

## Reconfiguring Anonymity

### **Contemporary Forms of Reciprocity, Identifiability and Accountability in Transformation**

**Funded by VW-Stiftung, 2015-2018**

#### **Project description**

##### **1. Rationale and objective**

Anonymity constitutes a specific form of social interaction and cultural encounter, in which potentially identifying markers of individuality and difference are dissociated from specific individuals and collectives, thereby creating situational, relational and partial forms of unknowability, invisibility, and un-trackability (Marx 1999; Nissenbaum 1999; Loeber 2011; Howe & Nissenbaum 2009, Ponesse 2013). Because contemporary societies are increasingly based on networked information and infrastructures, we are facing new questions of how networks of information, properties and people can be “cut” or interlinked in order to produce, maintain, abandon or modify anonymity. This not only holds true with regard to such phenomena as the international activist network Anonymous (Coleman 2013a and b, 2010a, 2011a; Maldonado 2012; Wiedemann 2012; Frois 2014), internet-based communication, new social media, or security and surveillance (Levin & Weibel 2002; Marx & Fijnaut 1995). The social, moral, and legal significance of anonymity is also keenly reflected upon in such controversial domains as baby drop-off boxes and anonymous births, anonymous donation of organs, gametes, blood donation, as well as peer review and application procedures (see Copeman 2009; Konrad 2005; Hirschauer 2004). In many of these fields, a legal, technological and moral “imperative” towards transparency and an unprecedented advent and spread of technologies of surveillance, identification and information jointly contribute to a process in which anonymity is problematized. As a consequence, the “end of anonymity as we knew it” is debated throughout the world of media (see Baumann 2011; Mon & Harris 2011 for examples), not only since the emergence of Edward Snowden’s case.

Despite the recent exposure of unprecedented means and methods of surveillance (Fuchs 2009; Howe & Nissenbaum 2009; Kerr et al. 2009), this project does not subscribe to the diagnosis of an “end of anonymity”. Instead, it takes the stance that we are currently witnessing a massive reconfiguration of “anonymity regimes.” The ways in which different forms of anonymity are produced, and in which spheres of anonymity become productive or not, are not yet adequately understood. What kind of knowledge does it take to better understand the current reconfigurations of anonymity? How are the shifts in anonymity regimes tied to emerging new concepts and “doings” of the person? How is anonymity linked to collective social forms, to ongoing negotiations of the notions of private property, sharing

and the commons, and to significant shifts in the dynamics and structures of mediated publics?

## Reconfiguring anonymity - Project Description

In order to address these questions this project embarks on a critical comparison of different regimes of anonymity by executing and juxtaposing five closely interlinked case studies that are indicative for specific dimensions of shifts in anonymity today:

- SP1 (Götz Bachmann)** Configuring Sociality. The Production of Online Anonymity Regimes
- SP2 (Michi Knecht)** Regulating Biopolitics. Changing Regimes of Anonymity in Gamete Donation
- SP3 (Gertraud Koch)** Identity, Health Insurance and Customer Cards. How Anonymity and Identity are Reconfigured in Software-Sorted Realms
- SP4 (Nils Zurawski)** Trusted Relationships. Police, Anonymity and Power
- SP5 (Ulf Wuggenig)** Making Visible. Performance, Art and Anonymity

All case studies will produce data on anonymity regimes as they emerge at the intersections of infrastructures, practices, and regulation and along the three core dimensions of sociality/reciprocity, identifiability and accountability. Further areas of inquiry we address include emerging forms of the self and the social, new constellations of public and private, and concepts and practices of property and the commons in their relation to changing regimes of anonymity. The overall outcome of the transdisciplinary project will be new empirical knowledge about, and a new theoretical model of, the transformation of anonymity regimes (understood as situated configurations of social, technical, normative and political elements). In collaborative work with artists, we additionally create artworks and performative situations in which the structure and relevance of particular forms of anonymity can be explored beyond “the everyday social arena“.

## 2. Current state of international research

Figures and forms of not-knowing – the secret, the stranger, and anonymity – have been hugely influential in modern social and cultural theory. Georg Simmel, Max Weber and Marcel Mauss as well as later George Herbert Mead, Zygmunt Baumann and Erving Goffman acknowledged forms of “being unknown” and of “not-knowing” as constitutive techniques of modernity and foundational for society at large. It is equally true, however, that in the history of social and cultural theory the concept of anonymity very often was linked to forms of a-sociality, experiences of alienation and depersonalized modes of exchange. Konrad (2005:5) notes “the essentially negative connotations accorded to the concept of anonymity in mainstream social science literature and the longstanding academic neglect of the subject as an intellectual topic.” Both “good” and “bad” effects have been attributed to anonymity in the scholarly literature – ranging from securing personal information, enhancing liberty and autonomy, protecting rights to privacy or free speech and ensuring fairness and

impartiality, to the promotion of hate speech, cyber bullying, irresponsibility and plain crime (Ponesse 2013; Marx 1999).

The current transformations of anonymity at the intersections of technologies/infrastructures, politics/regulation and daily life, however, are surprisingly under-researched (see Frois 2009; Rains/Scott 2007; Ponesse 2013). Empirical scholarship is fragmented and the available amount of theory, model building, and conceptualization is thin (but see Ponesse 2013; Nissenbaum 1999; Marx 1999; Wiedemann 2012). With its perspective on everyday social practices and cultural concepts and competencies, this project can build on a number of ethnographies such as Konrad's work on egg donation (2005), Coleman's comparative inquiries into blood donation (2009), Frois' exploration of anonymity in self-help groups (2009), Lock's ethnography of organ transplantation (2002), and Coleman's study about hackers who operate under the Anonymous label (2010b, 2013b). While these studies provide us with methodological and theoretical groundwork, none of them has addressed anonymity in its full complexity and in a systematic fashion, nor have they linked constellations of anonymity regimes across different case studies.

The importance of anonymity as a social and political concern is also mirrored in the world of art. New notions of anonymity linked to networked digital technologies have, over the past twenty years, been powerfully articulated in a number of projects within the contemporary and media arts. Major exhibitions like "CTRL[SPACE]: Rhetorics of Surveillance" (Karlsruhe, ZKM, 2001), "Goodbye Privacy" (Linz, ars electronica, 2007), "Trans-Privacy" (Düsseldorf, 2011), and "Faceless" (Vienna, Museumsquartier, 2013; Amsterdam, Mediamatic, 2014) have presented contemporary artistic reflections on regimes of anonymity and surveillance. In a variety of online, offline and software projects that sometimes gained high international visibility, artists and activists have explored the possibilities and limitations of being and acting anonymously in public, like the critical, or critically affirmative projects by Rafael Lozano Hemmer ("33 Questions per Minute", 2000), the Institute of Applied Autonomy ("iSee", 2002), Adam Harvey ("CV Dazzle", 2010), and Marc Lee ("Pic-Me", 2014), the open collective pseudonym "Karen Eliot", or experimental software tools like "ObscuraCam" and "Anonymouth". However, there is yet no systematic research about such artistic, speculative and experimental projects and their contribution to the reconfiguration of regimes of anonymity.

Our project will, for the first time, systematically connect research about online-based forms of anonymity with research on offline practices, to better understand the interplay of both. We conceptualize anonymity not only as an interaction or an instance of communication, but as a phenomenon that is technological/material/infrastructural and social/symbolic/and discursive at the same time. Methodologically, we develop tools for an extended ethnography (Burawoy 1999, 2000; Evens/Handelman 2006) of practices, forms of regulation and the imbrications of infrastructures and human organization (Star 1999: 379). We expand classical fieldwork methods (participant observation, document analysis, interviews, focus groups) into more collaborative forms of

knowledge production with platform designers, concerned citizen groups and legal professionals. Our four ethnographic case studies pose questions about what produces anonymity, as well as what anonymity is productive for, generating a more complex understanding of contemporary regimes of anonymity in transformation. Additionally, we have designed an integrative, collaborative process that will instigate experimental situations, linking the social and cultural science research in our ethnographic case studies with artists who experiment with forms of visibility and invisibility, perform the dispersion of traditional models of identification, point to the socio-political aspects of digital anonymities and reflect on new strategies of anonymity for the digital age.

### 3. Hypothesis and Research Questions

The core of our argument lies in the conceptualization of anonymity as a regime. Analogous to Collier and Lakoff's concept of "regimes of living," the notion of "regime" is used here as a different method of defining an emerging assemblage or configuration, a "manner, method, rule or government, including principles of reasoning, valuation and practice, that have a provisional coherence and consistency" (Collier/Lakoff 2005:23). The concept "regime of living" was developed in the context of cultural and social anthropology (Ong/Collier 2005) in order to empirically investigate and re-theorize intersections of technology, politics and value (for parallel notions of "regime" as a unifying logic that generates corresponding convergences in different realms of social life, see e.g. Leisering 2003; Karakayali 2008; Young 1998). Such regimes are most often not defined through pre-given political or cultural units (nation states, group borders) and do not necessarily depend on a specific cultural or social context, but take their particular shape and meaning only in the exigencies of concrete situations (Collier/Lakoff 2005: 32).

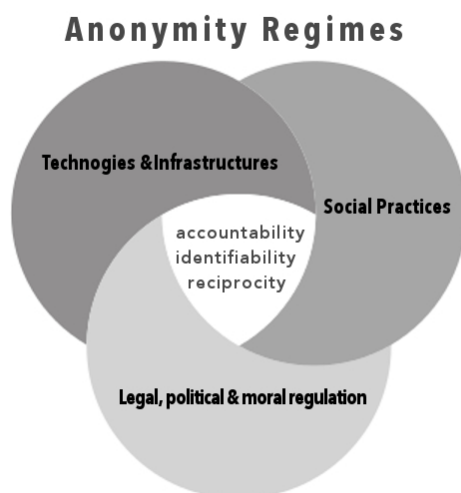


Figure 1: Anonymity Regimes

Our project starts from the assumption that contemporary transformations of anonymity take shape at the intersection of (1) technologies/infrastructures, (2) legal, political and moral regulation and (3) social practices. The reconfiguration of anonymity is therefore crucially situated in entangled online-offline worlds and has technological, social, legal and political dimensions. With the proliferation of online network media, gains or losses in anonymity are increasingly becoming the effects of not so much different types or amounts of information, but of the linkability or non-linkability of potentially identifying information to persons as they are connected to

## Reconfiguring anonymity - Project Description

variously spaced and structured networks of knowledge, properties and people (see Nissenbaum 1999, Marx 1999, Ponesse 2013).

These socio-legal-technological regimes of anonymity revolve around three central dimensions of social and cultural life: 1. reciprocity/sociality, 2. accountability, and 3. identifiability. Each of these dimensions designates a problem space in which specific ambiguities and tensions are negotiated and acted upon: Regimes of anonymity reconfigure (1.) forms and patterns of reciprocity/sociality by “cutting off” ways of giving back in anonymous communication and donation. They thereby address, among other dimensions, the logics of inclusion and exclusion, the dynamics of obligations, relations between people, as well as between people, objects and infrastructures. Regimes of anonymity transform (2.) notions and practices of accountability. This problem space refers to a tension between, on the one hand, safeguarding freedom and critique, and on the other hand ensuring forms of control, security, responsibility and attribution. Questions of accountability are also closely connected to concerns about private property, sharing, the commons and notions and practices of trust. Regimes of anonymity alter (3.) the practical politics and infrastructures of identifiability. Conflicts and tensions here emerge between individual identification and collective forms of belonging, between visibility and invisibility, and between forms of doing and undoing persons and selves. This problem space is closely connected to the unprecedented advent and spread of technologies of surveillance, identification and information we witness today, and generates the necessity of new forms of knowledge about the intersections of technology/infrastructure, regulation and social practice, by allowing and safeguarding or by limiting different forms of anonymity.

Based on this approach, the following four clusters of research questions will be investigated by four case studies, which comprise extended ethnographies of anonymity regimes in transformation:

1. What are the technical, material and infrastructural dimensions of doing and undoing anonymity in diverse networks of people, information and properties? What forms of standards, protocols, software designs, technologies, aesthetics are developed in regimes of anonymity? How are infrastructures of anonymity designed, decided upon, regulated and changed?
2. What kinds of legal, moral or ethical principles are enacted, reflected, criticized or recreated by heterogeneous actors while doing/undoing anonymity? How do diverse groups of actors legitimize, value, validate or disregard regimes of anonymity in everyday practice?
3. How do regimes of anonymity transform concepts and practices of the person, the self, the social, of private/public constellations, of property and the commons? How do notions of accountability, identifiability and reciprocity change in this process?
4. What kind of reflective, technical, legal, and social imagination and knowledge is performed and gained by actors in anonymous regimes, and how can this gain be enriched by collaborative research designs between artists and scientist? What patterns and dynamics can

be mapped within and across different regimes of anonymity? How can the public socio-technical literacy be raised with regard to managing identifying information within different regimes of anonymity?

#### 4. Project design

We study the reconfiguration of anonymity regimes and how they currently reshape notions of reciprocity/sociality, accountability and identifiability from four different entry-points into contemporary hybrid online-offline worlds: Social networking apps and platforms (subproject SP1), the biopolitics of anonymous gamete donation (SP2), identity/anonymity-strategies with regard to insurance, customer and debit “plastic” cards (SP3) and citizen-state interaction in police work and administration (SP4). The dynamics of change in anonymity regimes and the ways in which anonymity is practiced and problematized in these four fields of everyday life differ widely, enabling us to contrast and compare. While we are dealing here with distributed phenomena – the infrastructural, regulative and social dimensions of anonymity regimes are usually not limited by local competencies or national borders – we still need to engage with these potentially “translocal” or “global” regimes from the perspective of specific situations and localities. To be able to control intervening legal, economic and political frameworks when jointly analyzing our data and to focus our research, we have chosen to restrict the international scope of our inquiries. All four subprojects compare anonymity regimes in the United Kingdom and Germany, with an extension into the United States in SP 2. The UK and Germany show a stark contrast in their respective traditions of liberalism, with regard to their historical experiences of surveillance, and in their legal and regulative systems – all of core significance for the analysis of regimes of anonymity in transformation, therefore enriching our comparative analytics. Pragmatic reasons provide supporting arguments for this choice: The UK and Germany are those countries in which we have most expertise and easy access to all research fields and in which we can support our PhD students best and connect them to international colleagues.

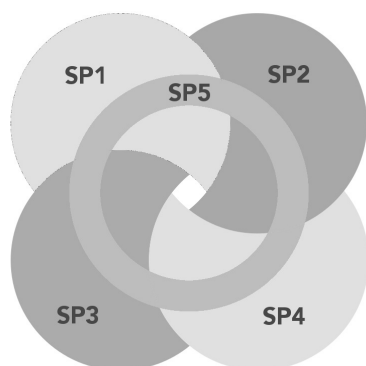


Figure 2: Project Architecture

All ethnographic case studies (SP 1-4) focus on regimes of anonymity from two angles: Firstly, how they come about and “are done.” Secondly, how the practices of varied actors in these configured situations shape the regime and reorder it: expanding or inhibiting anonymity, maintaining or modifying existing protocols, regulations and standards, thereby transfiguring them and changing related concepts of the individual and collective, the social and identity itself. All ethnographic case studies further share a focus on explicit conflicts about anonymity, mostly for heuristic reasons: the often taken for granted infrastructural, bureaucratic, technological and regulative dimensions of anonymity regimes lose at least parts of their

## Reconfiguring anonymity - Project Description

naturalized familiarity in situations of explicit dispute and debate, rendering changes in anonymity regimes and their legitimization more accessible for ethnographic research.

In addition, we experiment with new forms of collaborative knowledge production between our project and technical experts, activists and artists. Some of these more interventionist endeavors are integrated into the ethnographic projects themselves (see description below). The art-science project SP5 is specifically installed for this purpose as an interface between the different SPs. Its unique contribution to the Reconfiguring Anonymity Project has three main aspects. Firstly, series of art projects and an exhibitions which provide special occasions for presenting issues of anonymity in the sociologically particular field of contemporary art, and importantly, for debate in the public sphere; SP5 can thus contribute to the development of critical awareness as well as to a social and political competency in dealing with issues of anonymity. Secondly, the collaborative art-science projects developed with artists from SP5 create experimental and exceptional situations and thus provide poignant occasions for reflection on the technical, social and aesthetic dimensions of regimes of anonymity examined in the other SPs as well as their methodologies and assumptions. Thirdly, SP5 will create a series of thematic and methodological encounters and confrontations that will be discussed and analysed in the course of the research project by the participating researchers and artists. These will be encounters in which such informal social dimensions as humour, irony, irritation, or irrationality can come into play in a both productive and reflexive manner. It is expected that at this interface between SP5 and the other SPs, all projects will benefit from these special dimensions of exchange.

### Overview subprojects 1-5

**SP1: Configuring Sociality. The Production of Online Anonymity Regimes**, researches how social networking apps and platforms set up regimes of anonymity in Germany and the UK. Every step a user takes online leaves behind traces (Nissenbaum 1999). Such traces are central to the value chains of many social media platforms (Rheingold 2007) and provide opportunities for surveillance by multiple agents (Fuchs 2009). Digital media's ubiquity is therefore a central reason, why questions around anonymity recently became an issue of broader, public concern (Baumann 2011).

SP1 will focus on three clusters of questions, which are each based on a specific methodological approach: Firstly, the phenomenology of online anonymity: Here we ask, how anonymity fluctuates between perceived and 'real', staged and hidden forms? What shapes does it take at different moments in time, for different human or machine observers, and on varying levels, ranging from protocols to the database, and the interface? Secondly, SP1 will draw on Science and Technology Studies and (New) Media Theory (e.g. Thielmann et al. 2009), to research, how actors and actants produce regimes of online anonymity: While software developers, information architects, designers, marketers and "product owners" (which is the technical term in software development for the project



## Reconfiguring anonymity - Project Description

manager) prefigure and negotiate such regimes, in sometimes conscious and at other times unconscious ways (Suchman 1987), user practices are not only framed by such settings, but have also the potential to influence and sometimes to undermine them. Larger factors like technical infrastructures and protocols, data-driven economies, discourses about anonymity, and legal frameworks such as data protection play further crucial roles. Thirdly, SP1 will explore – now drawing mostly on social theory (e.g. Strathern 1993, White 2008) – the dynamics of sociality in the emerging regimes of anonymity. Forms of reciprocity and accountability, personhood and collectivity of users will be analyzed as “claims” (Ausländer 2012, Woolgar 2002) embedded in platform design, and through the tacit and explicit knowledge of designers and software developers about how regimes of anonymity shape accountability, personhood and reciprocity on the user side.

According to the comparative design of the overall project, SP1 will research two case studies of 3 months length in Berlin/Hamburg and 3 months length in London in a PhD project. The Postdoc of the project will coordinate interventionist experiments of building prototypes, and organize two roundtables, where the project findings will be discussed with industry, government and legal experts, as well as digital rights activists. This will not only disseminate the results to expert audiences, but also contextualize the results in wider economic, political, ethical, technical, and legal frameworks.

**SP2: Regulating Biopolitics. Regimes of Anonymity in Gamete Donation,** ethnographically investigates changing regimes of anonymity in gamete donation in Germany, the UK and the US. The field is exemplary for a massive cultural shift in regimes of anonymity within only three decades (see Klotz 2014; Konrad 2005; Knecht and Klotz 2012). Whereas anonymity had been a mandatory precondition for medically controlled sperm donation since the 1970s, current anonymity regimes in gamete transfer have pluralized and developed quite differently in the US, the UK and Germany. In the US, they have been transformed into issues of choice and design. In the UK (since 2004) and in Germany (since 2008), they have become temporarily limited in different ways, thus reconfiguring the relations of citizens and states as well as of genetically related and non-related kin. Most countries have by now imposed limits on how many children an anonymous sperm or egg donor may give rise to. Regulation of anonymity regimes has also been affected by human rights discourses and legislation advocating for a right to knowledge about genetic sources. Different forms of knowledge-networks have been built up with the intent to help identifying previously unknown halfsisters, halfbrothers and genitors. DNA and information/knowledge about the circumstances of anonymous donation are case-specifically collected, stored and archived, linked and made accessible for search strategies in so called “donor-sibling registries”. Finally, anonymity regimes in egg and sperm donation have become explicitly controversial and politicized. Their regulation has become a conflicted issue, making infrastructures, regulations and social practices of doing and undoing, containing or expanding anonymity observable for ethnographic research.

## Reconfiguring anonymity - Project Description

The project will ethnographically focus on four different kinds of archives and “donor-sibling registries” (DSR) and the infrastructures, regulations, and diverse social actor groups involved in them: In the UK, a DSR run by a centralized state regulator (HFEA, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority) overseeing the use of gametes and embryos in fertility treatment and research; in the USA, two privately run donor-sibling registries, one owned and operated by an IVF-clinic and another one organised and owned by a concerned group of donor-conception-families and young adults; and in Germany a de-centralised form of storing information with doctors, sperm banks, infertility clinics and concerned groups, which infrastructurally and legislatorial is still in its infancy. In all four cases, the ethnographic study of anonymity regimes will involve infrastructures and regulation in their historical development and participant observation of the political practices and knowledge practices of concerned groups, medical and legal professionals, families and donor-conceived young adults. The study asks: What are the effects of the designs of information data banks and networks and their import for various communities? How can one evaluate the debates about anonymity of sperm, egg and embryo donation with regard to infrastructures? How are online and offline search strategies and forms of knowledge management related? How are different forms of temporarily limited anonymity negotiated and valued by different actors? What are the dynamics of change in these regimes of anonymity?

Pivotal in the transformations of anonymity regimes in sperm donation are the political activities of concerned groups of donor families and young adults conceived with the help of genetic material from anonymized sources. The research will also follow their transnational activities and capture, how the donor-conceived start to form new social relations, identifications and a political voice, addressing issues of reciprocity, identifiability and accountability forcefully in public arenas.

**SP3: Identity, Health Insurance and Customer Cards. How Anonymity, Identity and Social Relations are Re-Configured in Software-Sorted Realms**, examines the latter processes in Germany and the UK. Increasing amounts of personal information transmitted via different sorts of plastic cards reconfigure social practices, generate specific skills of information management and reclassify social groups. The project distinguishes three types of such cards: The mandatory identity cards (type a), other cards that are not obligatory but still more or less indispensable in daily routines: debit and credit cards, membership cards, health insurance cards, or tickets (type b), and optional plastic or cardboard cards, like bonus and customer cards, frequent flyer cards etc. (type c). Behind those inconspicuous pieces of paper or plastic lie scripts (Akrich 1992) or programs (Leroi-Gourhan 1993) and infrastructures (Leigh Star 1999), realized by information technologies and subject to legal regulations. They define a specific relationship between the card holder and the service provider and as such have a social character. Which data is stored and how it might be processed is a recurrent subject of political controversies and critique by data protection/privacy activists. Recent trends in card development indicate an increase in information storage, the integration of different

## Reconfiguring anonymity - Project Description

functionalities on particular cards and an inter-linking of different card systems, developments all pointing towards a coming synthesis of all these functionalities of cards within a single smartphone device.

These processes of intensified and personalized information transfer potentially have a loss of anonymity as a consequence. A closer look however reveals that practices of anonymization are also a central element in what is actually happening. When personal data is categorized and typified according to income, level of debt, marital status, disease patterns, frequency of medical consultations, consumption patterns etc., critical consequences for individuals arise. By thus becoming part of so-called Big Data, the individual – while at the same time not mattering individually any more – becomes part of new forms of anonymous social relationships. This reciprocal relation between personalized data collection and anonymizing data processing practices constitutes a basic principle for the processing of Big Data collections. In practice, however, different types of cards are subject to completely different legal regulations, to variations in technical infrastructures and to different meanings attributed by individuals and societies.

This leads to a number of questions: Which principles structure the treatment of anonymity by different actors involved in the use of card systems? How do actors deal with the tension between the need for anonymity and the need for identity? Which practices of anonymization and identification/personalization are used? Which norms and social scripts are inscribed into infrastructures? How do infrastructures, the practices of actors and legal regulations interact? Which intensities of software sorting can be identified and what is their social acceptance? Which legal problems and necessary modifications can be observed? These questions will be approached according to the three card types (a-c). For each type of card, an example will be analyzed in both countries (UK and Germany). In the first phase, an ethnography of infrastructures (Leigh Star 1999) will figure out which regimes of anonymity are configured by the interaction of socio-technical infrastructures, social practice and legislation in the different areas. In the second phase, the research will focus on the practices of users. The main question will be, if and how their practices relate to the regimes of anonymity established by card issuing institutions, and if these practices seem adequate in the light of the users' needs for anonymity and identity.

**SP4: Trusted Relationship. Anonymity, Citizens and the State**, examines police work in their encounters with citizens in the UK and Germany. The project starts from the assumption that power is as much mitigated by identifying, making visible or exposing something or someone, as by anonymity. Anonymity may serve as a safeguard against power misuse and a mode of social equality, e.g. in elections or anonymous whistle blowing. States reserve the right to meet citizens anonymously, e.g. police officers performing their duties as non-identifiable persons, equipped with the power to make citizens identify themselves. This displays an asymmetry of power. As anonymity constitutes relations of reciprocity, identifiability, accountability and power, such relations are regulated by legal

## Reconfiguring anonymity - Project Description

provisions, technologies or practical infrastructures (guidelines, rules of engagement, settings, such as the police station, equipment), as well as by cultural scripts, and interpersonal or institutional trust. As a mode of social formation, anonymity is subject to change and adaptability, which is why the state-citizen relations are a good field to study and understand the dynamics of possible changes – both within the relationship, and of the regime itself.

In this case study we look at contrasting examples of police-citizen interaction in which regimes of anonymity (a.) are an important dimension of the overall constitution, and (b.) may represent different ends of a continuum of the relations between state and citizens, i.e. police as well as mundane agencies representing the state. The leading nexus for the study is anonymity of power (police) vs. power of anonymity (citizens). Fieldwork will look into the practices of police to remain anonymous (undercover officers, informers, public order policing) and explore the experiences of citizens in encounters with state authorities and police, regarding anonymity (e.g. anonymous reporting, informing). Main questions for this research are: (a.) how do the actors negotiate, construct and perform anonymity in practice, in the very encounters and to what ends?; (b.) what kind of power is provided by regimes of anonymity such as those performed and upheld by the police?; and (c.) does transparency create a new atmosphere of reciprocity, accountability and trust?

These questions and encounters will be explored in two different and contrasting political settings (Hamburg and Belfast) to gain a diverse, but complementary overview of how anonymity is configured, shaped and changes affect issues of trust, accountability and reciprocity: Belfast has a long and difficult history of citizen-state-police relations. Anonymity did and does play a role on various levels, from hiding the fact of being a police officer from friends, family and enemies, to the fact that anonymity was and still is a vital aspect of survival and security. Hamburg, although having a different history regarding its police and its general past, has seen some violent protest in recent years and a broad discussion over the demand to make police officers identifiable, especially in public order policing situations.

**SP5: Making Visible. Performance, Art and Anonymity**, invites a number of internationally renowned artists and groups to participate in the research project on regimes of anonymity in transformation by creating new art projects that will be developed alongside and in dialogue with the other subprojects. The areas of technical and social transformation where regimes of anonymity have been most crucially tackled in recent years – video and data surveillance, online commerce and services, online and offline mediated communication, hybrid and virtual communication spaces – have received heightened critical attention from artists and media activists, including such groups as The Yesmen, Critical Art Ensemble, Institute of Applied Autonomy, Übermorgen, Irrational, 01...org, Wachter & Jud, and others, who explored issues like online identity, the data body, data vulnerability, or surveillance.

## Reconfiguring anonymity - Project Description

The research project "Making Visible" addresses the questions: How do contemporary artists address the notion of anonymity? Which aspects of anonymity do current art projects focus on? How can the experimental methods of art-based research contribute to the interdisciplinary study of anonymity as a social phenomenon? The artists envisaged for participation in SP5 are Aram Bartholl (D), Heath Bunting (UK), Paolo Cirio (US/IT), Knowbotiq (AT/CH), all of whom have reflected on strategies for dealing with regimes of anonymity in the digital age through methods of experimentation and intervention. Without wanting to prescribe their creative process that will develop in the course of the project, these artists have been chosen on the basis of their prior work and expertise. They have had experience with connecting online and offline spaces, with offering speculative and "secure" solutions for digitally based collaborations, or developed analytical and practical tools for understanding and "hacking" identity systems of exclusion, both physical and virtual. Others have produced works on the technical, juridical and social vulnerabilities of online services and social media websites, and developed several applications that subvert state surveillance and help individuals and activist groups in countries such as China or Egypt to communicate safely, or worked in public spaces, both offline and online, and testing their specific potentials for in/visibility, agency, and subjectivation. This prior expertise of the selected artists will deeply help inform all subprojects. All artists will be matched with relevant sub-projects.

SP5 will instigate experimental situations in which the structure and relevance of particular forms of anonymity can be explored. The commissioned art projects will be geared towards highlighting aspects of anonymity that cannot easily be studied "in the everyday social arena", but that can be tested, provoked and dramatized in the specific, semiautonomous context of the art field. From the analysis of these events and instances, conclusions can be drawn about the structures and general status of anonymity in contemporary society.

## 5. Methods

Regimes of anonymity do not have a single geographic site at which they can be studied. Rather, they need to be understood as distributed, emerging assemblages (Kelty 2008:19). We therefore have not designed our four ethnographic case studies (sub-projects 1-4) in view of their geographical transmission or territorial coverage, but with an eye to the observability of infrastructures, regulations and practices in situations of conflict, and to conceptual inter-connections of problems (reconfigurations of reciprocity, identifiability, and accountability). Methodologically, regimes of anonymity can be researched in the logics of extended ethnographies (Gluckman 1961; Evens & Handelman 2006; Burawoy 2000), focusing on situations of conflict as social processes by following cases over extended periods of time and if necessary from one setting to the next (Burawoy 2000: 17; Mathar 2008; Mitchell 2006). The ethnography of infrastructures, information systems, regulations and other "abstracta" poses methodological challenges of its own (Beck, Niewöhner & Sørensen

## Reconfiguring anonymity - Project Description

2012; Knecht 2013; Star 1999). In order to research infrastructures and regulations as part of human organisation and to make visible the values and ideas, practices and relations inscribed in technologies and networked information, the classical ethnographic tool kit of (1.) linked sets of interviews with different actor groups – designers (Federath 2001), experts (Holmes & Marcus 2005), users (Woolgar 1999), concerned groups in anonymity regimes –, (2.) participant observation, and (3.) focus groups, has to be expanded (Marcus & Faubion 2009) to also include a wide mix of ethnographic methods for the study of infrastructures (Star 1999) and technologies, like software (Chun 2008), interfaces (Suchman 1987), and user studies (Bachmann and Wittel 2006; Woolgar 2002). To study the history of infrastructures, standards and regulations, supplementing document analysis is needed.

A second expansion of the classical ethnographic toolset that we will undertake is with regard to collaborative forms of knowledge production between social/cultural sciences, artists and different target groups (Besteman 2013; Fluehr-Lobban 2008; Lassiter 2005). We here expand from

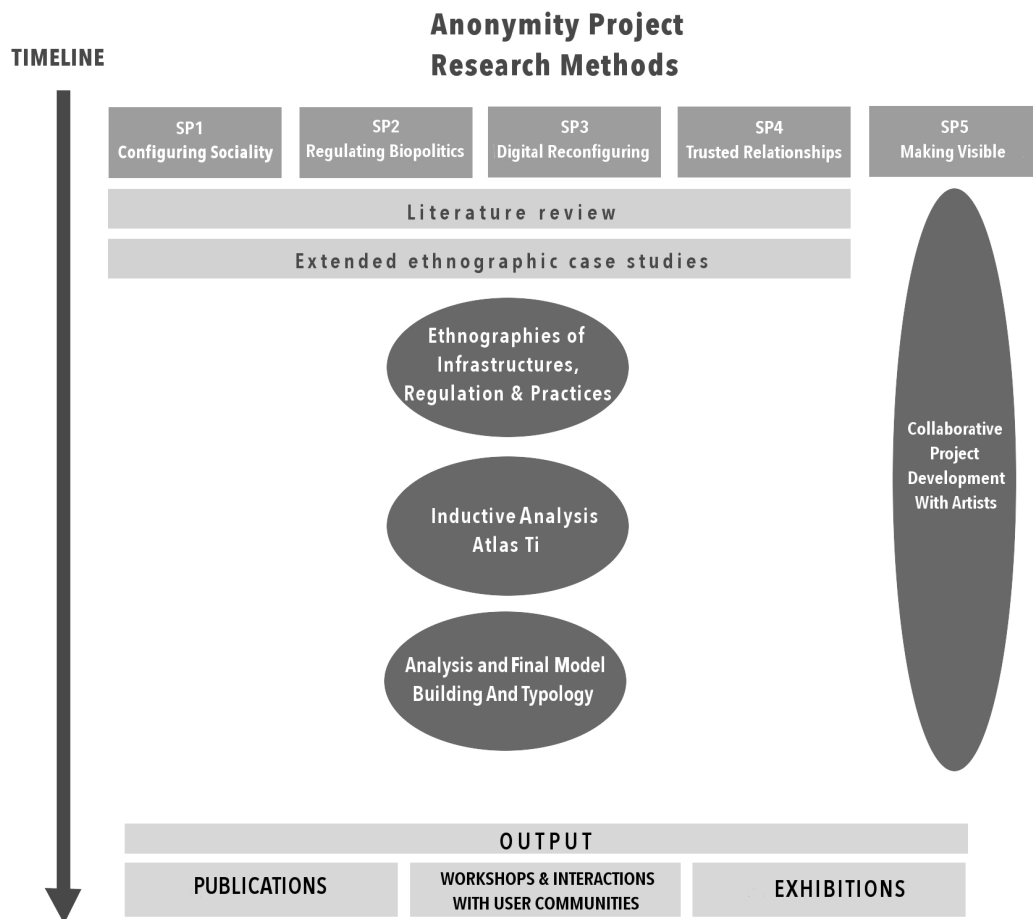


Figure 3: Research Methods

## Reconfiguring anonymity - Project Description

observation more into intervention (see Binder et al. 2013). We use round tables and focus groups to install feedback loops between the results of our research and experiences and knowledge of various actors in our study fields, validating our results in dialogue with different interest groups. SP1 will build and experiment with self-designed prototypes of social media platforms in order to understand a specific anonymity regime. SP3 will feedback results to lawmakers and data protection activists. Of central importance for the project group are experiments with new forms of collaboration between artists and social and cultural scientists (all SPs) (cf. Wesseling 2011; Peters 2013; Borgdorff/Schwab 2014; for the epistemological impact and the methodological role of art-based research applied in the humanities and social sciences see Cole/Knowles 2008; Leavy 2009; Bippus 2009; Barone/Eisner 2012). Art offers methodologies and forms of observation and intervention which can complement social science methodologies, but which are also unique in their deliberately undisciplined, often non-utilitarian and a-logical approaches to social structures and phenomena. In its tendency towards both unorthodoxy and representation, art can act as an important interface in the dialogue between science and society. The art-science projects developed in SP5 will test regimes of anonymity by creating unusual, provocative and counter-intuitive situations in which these regimes can be observed and tested, and their transformation or modification imagined, or speculated upon. The goal of these art projects is to offer a counterpoint and a reflective surface for the individual SPs, as well as providing distillations of the overall research topics which can be presented in a public exhibition and which will communicate these topics in a different and less formalized way than an academic research paper or lecture can.

All sub-projects start their work by systematically reviewing the research literature. Early working papers will evaluate and synthesize these findings along the core dimensions of identifiability (SP2 and 5), reciprocity/sociality (SP1, 2 and 4) and accountability (SP1, 3 and 4). The mid-term working papers produced by all sub-projects will specifically review moral, ethical and legal regulation of anonymity in the UK, Germany, and the US. The group will then generate their own data corpus, which will be analyzed and interpreted not only within single sub-projects, but also collectively across field sites with the help of ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software. Building on the results, we will produce a new theoretical model on infrastructures, technologies, practices and regulation within current regimes of anonymity in transformation, and new methods for research.

### **Management and Collaboration**

Whereas the management of the scholarly work will be organised collaboratively by all PIs the coordination of the project (updates, overall budgeting, overall monitoring and timetabling) will be performed predominantly by the speaker (SP2, Knecht, Bremen), in close cooperation with project leaders Zurawski (SP4, Hamburg) and Bachmann (SP1, Lüneburg). SP2 / Knecht will also be responsible for data analysis, organisation of ATLAS.ti training and ATLAS.ti implementation for the whole project consortium. All PIs, Postdocs and PhDs will meet regularly six times per year in

## Reconfiguring anonymity - Project Description

Hamburg, Bremen and Lüneburg to coordinate empirical work, data analysis and theory development (see working plan and time schedules). We will create a website, a mailing-list, a network (the Anonymity Research Group ARG) and use an FTP server for data and text sharing. Ongoing internal work will be organised in online workspaces.

The collaborative process with artists is continuously developed under the management of Postdoc and Curator Andreas Broeckmann (SP5). The artists will become associate members of the Reconfiguring Anonymity Project. A workshop will be organised during which the artists present their previous projects and research to the entire interdisciplinary group, and discuss their first ideas for the new commissions. We will then seek to match individual artists and researchers, so that both can work in dialogue, each on his or her own project, but with the awareness of the alternative methods and goals of the other partner. The intermediate results of the research projects will be shared via the internal mailing list and during the meetings of the Anonymity research group; during one of these meetings, a try-out exhibition will be set up to discuss potentials of the exhibition format for the presentation of the entire research project.

### **Privacy and Confidentiality**

Participation in all case studies is voluntary and confidential. All participants will be informed that they can choose to withdraw from the research at any time. The personal information and all data collected during interviews, participant observation and fieldwork will remain confidential and safe throughout the entire duration of the study. All names and identifying information about informants and protagonists will be anonymized. Each interview will be assigned an anonymous code in order to protect the privacy of the participants, and only project staff will have access to their personal and contact information. During the analysis phase, only the anonymous code will be used to refer to participants' interviews, and references and quotations in future reports and publications will only be made in anonymous form. Project data including digital interview audio files, interview transcripts, and field notes will be stored in a safe computer facility. Following the completion of the study, all electronic and hard copies of interview data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies at Bremen University.

### **6. Sources / material / corpora**

Subprojects 1-4 all do empirical research and generate their own ethnographic data, which will be analyzed by the team and used to develop a new model of regimes of anonymity in transformation. All projects also review historical, juridical and bureaucratic documents related to their case studies. In SP 5, the focus is on contemporary artworks and projects that are dealing with different aspects of anonymity, especially in performance, installation and media art.



## 7. Expected Outcome

The project will contribute rich empirical case studies and new analytic perspectives on anonymity regimes and their current dynamics of change across different (field) sites. It will provide a new concept of anonymity regimes on the basis of systematic empirical research and join the ranks of a group of philosophers, anthropologists, media scientists, and sociologists that have started to counter the long term academic neglect of the subject as an intellectual topic (see Baumann 2011/2013; Coleman 2012/2013; Konrad 2005; Leitner 2012; Marx 1999; Nissenbaum 1999; Ponesse 2013; Wiedemann 2012) in order to reposition the topic of anonymity at the center of social and cultural theory. The core outcome of the project will be empirical and theoretical knowledge about regimes of anonymity in transformation. Our three PhDs will be encouraged to publish at least two articles in peer-reviewed scientific English language journals along with their dissertation theses as books. Early bird and mid-term working papers are to be published rapidly on our website, academic journal articles and at least two edited volumes will be published about our findings. Working papers and conference reports will be uploaded on an Open Access repository.

A profound, empirically rich understanding of the transformation of anonymity regimes in contemporary culture and society is of central importance to a wide spectrum of actors in the fields of culture, law, economy, knowledge and society. The socio-technical literacy of society at large, our social understanding of the dynamics, productivity and dangers of anonymity in the interplay of offline-online worlds and at the intersection of technologies/infrastructures, practices and regulation within anonymity regimes, is underdeveloped to date. We have specifically planned our project in such a way that it invites a wider public to rethink their values, beliefs, everyday strategies and practices with regard to anonymity. Our findings, writings, experimental tools and exhibitions will find their audience within the academy as well as beyond. Four target groups that we address with our results can be singled out: (1.) Academic audiences (we also aspire to build around us an international network of researchers with a qualitative empirical interest in anonymity through our E-mail list, workshops and website). (2.) Actors in critical net culture, software developers, social media entrepreneurs and industry practitioners with high stakes in anonymity solutions will be engaged through two special dissemination events organized by SP1 and 3, the workshop “Infrastructures of Anonymity”, a mailing list, the working prototype for an online platform build by SP 1 and our website. (3.) Policy and lawmakers and civil society organisations will be invited to the “Regulation of Anonymity” conference in Bremen in 2017. (4) A more general audience and artists will be interested in the artwork and exhibitions commissioned and developed by SP 5, curated by Andreas Broeckmann. Exhibitions will be held in at least three well-established art venues in 2017 that have a track record in presenting critical issues in digital culture and that address a broad art and culture

### Reconfiguring anonymity - Project Description

audience (esp. Zentrum für Kunst und Medien, Karlsruhe, Kunstverein Wolfsburg, Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst, Oldenburg, Hartware MedienKunstVerein at Dortmunder U – Zentrum für Kunst und Kreativität, Akademie der Künste, Berlin). There will be opportunities to organise, alongside the exhibition, symposia and workshops during which other sub-projects of the Anonymity Research Group can be presented and discussed publically.