

August 12, 2007

THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

Not Being There

By **CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL**

“Granola-eating street fighter” is the unimprovable description that [BusinessWeek.com](http://www.businessweek.com) recently bestowed on [John P. Mackey](http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com), the chief executive of Whole Foods Market. There certainly aren’t many people like Mackey, a vegan who has ruthlessly built Whole Foods into a \$6 billion chain of organic groceries. But there are a lot of people who, one way or another, share his recent predicament.

This spring, the Federal Trade Commission moved to block Whole Foods’ \$565 million bid to buy out its leading competitor, Wild Oats. In the course of its investigation, the F. T. C. found that Mackey had disguised his identity to make at least 1,300 postings on Yahoo’s stock message boards between January 1999 and May 2006. Under the alias Rahodeb (an anagram of his wife’s name, Deborah), he talked up his company’s stock and trashed his competitor’s. In October 2000, he wrote of Wild Oats that “once the market figures out [Whole Foods] isn’t going to buy this company, it’s headed to \$3.00 — or less.” This use of an alias to manufacture support for one’s own position — known, after the homemade ventriloquist’s prop, as “sock puppetry” to chat-room regulars — puts another problem on Mackey’s plate. It also confounds one of our cherished myths about the Internet.

The chance to try on fresh identities was the great boon that life online was supposed to afford us. Multiuser role-playing games and discussion groups would be venues for living out fantasies. Shielded by anonymity, everyone could now pass a “second life” online as Thor the Motorcycle Sex God or the Sage of Wherever. Some warned, though, that there were other possibilities. The Stanford Internet expert [Lawrence Lessig](http://www.stanford.edu) likened online anonymity to the ring of invisibility that surrounds the shepherd Gyges in one of Plato’s dialogues. Under such circumstances, Plato feared, no one is “of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice.”

Time, along with a string of sock-puppet scandals, has proved Lessig and Plato right. As business, journalism and social life moved online, so did a lot of more pedestrian inner yearnings — greed, pettiness, back-biting, all protected now by traditions of Internet anonymity. In February 2004, Amazon.ca accidentally revealed the true identities of its anonymous reviewers, showing that several authors had taken advantage of aliases to give themselves five-star ratings or run down their rivals. Anonymity, it turns out, can serve two opposite interests: fantasy (an escape from the self) and manipulation (a reinforcement of the self).

None of the social rules that people born before, say, 1970 learned in real space prepare them for moral accountability in cyberspace. Does e-mail have the status of chitchat, or of an affidavit? Is sock-puppeting like shooting your mouth off in a bar and saying, when asked, that your name is none of anyone’s business? Or is it like making a false filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission?

We’re not too good at making these decisions online. We feel as if we’re chatting in a barroom or a dining room, but we may be held accountable as if we were in a courtroom or a newsroom. Without a physically present audience that we can see or hear, we are left free to imagine our audience however we wish. When we do so, it’s easy to delude ourselves that what we’re talking about determines whom we’re talking to. People don’t think, “There could be a billion people reading this, so I’d better not discuss sex.” Their

instincts tell them: “This is a place for talking about sex, so there can’t be many people listening.”

The blog of the Red Sox pitcher [Curt Schilling](#), [38pitches.com](#), is at its most fascinating when he seems to lose track of who his audience is. No major-league pitcher would ever reveal to the tiniest Little League luncheon audience how he pitches to the hot-hitting Yankees’ catcher [Jorge Posada](#). But after facing the Yankees on June 2, Schilling confided in the “privacy” of his blog (which gets thousands of visits daily), “Generally I can follow a split that stays up like that with an even better one at the bottom of the zone, or in the dirt.” Even if a Web site announces itself as a crowded room by calling itself a “forum” or a “chat room,” it never feels crowded because much of the commentary involves responding to specific posts, an act that — for those clinging to old-fashioned metaphors — resembles approaching someone in that crowded room to ask for a word. “I like large parties,” Jordan Baker says in “The Great Gatsby.” “They’re so intimate.”

C.E.O.’s like Mackey are in a particularly awkward position. They pride themselves on their “boldness,” “vision” and “leadership.” And yet any corporate leadership position is a nightmare of legal regulations, market constraints and media pressure. Populist distrust of any rich chief executive is seething just now. Laws on corporate governance are harsh and constantly changing. Shareholder value must be protected. The result is that no one takes anything a C.E.O. says terribly seriously. “He has to say that, or he’ll get in trouble,” is the prevailing view.

Shakespeare’s Henry V, in perhaps the founding act of sock-puppetry, disguised himself in the cloak of a common soldier on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt to rally the restive English forces with a pep talk (“I myself heard the King say he would not be ransom’d”) that few would have believed had it been given in the King’s own name. In the same way, posing as Rahodeb spared Mackey the trouble of appending at the end of every sentence, “... and I’m not just saying this because I run the company.” Leadership is intellectually delegitimizing, and yet leaders require intellectual legitimacy. This is an old conundrum. It has often been beyond the powers of a single identity to solve.

Christopher Caldwell, a contributing writer, last wrote for the magazine about Dr. Ron Paul.

[Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
