

Preface

Who am I then? Tell me first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else.

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

The explosion in Mobile Internet Device ownership and expansion in wireless connectivity form part of the pattern of our increasingly persistent virtual presence on social media services that has all but collapsed the boundary between being online and offline. The virtual and the real form a seamless space in which many of us live out our daily lives. We fashion the self through social interaction, community, and network affiliations, and in these ways we construct our identities as well as interpret the identity of the others we interact with. The age of social media and networks and the ease with which individuals can now produce, reproduce, and distribute digital content has powerfully shifted the ways in which we think about personal and global connectedness, distribution of artefacts and access to media, social action, and the production of knowledge.

This ability to engage so readily with digital media and online networks is empowering but our actions can also make us vulnerable. We suffer the pressures of information overload, time management and, as is argued in this publication, find we need to curate our more visible digital lives. The Internet has shifted from a set of static objects to a dynamic network of connected, interacting subjects. The term digital identity is broad. It stretches from the 'certification of an individual to partake in authentication-based transactions such as managing an online bank account' to 'online personas that are made visible through selective acts of self-disclosure, such as writing a blog or sharing our Facebook profile'.

Whether we call it 'digital identity', 'online persona', or 'virtual self', we are talking about accumulated electronic data that refers to us as an individual - the things that we say about ourselves, the things that others say about us, and/or the (by)-products of our electronic transactions that are driven by human-machine or machine-machine interactions.

It is impossible to decouple identity from our sense of self. As Jenkins (2004) describes:

[The self ...] An individual's reflexive sense of his or her own identity, constituted vis-à-vis others in terms of similarity and differences, without which she or he wouldn't know who they are and hence wouldn't be able to act.

Jenkins, R. (2004)

And here, similarity and difference play a strong role in identification, and in the dialectical process of knowing who we are and therefore where we can act. The digital spaces we inhabit can be performative extensions to our real world activities and similarly our digital identity is not substantially different from what we understand as “identity.”

Much of the unease experienced in maintaining a digital identity stems from the realisation that our online presence is often distributed and fractured, made up of bits and pieces that Levi-Strauss would call *bricolage*. One response to this unease is to attempt to stabilise these multiple configurations by creating consistent, authoritative sources to corral our errant data. And here lies the difficulty of defining the boundaries of digital identity. As we pass through our many technically mediated socio-cultural spaces – the networks in which we share, the communities we join – identity remains in flux and we can only ever capture a glimpse of ourselves.

Often we understand identity as performance and the proliferations of new social media spaces has created a wealth of opportunities in which we play out our digital selves. Goffman (1959) used the metaphor of a drama to explain how social meaning is attributed to a person in ordinary, everyday interaction. Through his work we see how the persona, both on and off the stage of life, and with various audiences, is manifested through performance. In other words, how well the role-plays and scripts that we use in everyday life are delivered and interpreted by others. Goffman believed, as do many social theorists, that the “self” is socially constructed. People attribute my characteristics to me and as an individual I cannot be understood separately from the social contexts I inhabit. As a performer I can consciously guide my audience to my own ends. With Goffman’s work in mind, rather than ask what is digital identity perhaps it is better to explore how identities are performed in digitally-mediated social spaces.

The chapters in this book take a set of differing but complimentary perspectives that provide positions from which to view the changing nature of digital identity in an age of intense social media use. These perspectives cover the domains of education, community, the sharing of personal data such as photographs and the use of mass social media tools that all affect the ways we construct and play out our online selves.

The first section of the book explores several interconnected approaches to describing and understanding digital identity.

Jäkälä and Berki begin by exploring five types of online identity and analyse the differences, similarities, advantages, pitfalls, and disadvantages of using them. The examples put forward by the authors illustrate the usage of these identity types and provide the reader with an improved understanding that increases our awareness and knowledge of their distinctive features. Koole and Parchoma then examine how learners develop a sense of self and belonging in networked learning environments and propose that individuals create and negotiate their identities through an iterative process of dialogic and symbolic exchange with other individuals. To explain this process, the authors provide the Web of Identity model composed of five dramaturgical elements that both guide and enable the enactment of behaviour. In the next chapter, Gourlay draws on the perspective of New Literacy Studies and examines digital media from the point of view of meaning making. In this respect, she discusses the complex ways in which multimodal semiotic resources are used in creating and maintaining digital identities and concludes with a reflection of how this analysis might apply to the context of higher education. In chapter four, Code acknowledges identity formation as a matter of individual choice and negotiation and one that underpins the notion of agency. From an educational perspective, she describes how agency in learning

is represented by the capability of students to make choices and to act on their choices in ways that make a difference to their learning. This includes having to make good judgments about their capabilities, anticipate the effects of different events, size up social opportunities and constraints, and regulate their behaviour accordingly. In the following chapter, Maia and Valente put forward a classification for digital identity based on a notion of weak or strong. They examine the conditions under which cooperative relationships may contribute to the construction of a strong digital identity and describe a process that they call the ‘spiral of transformation’.

The second set of chapters in the book explores the implications of social media use on elements of the self and notions of digital identity in ways that cover community, practice, risk, and reputation.

In chapter six, Pitsillides, Waller, and Fairfax consider the emergence of new cultures and practices surrounding death and identity in the digital world. This includes a range of theory-based discussions, considering how we remember and document the absence of information and how communities and individuals deal with the virtual identities of their loved ones after death. In this way they highlight the evolvement of digital practices in relation to public grief, the building of communal identity and the impact of digital recording and sharing identity. In the following chapter Preussler and Kerres explore the massive online social community of Twitter. From a social psychological perspective they analyse the motivation of users to engage so intensively and put forward the idea that status information functions as a highly effective reward mechanism. They outline a theoretical construct that explains why users try to gain social reputation in different virtual worlds with the possible spill-over effects of social reputation that can be gained in virtual and real worlds. Next, Williams et al. report on the ‘This Is Me’ project that aims to help students and the wider public to be aware of the impact that online material can have on their identity and reputation. Their chapter explores practical aspects of Digital Identity, relating to issues such as employability, relationships and even death. Drawing from these issues they describe a set of resources developed to help inform and educate people about how they can understand and control their own Digital Identity. This section ends with two key chapters that outline theoretical understandings of sexual identity through video sharing and the social functions of photography through photo-sharing. Krep’s chapter focuses on Foucault, Butler, and video-sharing on sexual social networking sites. It argues that the use and prevalence of video-sharing technologies on sexual social networking websites, has a direct impact on our notions of sexual identity. He claims that although sometimes pitted against one another and at times contradictory, the ideas of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler on the nature and expression of our sexuality and our gender identities in fact gel rather well, and both can help us to gain a deeper and more rounded picture of the impact and importance of the burgeoning phenomenon of internet dating websites in general, and sexual social networking in particular. In Pauwels’ chapter we find a detailed examination of the impact of digital technology on the way in which families present themselves in an online mode. He discusses how the expressive means have increased dramatically as the practice moved into the public or semi-public realm, catering for an anonymous mass of Web surfers. He shows how family self-representations on the Web present a fascinating area of research into cultural change and reproduction, and into the complex role of technology in those processes at the ‘grassroots’ level.

The third and final section of the book moves towards online behaviour, identity and education, including virtual social spaces and eLearning before finally exploring digital identity developed within learning and fan-based communities that use social media.

In chapter eleven, Warburton explores the negative connotations of lurking behaviour in online social spaces and uses a design pattern approach to show that lurking is in fact a valid activity for individuals entering an unfamiliar online social space, especially when deciding how to present themselves and their identity online. In the following chapter Adams provides a detailed review of situated learning concepts and identity reformation accounts within five case-study situations with varied learning technologies. Here, issues of situated identity, practices and the impact on real world contexts are reviewed. The reported findings identify that eLearning systems must be designed to support variations in situations, student awareness and reflection around implications of identity reformation. Aresta, Santos, Pedro, and Moreira detail the concepts of social software, digital identity, learning and education and how they feed an institutionally supported Personal Learning Environment that provides its users with a high level of freedom in the use of Web 2.0 services. The authors summarise the debates over the ever-increasing demand for institutional tools that are especially designed to support the construction of the digital identities of its members, and acknowledge a user's presence in communities and/or services that are outside of the institutional influence.

In the three chapters that follow the authors explore virtual interfaces and their design and immersive virtual worlds. Greyson discusses the design of embodied pedagogical interface agents with the aim of suggesting categorical or thematic design guidelines for pedagogical agents. The intent of the guidelines is to encourage multimedia designers to go beyond the current "one size fits all" mentality and encompass issues of race and gender in a way that provides meaningful learning experiences for a greater number of persons. Peachey and Withnail then examine the complexities of managing digital identity as mediated through an avatar in a three dimensional virtual world environment. The chapter describes some key moments in the construction of digital identities as a lecturer and a student in the Open University's community in Second Life™. Their exploration of experiences in relation to the impact of trust and consistency concludes that social interaction is pivotal to any meaningful identity development that takes place. Hatzipanagos continues the theme of community by taking on the concept of Communities of Practice. He challenges the notion that social media can by default facilitate formal and informal learning and suggests that if embedding social media within learning set-ups sustains communities of practice that support learning, we need to explore how and when this happens.

The final two chapters of this volume both look at identity in relation to fan-based communities and the use of social media. Lawrence notes that while new technology offers the promise of abstraction and automation, the Web offers an efficient, global method of communication between people. She presents a case study in identity and trust within the online media fan community to illustrate how communication and interaction are about more than the exchange of information, they are about who we are. Bunyamin and Ugur end with a detailed analysis of football and focus on the meaning of being a supporter. They ask what role digital media plays in constructing and articulating our identity and reveal the tools aimed at supporting interaction within social spaces and the socio-technical construction of digital identity as determined through the interactions that they support.

In conclusion, the body of work drawn together here reflects the diversity and complexity of understanding digital identity and the role of social media in the changing ways that we see ourselves. Chatfield (2012) encapsulates the challenges we face living if we want to thrive in the digital age:

"Today we are challenged as we have never been before. We are challenged by the lightening logic and infinite capacities of machines; by the digital presence of several billion humans; by a billion times that quantity again of data; and by what this means for our own sense of uniqueness and agency." Chatfield 2012: p.139

These challenges are similarly exposed within the rich variety of perspectives on digital identity held within this edited collection that together cut across the theoretical to the practical experiences of being. Identity is a lived and fluid experience. For all of us this is a journey that we hope we have captured and addressed in this volume of evidence based work and position papers on digital identity and social media use.

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