

Publications

Beware of Internet Defamation and Cyberbullying on ‘Anonymous’ Mobile Apps

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Whitney C. Gibson

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Whether it is on Twitter, Facebook, a blog or another place online, countless people use the internet as their personal outlet to vent. But sometimes, you might have the urge to get something off your chest, but you do not want your name attached.

Thanks to mobile apps such as Secret and Whisper, people can now divulge their deep secrets anonymously, with fewer consequences – the key here being *fewer*, as there is no absolute guarantee of anonymity.

Whisper, an app available for iOS and Android, was launched in 2012. Secret, an iOS-exclusive app, is just several weeks old. Together, these California-based anonymous messaging apps have been growing in popularity and making a ton of headlines the last several weeks, many positive but others more skeptical.

The Word on “Whisper”

Whisper allows its users to type out confessions, and these messages are then placed over generic stock images. Posts are shared anonymously throughout its entire network, and users can respond to others’ posts. In February, *The Wall Street Journal* reported 90% of its users are between the ages of 18 and 24, and 70% are women, according to *The Huffington Post*. For a March 6 article, Whisper representatives told *Bloomberg Businessweek*, that it gets 3.5 billion page views monthly, and its users spend about 25 minutes per day using the app.

The Scoop on “Secret”

Secret, which uses the tagline “Speak freely,” encourages potential users to openly share their thoughts and feelings, free of judgment. The recently launched app digs into users’ iPhone contacts and links them to their Secret-using friends. Users can choose backgrounds to compliment their notes and, once posted, they can be “liked” by their contacts. Once liked, a post can be viewed by the contacts’ other

contacts (and possibly their contacts' contacts...).

A Way to Combat Bullying, or Just Another Outlet?

Many, including the developers themselves, believe these apps can prevent cyberbullying and even create "support networks." According to *The Wall Street Journal*, Whisper filters trigger words for moderation and has 120 moderators to help combat bullying. Secret, meanwhile, largely depends on its users to report negative comments.

But critics are weary. *Businessweek* reported child safety advocates worry about the bullying of teenagers and defaming of strangers. Similarly, the *Huffington Post* piece included speculation about the ability of "trolls" to wreak havoc, especially with emotionally frail young users.

On March 14, *TechCrunch* reported *Secret is now warning users not to defame others* while using the app, in what may only be "a first step" in regulating behavior. Offending users are directed to Secret's Community Guidelines, which state: "Any post that is defamatory, offensive, mean-spirited, or likely to place the targeted individual or group in harm's way will be removed."

Is Anonymous Really "Anonymous?"

Both Whisper and Secret seem to take security and safety seriously. But our experience suggests the apps' users are only anonymous up to a point, and they should never assume immunity from consequences.

Whisper's privacy policy communicates (to the few who actually read it) that it may disclose information if required by law, and there is no guarantee anything transmitted online is 100% secure. Secret, meanwhile, scrambles contact information and claims not to know anyone's actual phone numbers or email addresses. But they acknowledge "[i]t is possible to match a phone number to a hash, especially if the salt is known to an attacker."

As noted in *The Huffington Post* article, users of these anonymous apps may be able to hide their names from their posts, but the secrets and whispers are still "attached to your IP address."

We have experience securing IP addresses of offending posters/commenters on various websites, and issuing subpoenas to internet service providers to reveal the misbehaving subscribers' identities. Dealing with Secret and Whisper should be no different, meaning those who defame or bully others on these apps can likely still be caught. Thus, anonymous users of Secret and Whisper may actually only be "anonymous."

For more information, contact Whitney Gibson at 855.542.9192 or wcgibson@vorys.com. Read more about the practice at <http://www.internetcrisesattorneys.com>.