What's in a name in the digital ether

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THERE is an ''ASIO Surveillance Van'' at the end of my street and ''House of Awesome'' round the corner. ''YourKidsAreUgly'' advises a neighbouring wi-fi network. ''Get_Lost'' I'm told, then ''Fat_Boy'' for good measure.

I am cataloguing the names people give their home wireless network. It's a cabinet of curiosities for the digital age.

''BeNice2UrNeighbours'' pleads a network in Fitzroy, but ''Donttouchmyface'' in Collingwood. St Kilda is ''Pretty fly for a wi-fi''. In South Yarra it is the ''EndofTime''.

Increasingly people treat their wireless network like a personalised ringtone, says cultural research professor David Rowe, from the University of Western Sydney. ''It's a kind of spatially

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abstract way of identifying ourselves.''

Walking around Melbourne with my iPhone scanning for nearby networks, I uncover the crude (''twathead''), creepy (''Im watching you sleep'') and cautionary (''Just Another Brain Cancer''). ''Salvation'' lies outside a Kensington drive-thru. In West Brunswick, one bids ''VAMOS ARGENTINA''.

Like any form of self-expression, trends emerge. Many wi-fi names reflect the character of a suburb, as much as its cafes and streetscape. Residents in affluent South Yarra and surrounds tend to be straight-laced self-promoters, naming their wi-fi after themselves. They're more irreverent in Footscray (''StupidWireless'') and poetic, almost dreamy, in St Kilda (''phrazesfortheyoung'').

Some streets are a mess of characters thrust together in the digital ether. ''Little Alex's Willy'' is on the same street in Carlton North as ''Big Mim's Box''.

The relative anonymity encourages rampant self-expression. ''There seems to be some kind of impulse to establish one's identity, one's distinctiveness in almost any kind of space,'' says Professor Rowe. ''Maybe we fear standardisation and bureaucracy and this is our little bit of rebellion.''

Some people send messages to neighbours — the digital equivalent of slipping a note under the door. Few areas in Melbourne's inner suburbs are free of wireless or offer wireless free — ''Almost Free wi-fi'' teases a wag in Fitzroy.

''I think it's just claiming your space, being part of something,'' says Alexandra Janelli, the founder of wtfwifi.com, which catalogues bizarre wi-fi names. ''I know it's virtual ownership but it's still saying 'this is my network'.''

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