

**METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR
ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING USER-
CONTROLLED ANONYMOUS
COMMUNICATIONS**

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to establishing anonymous communications between two or more parties. More specifically, the invention relates to controlling the release of confidential or sensitive information of at least one of the parties in establishing anonymous communications.

**CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED
APPLICATIONS**

This application is related to co-pending patent application Ser. No. 08/711,437 entitled "METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR FACILITATING WHISTLE-BLOWING INCORPORATING USER-CONTROLLED ANONYMOUS COMMUNICATIONS", now abandoned application Ser. No. 08/708,969 entitled "METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR MATCHMAKING INCORPORATING USER-CONTROLLED ANONYMOUS COMMUNICATIONS", application Ser. No. 08/704,314 entitled "METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR FACILITATING AN EMPLOYMENT SEARCH INCORPORATING USER CONTROLLED ANONYMOUS COMMUNICATIONS", and application Ser. No. 08/711,436 entitled "METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR FACILITATING NEGOTIATIONS INCORPORATING USER-CONTROLLED ANONYMOUS COMMUNICATIONS", now abandoned all filed on Sep. 6, 1996.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RELATED ART

The need for anonymous communications can be found in everyday situations. Police hotlines solicit tips from the public to help solve a crime, often without requiring callers to give their names. Cash rewards are often offered for the return of missing items with no questions asked.

One form of anonymity involves "shielded identity," where a trusted agent knows the identity of a masked party, but does not reveal that identity to others except under very special circumstances. Unless otherwise specified, the term "anonymity" is used throughout this application interchangeably with the notion of shielded identity.

Shielded identity appears in a wide range of useful and commercial functions. A company might run an employment advertisement in a newspaper with a blind P.O. box known only to the publisher. A grand jury could hear testimony from a witness whose identity is known only to the prosecutor and the judge, but is concealed from the jurors, the accused, and opposing counsel. A person could identify a criminal suspect from a lineup of people who cannot see him. A recruiter could contact potential candidates for a job opening without revealing the client's name. Witness protection programs are designed to shield the true identity of witnesses enrolled in the programs. A sexual harassment hotline could be set up for victims of sexual harassment to call in with their complaints, while promising to protect the callers' identities.

The above examples illustrate the need for anonymity or shielded identity due to a fear of exposure. The need for anonymity can also be motivated by a desire for privacy. For instance, donors may wish to make an anonymous charitable

contribution, an adoption agency typically shields the identity of a child's birth mother, a Catholic confessional offers anonymous unburdening of the soul, and local phone companies maintain millions of unlisted telephone numbers accessible only by special operators.

The concepts of anonymity and shielded identity do not lend themselves to conventional communication systems. While it is possible to send and receive anonymous messages, such as a postcard with no return address or a call placed from a pay phone, it is difficult for parties engaged in multiple communication episodes to remain anonymous from one another. In general, conventional communication systems are premised upon the notion that communicating parties know each other's identity. For the purposes of this invention, the term "communications system" refers to any system that facilitates an ongoing cycle of messages and responses.

Most current communications systems, whether written or oral, do not permit an ongoing, multi-party, shielded identity dialogue. For example, letters need an address to be delivered, calling someone on the phone requires a phone number, and meeting face-to-face provides for visual identification. The process involved in most ongoing communication systems is simply not conducive to retaining concealed identities.

Yet, in some cases, concealing identity can actually encourage or facilitate communication between unwilling or cautious parties. For example, a party negotiating a peace treaty with another may be unwilling to reveal his identity because, if the negotiations fail, that party might be exposed or subjected to potential blackmail.

One specific example of the need for concealing identities is in the employment search process, where the release of the name of the hiring company (or the position involved) could be damaging to the company. The hiring company might be concerned about how potential competitors would use the knowledge that the company is searching for employees to upset customers who are relying on the stability of the company. Mere speculation that a company is searching for a new president could dramatically reduce the price of the company's stock.

To find potential candidates for the vacant position, the company could engage an employment search firm to discreetly find potential candidates without disclosing to the market, or even potential candidates, the company's identity until the company decides to confide in or hire a particular candidate.

In engaging such employment search firms, however, a hiring company entails some risk that the search firm will prematurely or indiscriminately reveal the company's identity to a potential candidate. Search firms are generally compensated based upon the number of successful placements, and thus are motivated to make vacant positions appear as attractive as possible to potential candidates. In doing so, search firms could be tempted to reveal enough information about the company for potential candidates to discover the identity of the company, or, for that matter, the firms may reveal the company's identity itself. Accordingly, hiring companies cannot be counted upon to maintain effective control of what information is released to potential candidates, and thus are unable to instill any satisfactory degree of confidence in their clients about the confidential status of their search for job replacements.

The use of search firms also creates inefficiencies. In dealing with a search firm, candidates looking for a new job may engage in a dialogue with the search firm, asking a