



## Nobody knows you're a dog: or do they?

From shopping sites to news organizations, finding anonymous comments online isn't difficult. Many like that. A well-known [New Yorker cartoon](#) joked about digital anonymity, showing a happy dog telling a pal: "On the Internet, Nobody Knows You're a Dog." But if you look closely at the link, there's a second cartoon. Based on the "click data" that gets fed back to search engine, social media and other digital companies, the commercial world not only knows who the dogs are but their breeds and hobbies. This is the privacy paradox: You might think you are anonymous, but you're actually less anonymous than you've ever been.

### Class discussion at three levels:

**Flashlight:** Find examples of anonymous comments that make a positive contribution to an online discussion and those that do not. Can you think of a way to encourage one and discourage the other? If you were to make a rule against anonymous comments online for your website, would you create any exceptions? How would you define those exceptions and how would you enforce them?

**Spotlight:** Mozilla, the New York Times and the Washington Post plan to develop a more sophisticated [user-generated content and commenting platform](#). It aims to create a community of commenters; encourage better engagement between journalists and readers; and eliminate inflammatory and abusive comments. Do you use comments on news? Would you comment differently if you had to disclose your identity? Would you like journalists to respond to your comments? What do you think about attaching your Facebook profile to your comments?

**Searchlight:** Given the privacy rights espoused above, look into the revelations of the [PRISM program](#) and the seizure of [Associated Press phone records](#) and a [Fox reporter's emails](#). Without warning, the federal government believes it may sweep huge amounts of information from the servers of major data companies, as well as phone records and even emails. On top of this, [companies collect massive amounts of data](#) about consumer activity, often traced back to an individual user's ISP address. Add to that the voluntary flood of personal information on social media. Class discussion: Are new consumer protections needed? A credit score is information collected by business according to your purchases and

payments. You have access to that and can review or challenge it. Why not do the same for information profiles? Would knowing what the companies know and what the government could know change how people behave on line?