



ADVENTURES IN TRACKING ONLINE ANONYMITY

MIT Technology Review

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troll hunters

page 50



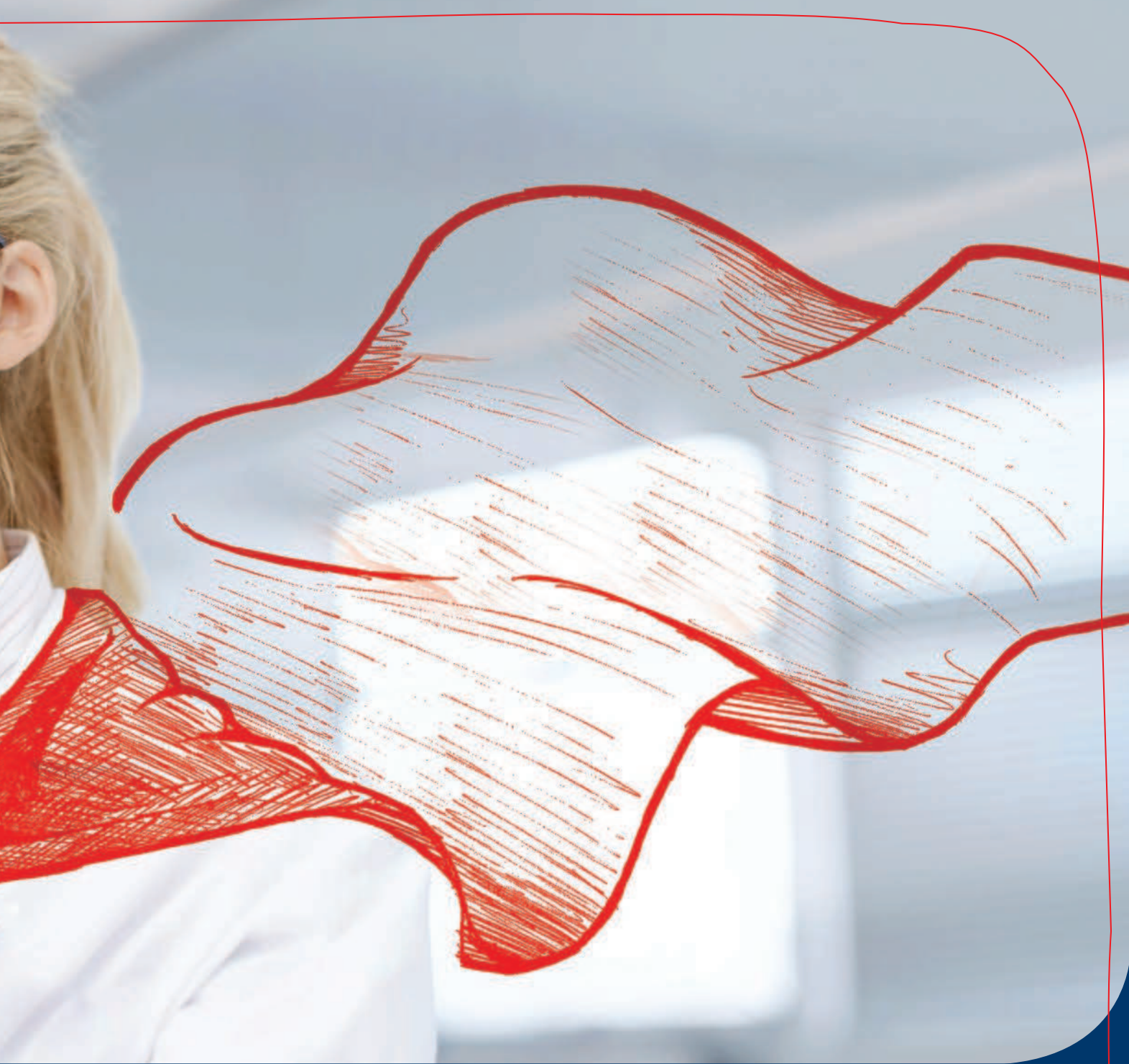
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From the Editor



IN “THE TROLL HUNTERS” (PAGE 50), Adrian Chen writes, “Old-school hate is having a sort of renaissance online, and in the countries thought to be furthest beyond it. The anonymity provided by the Internet fosters communities where people can feed on each other’s hate.”

Chen reveals the scale of *nätthat* (“Net hate”) in Sweden, a country known for its tolerance, where anonymous posters to websites nonetheless rage against immigrants who (racists believe) are destroying “Swedish culture.” As in the United States and elsewhere in the world, Internet trolls in Sweden also persecute women, often just for the strange satisfaction of frightening them.

Trolls must be moved by bitter resentments they cannot otherwise express and liberated by the heady unaccountability of anonymity. Harassing comments found on websites are sincere expressions of how a portion of humanity really feels. Some people hate other people, and technology amplifies the expression of views that (at least since the end of World War II) were mostly whispered in private or shouted at rallies of ineffectual political movements (see “Free Speech in the Era of Its Technological Amplification,” March/April 2013). But what can be done about trolling in open societies like Sweden and the United States is a vexed question about which citizens ardently disagree.

Both the United States and Sweden have set high bars for criminalizing speech: speech is presumptively free unless it violates the “harm principle.” In America, speech can be banned if it is a “real threat,” either because it constitutes an incitement to hurt someone or (as Justice Sandra Day O’Connor wrote in 2003) to protect people “from the fear of violence” and “from the disruption that fear engenders.” Citizens who value free speech and believe it necessary for democracy, individual expression, and

a marketplace of ideas are mostly comfortable with such a limited constraint.

But others are not so comfortable (see “Q&A: Shanley Kane,” page 26). Threats are seldom prosecuted, because words are slippery things and anonymous trolls cannot be found easily. More, the harm principle is not simply extended to harassing speech that seeks to oppress or silence minorities and women. Activists would like to see a wider legal definition of harm, or broader intolerance for harassment.

Chen’s feature describes one controversial approach in Sweden, where “a group of volunteer researchers called *Researchgruppen*, or Research Group, has pioneered a form of activist journalism based on following the crumbs of data anonymous Internet trolls leave behind and unmasking them.” Research Group scraped the comments of a right-wing publication named *Avpixlat*, and matched the encrypted e-mail addresses of commenters against a database of publicly available addresses. The researchers gave the names of many of *Avpixlat*’s most prolific commenters to *Expressen*, a Swedish tabloid, which then reported that dozens of prominent Swedes, including politicians from the far-right Sweden Democrats, had posted racist and sexist comments. Some politicians and officials resigned.

Research Group’s public shaming of trolls was controversial in Sweden. *MIT Technology Review* readers may also feel troubled: they might want to distinguish between real threats to individuals and the expression of views that, however reprehensible, have a tenuous connection to immediate harm. But the data journalists of Research Group were responsible for an innovation: they put a cost to trolling. By stripping away the cloak of anonymity, they demonstrated that while speech is free, it is not always without consequences.

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Contents

Front

- 2 **From the Editor**
- 8 **Feedback**

VIEWS

- 10 **MOOCs' Teachable Moment**
How online education can help erase the skills gap.
- 10 **Fixing Autism Research**
For starters, we can stop searching for a "cure."
- 11 **The World Needs Anonymity**
It's not always a bad idea to keep your identity to yourself.
- 12 **On Creativity**
A newly unearthed, previously unpublished essay by science fiction great Isaac Asimov.

UPFRONT

- 15 **An End-Around for Consumer Genetics**
The FDA has stymied 23andMe, but tests live on.
- 20 **The Mystery of Autism**
One problem: nobody agrees on how to diagnose it.
- 21 **Voice Recognition for the Internet of Things**
Getting your thermostat to recognize your voice.
- 22 **Ultrasound Gets Small**
How a new chip could upend diagnostics.
- 24 **Will a Breakthrough Solar Technology See Daylight?**
A startup's record-breaking cells meet economic reality.

Q+A

- 26 **Shanley Kane**
Is Silicon Valley hopelessly sexist?



January/February 2015

28 | **Can Japan Recapture Its Solar Power?**
A lesson in the political vulnerability of renewable energy.
By Peter Fairley

36 | **Solving the Autism Puzzle**
A new approach to finding the genes behind autism shows promise. *By Stephen S. Hall*

44 | **Desalination out of Desperation**
Severe droughts are making researchers rethink how we can get fresh water. *By David Talbot*

50 | **The Troll Hunters**
Exposing thugs, bullies, and racists on the Internet seems like a good thing. Can it go too far? *By Adrian Chen*

Back

BUSINESS REPORT

- 59 **Cities Get Smarter**
How technology can make urban centers more efficient, better places to live.

REVIEWS

- 68 **Do MOOCs Actually Work?**
College survived. But online courses are still worthwhile. *By Justin Pope*
- 72 **The Aura Apps**
Do digital filters change the meaning of the "past"? *By A. D. Coleman*
- 79 **Google Glass Is Dead**
This wearable computer isn't a hit, but the vision lives on. *By Rachel Metz*

DEMO

- 84 **Coal Plant Buries Its Own Greenhouse Gases**
Showing that carbon sequestration can be done. *By Peter Fairley*

45 YEARS AGO

- 88 **Education by Machine**
When the teacher is a computer, learning can get personalized.

ON THE COVER



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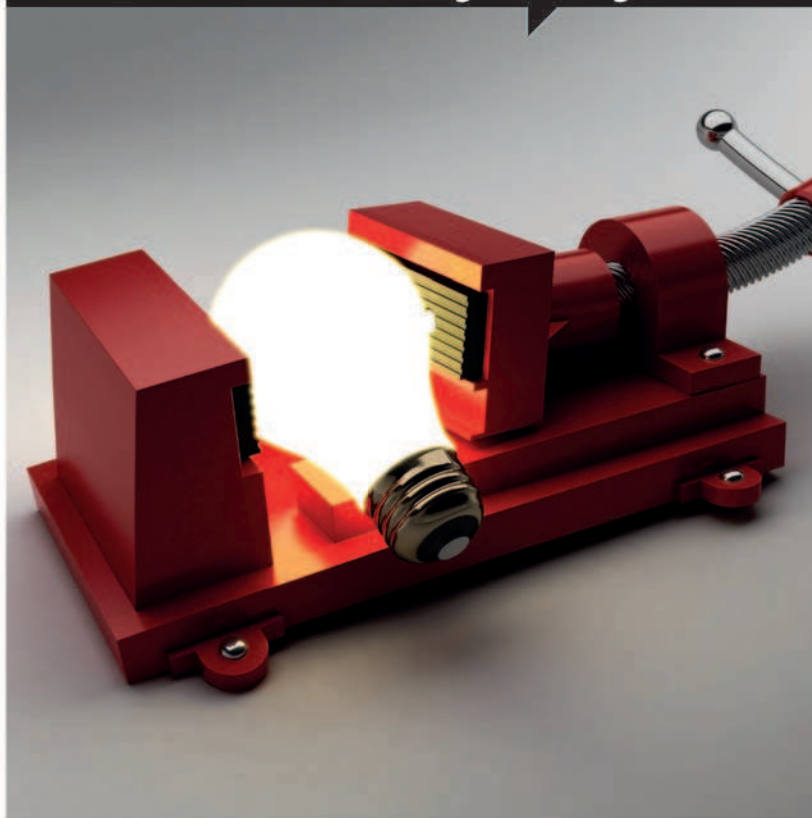
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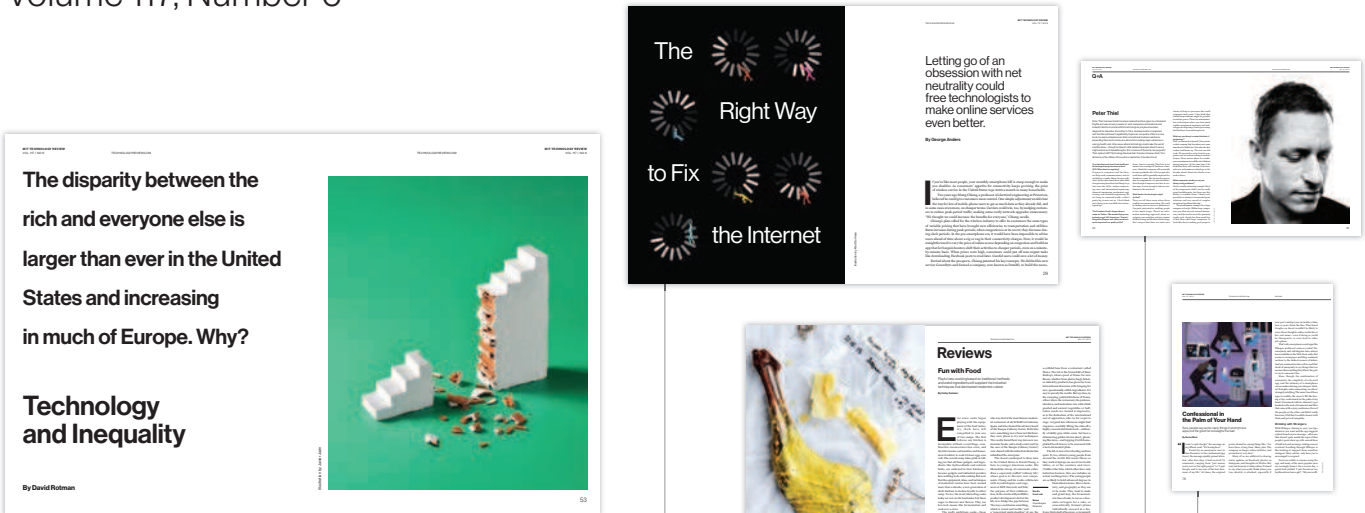
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Five Most Popular Stories

MIT Technology Review
Volume 117, Number 6



1
Technology and Inequality
MIT economist David Autor is quoted as saying we would be hard pressed to find a robot today. The self-serve gas pump, the answering machine, the word processor, the self-checkout in the grocery store, and the automated door opener are the “robots” that Autor is not seeing. Each of these devices represents an entry-level job that no longer exists.
—dennis.drew.737

2
The Right Way to Fix the Internet
Big telecom argues that their monopoly should be strengthened, which will then give them the security to make infrastructure improvements. Meanwhile, they lobby behind the scenes to make it illegal for cities to install their own fiber networks. Clearly their interests are not aligned with consumer interests. —SneedUrn
Net neutrality is not about fairness to corporations or startups. It is about letting users have full control over what they want to access via the Internet. —gubrud

3
Fun with Food
I'm by no means a foodie, but I thought Corby Kummer's article on food experimentation was one of the best I have read in MIT Technology Review. Ironic, though, that it comes in the context of the “Inequality” issue. Still, kudos to Denmark that it can maintain a still-generous social welfare net and nurture world-beating designers and scientists, in which group I'd gladly include Noma's Redzepi. —Cenk Sumen
Good story to read if you're on a diet.
—Ken Stailey

4
Q+A: Peter Thiel
Peter Thiel thinks incrementalism can't lead to anything revolutionary. But different people doing incremental things may very well be what is needed. The Apollo program would not have been possible without incremental developments that happened decades earlier. The same is true of the Manhattan Project and his other examples. —acowan
Tech feeds the lowest common denominator because that's where the money is. “Get in, make \$10 million, get out again.” Isn't that the dream of every Silicon Valley twenty-something? —anonymole

5
Confessional in the Palm of Your Hand
Being anonymous doesn't equal being honest. So besides the haters, trolls, and scammers, you're reading the online equivalent of the *National Enquirer*. —rykk.dekk
Ten years ago, we were afraid of losing our online privacy when our real names became attached to our comments on Facebook. Now we're seeing companies created to bring that anonymity back, and with that comes freedom of expression, creativity, and honesty. That's why I'm all for companies like Whisper and Secret.
—lamoore