social Media. Steven Schwartz, struggles with BiPolar disorder and Borderline Personality Disorder.

A former Canadian journalist, Steven authors a popular blog called “ the bipolar badger. ” In his posts he openly shares his personal experiences dealing with mental illness. . . and he is brutally honest about it all. That is not to say that he is unable to laugh at himself and share entertaining anecdotes in his writings from time to time. Steven seems to believe that revealing himself and being who he really is equates to his own well being; the enlightenment of himself and countless others; and the general good. There is little doubt that Schwartz undergoes healthy catharsis as he openly and honestly expresses his personal thoughts and emotions. Admirable is Steven’s stated goal (within his blog) to personally help make a difference in the ongoing campaign to reduce the stigma, shame and misconceptions associated with having mental illness.

For putting his neck on the line, the mental health community owes Steven Schwartz many accolades and many thanks. But this is just Steven’s story. For others, it is the anonymity that they crave allowing them to shield themselves from the insensitivities they may face from day to day. There is much hurt resulting from unfair stereotyping and the acceptance by others of inaccurate and improper assumptions made about those who struggle with mentally illness. Technically Protecting Your Anonymity All people need to talk with and learn from others about themselves and about the world around them. This is regardless of whether they wish to reveal themselves or remain anonymous. This is not just a need of the mentally ill; it is a basic human need. And, as we have learned from the courts; all of those who appreciate democracy place a very high value of their Freedom of Speech

along with their right to remain anonymous when sharing their views, publicly. Those who are mentally ill and who are able to grasp these concepts are among them.

So what basic tips can be offered to protect one's anonymity over the Web these days:

1. Use pseudonyms tied to free, international webmail and blog hosting sites. These are less easily traceable than the better known fee-based, domestic services
2. Use public computers, wherever possible. Schools, libraries and Internet Cafes are among the places that offer Social Media access for free or at reasonable cost
3. Use anonymous proxy servers like those found on a list of public proxy servers. Chances are you may need help choosing and setting up a proxy server interface, but once this is done it is nearly impossible for your IP (computer /location/identity to be traced)
4. Use a stealth blogging site like " Invisiblog," which allows blog posting by specially created E-mails (Mixmaster) rather than by direct uploading of written material. It really helps to cover one's personal trail. There are also ways to further encrypt one's Web contributions with online services such as GPG. It will take some effort or the need to ask for help setting some of these tools in motion, but it is worth the added attention.

If Social Media continues proving to be an aid in the overall treatment of Mental Illness, it becomes increasingly important for everyone in the mental

health community to advocate for the protection of anonymity on the Web. This will be a tough battle as the courts must be consistent in their rulings and it will be nearly impossible to create a double standard here. Can anyone really separate the malicious creep who posts attacks - anonymously - on the Web to avoid detection and prosecution from the mentally ill, who may also let loose from time to time -anonymously- to avoid identification and stigma? This will be a real challenge. At stake may be more than the gold standard of Freedom of Speech; it may be the platinum value of good mental health.