Digital identity: finding me

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Abstract. Identity is neither simple nor static, and in many ways the multiplicity of identity that this paper will consider is not in itself either novel or controversial. Who I am as a writer, academic, sister, teacher, learner is as complex as who you are as a reader and everything else that you may be. Our everyday roles and experiences contribute to the complex nature of our identity, and we are both defined by (and define ourselves according to) the actions, choices, beliefs and emotions that we either choose or deny. In these respects it seems likely that what we might call a *digital identity* would merely add to the multiplicity of our existing complex picture of ourselves. What this paper will consider is whether this is indeed just another facet of what it is to be me, you, or anybody else, or whether our digital identity affects identity in differently, and (either way) in which direction of travel that relation follows. Am I me because of Facebook, or is my Facebook me?[2] Or are these relations reciprocal, or something else entirely?

1 THE DIGITAL GENERATION?

The concept of a digital identity (or footprint, tattoo, etc.) picks out the idea that a terrestrial human identity can stretch into the digital web. The term can point to a life lived online (through games or avatars), or one that is portrayed after the fact (such as on social networks, message-boards, or blogs). It can reference a digital network of friends, as well as work associates and colleagues. A digital identity can in principle be singular. Whether this is through one output only, which is increasingly rare, or through the persistence of one single identity through all digital output, which is still possible. The connection can be drawn by an individual alone, and can include a single representation of a perceived identity by the person, or can be identified or created by an observer who can access and associate photos or personal information to a single user. Indeed, certain data mining software can already achieve this with relative ease.[3] It may also consist of multiple yet discrete individual strands of identity manipulated by a single user who yet (purposefully or otherwise) does not draw attention to, or does not perceive there to be, links between them. As Palfrey and Gasser [1] show, there is generally a lack of agreement about whether there are one or multiple identities amongst the generation of digital users born after the so-called *digital-explosion.*

On the one hand a digital representation of identity can seem fleeting, or open to change, for instance where information is easily amended, deleted, constructed, reconstructed. On the other hand, information persists. An online identity can remain tethered to inaccessible and/or persistent threads of information that remains on the web long past a person's own mortal existence in the world. Yet the concept of permanence on the web—the limitless persistence of uploaded information—is in fact one that is uncertain. For instance, Case C-131/12 was heard at the Court of Justice in May 2014, on the topic of Personal data and the "Protection of individuals with regard to the processing of such data". In this case the court ruled that a data subject "may oppose the indexing by a search engine of personal data relating to him where their dissemination through the search engine is prejudicial to him and his fundamental rights to the protection of those data and to privacy — which encompass the 'right to be forgotten' — override the legitimate interests of the operator of the search engine and the general interest in freedom of information." [2] The *right to be forgotten* as it's come to be known has yet to be fully tested, and it seems unlikely to be the end of the matter. Yet it is clear that some data, where such data is considered valuable in one form or another, is either carefully or haphazardly, and not always anonymously, catalogued and stored. This is not always with either the explicit or informed consent of the user, and where consent is sought, for instance in the ticking of agreements for services, users may not always be considered *informed*. But who is this user, and whose identity is at stake? It is this that this paper will explore.

Before this there are some distinctions to bear in mind and some to dispel. Palfrey and Gasser [1, p. 4] draw a distinction for instance between those to whom digital media is second nature, and those for whom it is learned behaviour: digital native for the former, digital immigrant for the latter. But who should we say occupies the former category, who the latter? Is it simply a matter of *age*? In fact, this terminological shorthand rather polarises between two groups, when many people may flit between one group and another (native to certain technologies, immigrant to some, alien to others). Buckingham [3] offers an alternative reading of the term "digital generation",[4] and this account may prove more fruitful. He cites a need to account for the fact that the impact of these technologies is not restricted to just the emerging identities of the young, but to the developing identities of all ages. He further notes [3, p. 2] that "generations are defined both historically and culturally", such that while the time frame may be important, it is not restricted to those who are *born* within that particular time frame. Indeed, and at the other end of the scale, there is little reason to suppose the generational distinction to be the most important distinction. This may be for a number of reasons. First because older generations within particular cultures may have more economic advantages, thus enabling better access to the digital world than many young people. This may be true across cultures. It is also the case that during the latter half of last century, and even in this century, the

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[2] Other Social Networks are available.

[3] Cf. http://business.time.com/2012/07/31/big-data-knows-what-youre-doing-right-now/ [accessed 20/03/15]

[4] Buckingham [3, p. 11] also suggests caution with respect to the term digital generation since he claims it "runs the risk of attributing an all-powerful role to technology". This seems a reasonable comment, especially as it is fair to say that the *technology* in and of itself does not contain within it the potential for power. Rather it is how it is used, manipulated, and used as manipulation that should be of concern (by others, corporations, etc.), where risks and benefits are not equally considered.

majority of young people across the world still have little or limited access to such technologies.[5]

2 THE PHILOSOPHICAL *I*

The distinction between *society* and the *individual*, including where, what, and even the possibility of such distinction, has been hotly debated. The answer you give about where that distinction might lie will give an indication of your cultural upbringing, political affiliations and/or beliefs. Perhaps all three. Those philosophies which hold identity to be an *individual* matter, whereby a person is born with an essence, or develops this on their own account no longer hold much sway. Rorty [4, p. xiii] provides an easy account of why this might be the case, noting that those who deny "there is such a thing as 'human nature' or the 'deepest level of the self'" have, as their strategy "to insist that socialisation, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down…" This is the approach I will adopt in this paper, and in what follows I will present what I believe are convincing arguments regarding the necessarily *social* nature of identity formation. Along the way it should become clear that individualistic views, on this account, are untenable.

To do this, we can begin by examining the work by Taylor [5] who argues that a general feature of human life is "its fundamentally dialogical character." To which he adds that "The genesis of the human mind is…not 'monological,' not something each accomplishes on his or her own, but dialogical." For these reasons he suggests that our *identity* is thus defined "in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the identities our significant others want to recognise in us" [5, p. 33]. This sense of struggle is encapsulated by this need for *recognition*. Taylor states that our identity "needs and is vulnerable to the recognition given or withheld by significant others" [5, p. 49]. Here we need to understand recognition of a person and/or their identity as pointing to more than just the action of *seeing*. A *willing* to recognise someone *as* is also important. As explained elsewhere, recognition and acceptance are key elements in both personhood and identity [6].

Along the same line, Markell [7, p. 41] concludes that the politics of recognition "actively constitutes the identities of those to whom it is addressed." The influence of Hegel's discussion of recognition is particularly relevant here:

> we are the sorts of beings we are with our characteristic "self-consciousness" only on account of the fact that we exist "for" each other or, more specifically, are *recognized* or *acknowledged* (*anerkannt*) *by* each other, an idea we might refer to as the "acknowledgment condition" for self-consciousness [8, p. 1]

Gilbert and Lennon [9, p. 140] discuss the "embodied nature of subjectivity," on which they describe "The constitution of subjectivity by other subjects," whether these are *general* or *particular* others. To this they add that the "Experiences of *sameness* with others serve to constitute the self." This includes where the construction of the *I* involves the self as engaged in the process of *differentiating itself*. Even here, the self requires and involves others (in simple terms the possibility of comparison requires that something must stand in comparison *to*).

If these philosophical accounts—supported by accounts offered in both social theory and psychology—of identity formation are taken seriously, we see that it is not only the other who forms our notion of self but the interaction through which this dialogical formation occurs. Following this line, we can see that questions need to be asked about the manner of interaction. If on this account our identity forms in relation to the other (including the myriad of social, cultural, political, and religious contexts), what then is the effect when that primary interaction or engagement with the other is *virtual*?

3 THE DIGITAL *WE*

With the expansion of online communication and more recently social networking, there has been the potential for closer and more immediate cross-linguistic and cross-cultural interactions. Given the infancies of these technologies and societal participation in them, the implications for broader notions of society and culture, as well as for notions of individual identity and personhood remain somewhat uncertain. On this, Palfrey and Gasser [1, p. 32] offer the claim that "what it means to be a young person hasn't changed; what has changed is the manner in which young people choose to express themselves." In one sense this may be true. In and of itself what it means to be *young* (as in *to not be old*) may not have changed, but it seems that now more than ever newer generations can engage with the world around them in new and distinct ways. Added to which the boundary for young-ness itself has shifted (it is less common to presume that adulthood necessarily and always begins at 18).

Multimedia interaction—gaming, social networks, online message-boards, instant messaging, blogging—impacts on the way we engage with others and the ways in which we make our voices heard, hear the voices of others, and how much time we give to each. By this stage however we only have speculative ideas about the sort of impact these subtle or major shifts in interaction may have on identity, or on our brains. What the effects of a continuous and complex multi-tasking may have on brain processing, for example, remains to be seen, and while there are claims that that such activity has already affected the manner in which our brains process information, and the relation between short and long term memory storage, these are certainly not conclusive (cf. [11] for further discussion on this topic, including conflicting accounts, research and evidence). Yet beliefs about the impact of such changes already impacts on the provision of education, such that the expectation in UK Higher Education is that teaching should and often must include digital platforms and content. Modern learning, educational methods, and even students are seen as somehow different to their predecessors, and students are as likely to be described in terms of their online, interactive, and collaborative learning identities (*digital clients*, is one such example) as by their analogue experience. Arguments are offered about whether and how such changes affect students, and much is assumed, but here as with much that is digital, there is little consensus, and even less certainty.

Prensky's seminal paper from 2001 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants' argues that students born into the digital world "think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors" [12]. This claim and the arguments that follow lead him to conclude that those who teach such students "speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are

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5 The reasons for this are both vast and important, but there is not the space to consider them here. Nevertheless it should be noted that where the consideration of a digitial identity is considered, access to such digitial media is necessarily assumed. This is neither a politically nor ethically neutral position, and the use of the "we" throughout this paper should be considered alongside the recognition that I offer here.

struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language." A call to changes in education followed these and similar claims, but the evidence for this is largely anecdotal and (as I note above) is certainly not definitive. As Bennett, Maton and Kervin note, calls for major change in education, though "widely propounded", have in fact "been subjected to little critical scrutiny, are under-theorised and lack a sound empirical basis" [13]. In their exploration of the field, they instead found that while "a proportion of young people are highly adept with technology and rely on it for a range of information gathering and communication activities", this cannot be taken for granted since there is also "a significant proportion of young people who do not have the levels of access or technology skills predicted by proponents of the digital native idea." In conclusion they offer the following sober conclusions:

> While technology is embedded in their lives, young people's use and skills are not uniform. There is no evidence of widespread and universal disaffection, or of a distinctly different learning style the like of which has never been seen before. We may live in a highly technologised world, but it is conceivable that it has become so through evolution, rather than revolution. Young people may do things differently, but there are no grounds to consider them alien to us. Education may be under challenge to change, but it is not clear that it is being rejected.

Changes in general communication are perhaps less controversial and are more immediately apparent. It's indubitable, for instance, that there are differences in the ways that we communicate now as a result of technology, as well as the expectations that these changes bring. We send emails rather than letters, text messages rather than make phone calls, but how it is changing *us* is likely to prove a more difficult analysis. A subtle shift from thinking in one way to thinking in another is not always easy to track (we're not even sure about the way in which we currently think). Nevertheless, it is possible that our thinking *is* changing, and it is equally likely that the digital age has a hand in this. As noted above and in [11] current research into the way digital interaction may be changing our very brain processing, such that on foundational levels our very nature (as persons) is altered is still in its infancy.

In terms of expectation, the assumption that there could or should be immediate responses to messages (email, SMS) is striking, as well as the idea that we can and may even be expected to engage quickly and with less effort to large audiences of friends or acquaintances (Facebook, Reddit). There is even now a belief that our voices can or should be heard by the public or by those who we would not otherwise have access to (Twitter). These are just a few of the more common examples. The perception of the nature of information and information-exchange seems also to be changing, though again with caveats as to the extent. For instance information is no longer static, evolutionary but slow moving (encyclopaedias, books, libraries), and is instead malleable or even fleeting (wikis, forums, semantic web searches). Mono- or one-way consumption has been replaced by immediately dialogical, information-manipulating (editing, creating) interaction. Information is not an endgame, and though the process of information gathering may be dynamic (the idea of being wed to one newspaper, for instance, is no longer as common as it was), but there is reason to doubt that there have been substantial changes in our perceptions of information as something that is accurate or definitive. The proliferation of false celebrity-death stories is only one such reason for caution,[6] which sits uneasily alongside the scepticism of the unreliability of what is read on the web.

Of most interest for this paper are the changes in relationship formation and development. Online relationships mirror analogue engagement in some ways, and can be fleeting, long distance, or entirely non-physical [3, p. 6]. If we accept that identity is formed dialogically however, we must question the impact of whatever changes there are. Discussion about the so-called *filter bubble* is one such example. As Pariser [14] explains, the algorithms employed by internet search engines narrow searches according to user history. Thus ensuring you are likely to see more of the same each time you search. Filter bubbles are also self-perpetuating. In our choices of Twitter followers, Facebook friends, Reddit sub-groups, we share and follow those who we perceive to share affinity for our interests, beliefs, and ideas. This is not always true of course, and some may actively seek out antagonistic or opposing parties or opinions, but this is certainly not a given. At this stage it also seems increasingly less likely. With the rise of the *safe space* in UK university campuses (and even with the backlash against these, whether in the name of liberalism or free speech)[7] the mechanism for deciding whose voices are heard and by whom seems to be following a trend of narrowing rather than expanding, and it's perhaps not surprising. Arguments can be fun of course, but in friendships people seek common ground (even if the common ground is a love of argument). That such tendency would be mirrored online is unsurprising.[8]

This is important when we think about dialogical identity formation. If identity is indeed formed *in response to, because of* or even *in spite of* the way in which others perceive us, the fact that we can manipulate what others perceive on the one hand (selfies are an excellent example of this), or delete those who do not view us as we might wish to be seen, on the other, means that the formation of identity may also be open to our own manipulation. This may not in itself be unusual or controversial. Groups of analogue friends are also self-selecting to some extent. But it is precisely the question of *extent* that matters here. Simply put, if I didn't like the views of those around me in a pre-digital age my choices were limited: physically remove myself from those people, or choose to ignore, adapt, respond, or confront the views that I faced. In digital dialogue the confrontation need not be so obvious (I can simply delete, block or otherwise silence such views), nor do I ever need to hear them at all, since I can unfriend, block or otherwise remove the access that those people have to me, or me to them. This can be long before they have the chance to offer the views that I might wish to avoid. Examples of people who unfriend or unfollow those with whom they disagree are not difficult to find. Thus an opportunity to define oneself in dialogue with, including in contrast with, those people antithetical to ourselves may be lost. If there is an impact of this, and even if this develops as a trend, remains to be seen.

In a broader sense how we *use* digital resources already affects the way in which an online identity is perceived by others. In the same way that we define an artist according to their

[6] Cf. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/20/fashion/celebrity-hoax-death-reports.html?_r=0
Also see attempts by some sites like Facebook to mitigate the impact of false information and news stories on their pages: http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/20/us-facebook-hoaxes-idUSKBN0KT2C820150120

[7] Cf. http://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/feb/06/safe-space-or-free-speech-crisis-debate-uk-universities

[8] There is of course more to be said about these ideas, and it is a topic to which I hope to return in the next incarnation of this paper.

engagement with, and usually production of art, someone who has a blog is a blogger. In this way the person becomes associated with a sub-culture of internet uploaders (or contributors). If, on the other hand you surf the internet without leaving more of a mark than the occasional status update or cookie trail, then you might be considered a downloader or lurker (or less flatteringly a *consumer*). Rather like the person who visits and consumes art but does not actively create art. The fluidity of such identities online is particularly noteworthy since each unique or individual interaction, with more or less anonymity can define an individual quickly and with more or less permanence. While overnight stardom in historically analogue terms was relatively infrequent, and normally included a lot of behind-the-scenes work and participation in a field—whether willing or otherwise—an overnight internet star or sensation can happen *overnight* in rather more of a literal way. This has been found to some cost by unwitting users, such as Justine Sacco, Lindsey Stone, and Adria Richards, all of whom used internet media to share their ideas and experiences, and all of whom faced quite serious backlash, bullying and smearing as a direct result.[9] Add to this *trolling* that includes sustained campaigns, or even identity appropriation or theft, and it becomes more and more apparent that in simple terms your identity online is up for grabs, for good or for bad. The possibility of anonymity is part of these trends, though it would be difficult to cite this as the only reason. While a person may be less likely to insult someone in the analogue world as online, this does not mean that they wouldn't do so. As an interesging aside, *anonymity* itself has lately been cemented as a grammatical person, sometimes even with proper noun capitalisation ("posted by Anonymous").

There are of course advantages to anonymity. Holloway and Valentine's research into the way in which young people engage with the internet [10, p. 133] found that anonymity allows "users to construct 'alternative' identities, positioning themselves differently in online space than off-line space." Identities, they further note, that are both *played with* and at times *abandoned.* This anonymity offers control, flexibility, as well as "time to think about what they want to say and how they want to represent themselves" [10, p. 134]. Despite this, they also found that the off- and online worlds of children are not utterly disconnected, but rather "mutually constituted" [10, p. 140]. It is easy to see the benefits this can bring, especially where such identities may be otherwise isolated, but the question of narrowing dialogical engagement once again remains unanswered. A positive example of where this support may be helpful in identity formation is for transgender identities that are otherwise less common in an analogue community. Yet there are other identities that can be perpetuated by online communities in ways that may be harmful, such as pro-ana sites, which promote eating disorders, and propagate myths about weight and health.

Palfrey and Gasser [1, p. 36] claim that "increasingly, what matters most is one's social identity, which is shaped not just by what one says about oneself and what one does in real space but also by what one's friends say and do." While the immediate impact of one's social identity may be more apparent, more permanent, or perhaps just more accessible, it is a misnomer to distinguish identity in this manner. Identity (according to the dialogical account) is at once always and necessarily social (cf. [17] for further discussion on the social aspect], at least in its formation, and perhaps the clearest differences are likely to be the overt and immediacy of the perception of such formation.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to engage in the conversation on digital identity, and in so doing has attempted to offer a picture of online identity that reflects the complexity and uncertainty that is not antithetical to pre-digital discussion of identity. To some extent the online identities that we construct (or are constructed for us) are, on the one hand, just another strand of what it is to be me or what it is to be you. On the other hand, the paper has tried to show ways in which the dialogical formation of identity may face challenges in the narrowing selection process of those dialogues, and from silencing the voices that are *other* in some way. The paper has sought to broaden the scope of the discussion on this topic. The hope is that it attracts the attention of many different voices (including dissenting or unconvinced), and that from this dialogue the identity of the paper can be expanded.

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[9] Cf. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/how-one-stupid-tweet-ruined-justine-saccos-life.html
The fact that all these examples are of women is not unintentional. While it would be untrue to say that *only* women experience online shaming, bullying or harassment, it *is* true to say that women face a disproportionate volume of such abuse. This reference purposefully does not include comment on whether such criticism as each received was deserved or not, since that is beyond the scope of this paper. For the purposes of my argument, what is of interest is the identity they forged, and that which was forged for them online.

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