Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue: The Construction of Online Identity and Its Consequences

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the construction of identity in online communities and websites for social purposes, and its consequences in terms of how one’s online identity may be utilized to such an extent that one’s real-world identity is either enforced or eroded. It does so by investigating the very nature of Identity, coming predominantly from a cultural studies research and philosophical view, although it also cites some parallel findings in Information Systems (IS) research. In the Section Something Old, the author investigates the concept of identity in the real world, then investigates it in the online world in the Section Something New. Section Something Borrowed examines how an individual positions oneself including who one associates with and why one flags it so to others. And finally this paper looks at some consequences unfolding in our time (in Section: Something Blue), citing several pointed examples for illustration purposes, where values that have been migrated from the real world are amplified via the Internet, causing all sorts of actions and consequences both online and offline. These issues and actions revolve around control and disclosure of one’s identity that has consequences upon reputation and trust, and how responsibility needs to be brought forward into how one positions oneself, manages one’s own identity, and acts appropriately in and beyond the Internet. Above all of these, the author concludes, is the responsibility of understanding the nature of identity itself.

Keywords: Cultural Studies, Cyberspace, Facebook, GooglePlus, Human Flesh Search Engine, Identity, Internet, LinkedIn, Professional Identity, Social Networks

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the construction of identity in online communities and websites for social purposes, and its consequences in terms of how one’s online identity may be utilized to such an extent that one’s real-world identity is either enforced or eroded. Identity, this paper argues, is an imagined “site” the boundaries of which distinguish whoever is assigned within them, from those outside. Identity is flexible and ever-changing in nature, constructed on the

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needs of an individual to react to the demands of their political, economic, societal and cultural circumstances. As such, the formation, standardization and circulation of one’s identity within society affects not only how one understands and represents oneself to others, but is also the basis of how one is recognized and treated by others accordingly.

To take this argument one step further, unlike the real world, the Internet is capable of enabling one to reach across nearly all political, cultural and sociological traits that are commonly used to construct one’s identity as an imagined “site”. What is more, the Internet itself is an imagined “site” whose social functions, capacities and protocols are continually expanding and regularly redefined. The imagined boundaries of the Internet are therefore considerably different from those of the real world, creating the needs, opportunities and means for one to continuously present, reproduce and dynamically manage one’s online identity. Most importantly, in the case of online identity, it is more often a matter of one’s choice to actively construct a specific identity than that of one being randomly assigned an identity by others. This presents one with ample opportunity and choice not only to represent oneself but also to have a significant bearing on how one is recognized.

As a result, there is a clear and urgent need to examine the formation, standardization and circulation of one’s online identity and how it impacts upon the ways in which one interacts with others on the Internet. Because of the social nature of online communities and websites, the imagined “site” that is online identity becomes even more fluid and its boundaries increasingly fragile due to a lack of protection against misrepresentation and privacy violation. At this point it is worth stating that Identity is researched, defined and managed from several different fields of study. The research behind this paper is best described as Cultural in nature. Given the technological foundation of the Internet that enables cyberspace as we know it, Information Systems (IS) research and development also has a significant interest and research record in Identity. While this paper focuses on cultural and even philosophical aspects of identity, papers in other fields including IS will be cited from time-to-time as there are some parallel findings and observations across these disparate fields of study. Additionally, when Google+ and Facebook (and other social network platforms) are discussed further down, we will see that there is a continuing push from the technology companies behind the preeminent social networking platforms today, to mesh ones real world identity (or at least the handles/identifiers assigned to an individual), with as many of ones online identities as possible, through our various interactions spread across the Internet.

At this point a useful paper from IS research by Roussos et al. (2003), titled ‘Mobile Identity Management: An Enacted View’ suggests three principles regarding Identity. The first two are of some use in clarifying the discussion here:

- **The Locality Principle**: Identities are situated within particular contexts, roles, relationships and communities. People will have multiple different and overlapping identities in (these) different contexts, and each of these should be respected;
- **The Understanding Principle**: In human relationships, knowledge of identities is negotiated and both sides in the relationships should know how properties that characterize identity are exchanged and used. Relationships should be symmetrical and reciprocal.

The third principle, not repeated here, is really a restatement of the second with emphasis upon mutual understanding by those in a relationship. Much of the technology and management issues around identity focus on the Locality Principle (e.g. identifiers and how they are used for particular services, while in specific contexts), whereas, the Understanding Principle as given by Roussos et al., leans much more towards a Cultural Studies approach to identity, such as is the emphasis in this paper. And yet, both principles involve aspects of
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