Chapter 8
This Is Me:
Digital Identity and Reputation on the Internet

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ABSTRACT

The chapter reports on the ‘This Is Me’ project, which aimed to help students and the wider public to be aware of the impact that online material has on their identity and reputation. The chapter explores practical aspects of Digital Identity, relating to issues such as employability, relationships, and even death. For example, understanding the impact a photograph posted on a social networking website might have for different groups of people, ranging from friends or parents to future employers. As part of the ‘This is Me’ project, stories were collected from students and others about Digital Identity matters, a grounded methodological approach based on action research was used to establish issues related to Digital Identity particularly relevant to those in academia. Drawing from these issues, resources were developed to help inform and educate people about how they can understand and control their own Digital Identity. A number of these resources are presented here, along with reflections on how they are used and can be adapted.

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This Is Me

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Internet has changed the way many people view themselves and others. For example, consider this scenario:

A generation ago if Andy scored the winning try for his university rugby team, it would be a fact known by the people who were there and a small number of others who’d heard about the match - it might have been mentioned in the small print of the student union’s newspaper. The event would quickly fade from everyone’s memory. Now, if Rob scores a try the information is likely to be shared across his and his team mates’ social networking sites in words and pictures, posted on the team’s website, and to be easily accessible for many years to come. Indeed, it is likely to be accompanied by details of the after match celebrations.

In earlier times information about individuals was only recorded in small amounts which were normally difficult to access, let alone search; Andy’s try was only known of by a small group. Now, individuals of all ages (such as Rob) are creating an online presence for themselves within social networking sites and elsewhere. It is easy for individuals to refer and link to others across the Internet; Rob’s team mates are readily able to link to Rob’s content and refer to his antics. Much of the material on the Internet is persistent and searchable, so today, aspects of identity are widely accessible that in previous eras would not have been; many people can easily find details of Rob’s identity relating to his participation in rugby, while few beyond Andy’s immediate circle would have known about his.

The ‘This Is Me’ project was designed to investigate online presence with the aim of producing resources for individuals to recognise the aspects of their self (or identity) they are projecting, and to understand how this online presence is perceived by other people. The project was initially targeted at individuals within an academic environment, and a wealth of material was developed to help individuals understand their Digital Identity. Later the project expanded to cover the wider public, with materials developed for groups ranging from school children to the retired. This chapter aims to explore some of these practical activities and materials, and to share and discuss the outcomes of interactive sessions in which these activities have been used.

IDENTITY

Identity is an elusive concept, with no single clear definition. It is used in many different contexts and for a variety of purposes, ranging from authenticating to a bank to be allowed access to our money, to our understanding of who we are within a community. Buckingham (2008) traces the ambiguous meanings to the root of the term:

The fundamental paradox of identity is inherent in the term itself. From the Latin root idem, meaning “the same,” the term nevertheless implies both similarity and difference. On the one hand, identity is something unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent (and hence the same) over time. ... Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind (p. 1).

Jenkins (2004), while exploring the concepts of identity, states that in earlier work (including the 1996 edition) he used the term ‘social identity’, but now believes the social aspect is an essence of identity:

...all human identities are by definition social identities. Identifying ourselves or others is a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction: agreement and disagreement, convention and innovation, communication and negotiation (p. 4).
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