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## To be or not to be, the importance of Digital Identity in the networked society

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**Abstract:** The emergence of the web has had a deep impact at different levels of our society, changing the way people connect, interact, share information, learn and work. In the current knowledge economy, participatory media seems to play an important part in everyday interactions. The term “digital identity” is becoming part of both our lexicon and our lives.

This paper explores some of the aspects regarding approaches and practices of educators, using web technologies to foster their digital identity within their networks and, at the same time, developing a social presence to complement their professional and academic profiles. In fact, we think it is imperative to discuss the relationship between our social presence and our professional life, as online the two are often intertwined.

We present the issues the web poses through dichotomies: open or closed, genuine or fake, single or multiple. We also comment on different approaches to these dichotomies through examples extracted from recent projects, drawing from user’s experiences in building their digital identities.

This paper looks at the importance of digital identity in the current networked society, by reviewing the contemporaneous scenario of the participatory web, raising a set of questions about the advantages and implication of consciously developing one’s digital identity, thus opening the discussion regarding openness, uniqueness and integrity in connection with one’s digital identity.

This paper is also a reflection of thinking and practice in progress, drawing from examples and real-life situations observed in a diversity of projects.

The issue could be reduced, perhaps, to whether one consciously becomes a part of the digital world or not, and how that participation is managed. It is up to us to manage it wisely, and guide knowledge workers in their journey to create theirs.

**Keywords:** Digital identity, networked society, digital literacy, knowledge workers.

### INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the web as a dynamic, user-centered platform for interaction and congregation of social capital is reportedly creating impact at different levels of our society (Hiltz & Turoff, 1993). It is changing some of the fundamental aspects of how people connect, interact, share information, shop, socialise, learn and work (Solomon & Schrum, 2007). In the current knowledge economy, which is increasingly dependent on digital technologies, there seems to be a tendency to optimise practice with the support of participatory media.

Networked and communal learning are concepts often associated with the use of learning technologies (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009), and the creation and exchanging of knowledge. Networking, however, is not a new concept nor a new practice. Networks are probably as old as humankind has shown interest to learn with others. Erasmus was one of the most networked scholars of his time, making use of the epistolary genre (Pehn, 1999). In the enlightenment age, Voltaire followed a similar path. Darwin is most certainly the scholar with the largest analog network ever (Berkvens-Stevelinck, 2005). Yet, such ‘networking fashion’ was never taken on completely. Even today, in a *networked* society (Castells, 2000 & Dijk, 2006), contrasting approaches to knowledge creation and practice co-exist. Nevertheless, there is a growing awareness to the need of fostering new forms of learning, collaboration and dissemination of one’s work as part of one’s digital and professional footprint.

This short paper will explore some of the aspects regarding approaches and practices of educators with the use of web technologies to foster their digital identity within their networks whilst developing a social presence to complement their professional development and academic profile.

### **THE INTERNET AS A NEW SPACE FOR LEARNING AND SELF-PRESENTATION**

The idea of a virtual network started in the early sixties in MIT by Licklider (1963) with a publication about a "Intergalactic Network". The idea was to create a kind of virtual network which would enable researchers to interconnect several computers in order to make scientific and military information easily accessible to individuals in different locations. Although far from what the web would become in the decades ahead, this was the idea that kick-started a long and complex process of 'humanizing' the machine and creating new spaces for sharing and creating of information.

The web has witnessed different stages. We started with a fairly static and institutional driven web, in which information was displayed 'from one to many', almost as a replica of what was already in place in the physical spaces. In the 80s and 90s, and especially in the beginning of the 21st century a new wave of practices started to emerge as the interactive web incrementally took shape. In the educational context, things were not different. Despite of a modest pace, institutions started to adhere to the new medium of communication. Websites started to be the main information brochure of educational institutions, especially in higher education. Individuals could access relevant information from any connected computer.

The next natural advancement came with the development of new modalities of distance education, which had already being augmented with the invention of the CD-ROM and multi-media resources. With the internet as a new space for information delivery, the first phase of e-learning started. As exciting as it was at that time, the practices developed focused more on what the technology allowed rather than on what was didactically required. This has left repercussions which can still be found today in the more traditional approaches to e-learning. As Adell (2010) reminds us, even today the biggest issue education faces is not so much a pedagogical problem but rather a misunderstanding of didactic concepts. In a nutshell, this first phase

of learning with technologies consisted mainly on providing individuals with access to prescribed content and tools from a top-down approach (John & Wheeler, 2007). With very limited access to the production of content, users only 'concerns' were how they could access and 'consume' the resources made available. Their role was a more passive one. The second phase of the web, however, brought about a significant change not only on how content is accessed and produced, but rather and foremost, on how interactivity, collaboration and networking are mediated and enabled. In the last decade we have drastically shifted from Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) to social networking and peer participation. With it new paradigms start to emerge. (Craig, 2007). The web as an accessible book (Coughlan, 2005) stops being the main feature of the technological advancements. The web now distinguishes itself for its multifaceted, dynamic spaces and interconnectivity. Furthermore, it is celebrated for its multi-layers of participation and engagement. We would be naive to state that the web as it stands today has become fully democratized, but we can assert that at least it has been made open to the masses. We have shifted from a targeting-consumers web to a producers-driven environment (O'Reilly, 2005), where people now have an opportunity to both access and create content. With this, it is not only Institutions who have the power to brand themselves through a different medium. Individuals too have the opportunity to cultivate an identity as part of their socio-professional activity. Moreover, they have the right to question and reflect about that identity (McLuhan, 1968): a digital presence which is organically developed as part of their digital footprint as they join and participate in spaces that augment their opportunities to learn, foster new skills and raise their profile.

Naturally, this freedom to establish an active and visible presence online presents challenges to web users who lose their anonymity as they become active contributors of technology mediated networks which are wider than their local spheres of influence. This is one of the greatest dilemmas of this age. Privacy management is no longer only an issue difficult to deal with by public figures. Ordinary people are faced with similar issues as online publishing becomes a more current practice amongst the 'masses'. With the different services available to easy-publish photos and documents, participate in discussion, and create personal spaces, use geo and social tagging, individuals are exposed. We can even argue that despite

being more connected than ever before we are equally much more vulnerable. With the advent of the read and write web, not wanting to be part of cyberspace is almost an unrealistic deed. Our digital presence is not only dependent on us, but rather on those who know us and/or those who have access to our information. Anonymity is becoming quite a luxury even for the common citizen. Digital Literacy, on the other hand, is becoming a necessity. Knowing how to manage our public and private spaces online is a skill we can no longer disregard nor undervalue (Craner et al, 2000). Digital literacy is a value asset in any one's credentials (Gilder, 1997).

The next section of the paper will briefly examine some of the key issues educators, and cybernauts, in general encounter when crossing the online sphere. For knowledge workers, in particular, the web can be a fruitful space to complement their formal professional development, enhance their networks and thus forge a digital identity as a new component of their professional profile. Although the advantages are numerous, there are also implications which individuals should be made aware. This is indeed an area which requires further attention, especially since there is a growing tendency to participating online, even if only for social purposes. Therefore it is imperative we trigger the discussion regarding what one's social presence means in the context of one's professional life as online the two become often intertwined.

#### **DIGITAL IDENTITY – WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT INFLUENCES EDUCATORS' PRACTICE**

Digital Identity is a fairly new concept that derives from the practices individuals have been developing online (Williams et al, 2010). As pointed out before the web has been shaping the way we access and produce information. It is not less notorious that it has had an impact on how people become or make themselves 'more accessible' to others. That is probably one of the most fascinating aspects of the web. Cyberspace mediates interactivity and convenes human presence. Moreover, it provides exposure and new forms of community engagement. All of this is beneficial to the knowledge worker. All of this is important as a form of extending one's academic links and disseminating one's work. But all of this requires a new

set of skills, especially where information and privacy management is concerned (Alexander, 2008).

Digital Identity is a serious matter in this day and age. In our opinion, it centres around two macro areas: presentation and reputation. The first deals with the way we showcase our practice online, how we participate and interact in shared spaces, i.e., how we present ourselves and which 'persona' we assume as part of our presence online. The second focuses on what others think of us. Online the judgment of others takes an explicit form too via the different channels of communication. Our reputation, independently of having an online presence, is socially bound. Our behaviour is socially and culturally modelled, and socially and culturally judged. Other people's judgements of our conduct and performance determine the way people consider us. Hence, digital identity management is important, as it can impact on our activity both face to face and online. In a digitally connected world, educators have a two-fold role when it comes to address the issues cyberspace poses on their practice: on the one hand they need to mentor their students to be digitally savvy, which is far more complex a task than teaching them to create accounts in social networks or help them create a blog, for instance. On the other hand, they need to do what they preach in order to model behaviour, i.e., establish a reputable digital identity which students can look up to and follow as example.

It is interesting to note that almost all projects and activities that are based on using web tools and applications are actually ways of creating our digital identities, even if that is not their main goal. Every time we open an account for an online service, we are producing a small fragment of our digital identities. Some will stay with us and become a very important part of it, whereas others will be left behind, and perhaps even disappear. In other occasions, we will discover that a particular tool is not useful for us in that moment and situation, and so we will discard it, or perhaps leave it there, awaiting for that moment when it will become clear to us that it is time to add it to our toolbox. But even in those cases, it is the path that is important. Trying the possibilities of the web, and being able to decide what is and what is not useful for us is a way of maturing our understanding about what it means to 'be' online. Selecting and constantly revising which environments are an important component of our digital identity at a given moment of our

practice is part of the process of our ever-changing digital self. Our digital identity, just as our own personality, is always in progress, and it is mirrored in the environments we co-exist online.

As much as it is important to establish a digital identity, the issue of managing it arises many questions. Each technological advance has brought with it the need for a new set of basic skills to add on to the traditional literacy and numeracy ones.

Although the read-write web no longer calls for a great deal of technical knowledge - coding skills can now be kept to a minimum by the regular user - there is some soft skills that need to be developed. And those have less to do with (m)any of technicalities of the web, but rather with the 'philosophical' reflection of what it entails to 'be' online. There is a pressing need to develop a critical attitude towards the way we present and expose ourselves, and others, online.

How should we go about doing this? How can we mentor our educators on these issues? And, most importantly, how can we mentor them to mentor their students to manage their online presence?

In the next section will explore some of the issues we have been debating whilst mentoring knowledge workers into a reputable digital identity

## **BE YOUR DIGITAL IDENTITY**

As mentioned above, anyone who has initiated their activity online has also started their digital identity. One's digital identity is fragmentary, and therefore composed of the several services and networks we join. Yet, not all of these sites are necessarily related to our professional life, nor are they all related to our social activity. As we perceive the web as a space for socio-professional congregation, our digital identity can also become a mix of both. For some people, this presents no issues; for others, however, such realisation of mixing the different spheres of their lives can come quite as a surprise. Being aware of the possibilities as well as the implications of what it means to 'be' online is therefore crucial.

The key concepts presented below aim to start a reflection about the possibilities the web opens to us regarding our digital identity, and also draw on some of the implications it has on our 'real' life and reputation.

### **The dilemma of the web**

One of the ways of illustrating the issues the web poses to us, is to present them through a dichotomous thought. This will allow us to consider both sides of the coin and make conscious decisions about the options we are given. The points presented below will serve to open up a discussion as part of the presentation this paper is written for. Results from the discussion will serve as the basis for a more in-depth paper.

### **Open or closed?**

Do we want our activity online to be open or closed? Both are possible, and both present advantages and disadvantages. Open identities enables us to establish a more reachable presence. It makes us more accessible to our audience and it is particular beneficial in terms of community engagement. As knowledge workers, we can even advocate that it is our duty to foster open networks which will contribute to the common good and help advance knowledge. There is clearly also an advantage in terms of 'marketing' our work. By opening up the spaces where we present our practice, we are giving others an opportunity to interact with us and have access to our work. But as in everything, there is no rose without a thorn, and we know that just like in physical life, not everyone who participates in these environments share our good faith. It is important to protect our privacy too, as not to increase our vulnerability. So the question is: how much do we share? And how much is too much? This is certainly an answer that is bounded to individual practice and to context too.

For example, in one of the projects we were involved in, PELICANS (the other projects referenced here are DigitalOrchard and Seniorlab, all based at Citilab-Cornellà, Barcelona, Spain), students were presented with different online services for building "Hubs" where the whole class could meet and discuss ideas; wikis, blogs and social networks were amongst the options considered. In a class of 33 students, not one of them chose Facebook as a possibility, arguing that it was "their" space and did not want

teachers involved. Interestingly enough, after the subject was over, some of the students actually invited the lecturer to their network of friends. It seems that they have no problems adding an “authority figure” to their “circle of trust” if the decision is theirs, but reject the idea if it is imposed on them.

### Single or multiple?

Another dilemma many people face regarding their digital identity deals with the way they separate their private life from their professional sphere. Although it seems quite a straight forward thing to do, it is very hard to achieve. Moreover, the more we use the web as a space for congregation, the harder it becomes to keep a clear distinct between what is personal and private, and what is linked to our professional profile, as some people we connect to will have a different take on their digital footprint. This also interrelates with the issue presented above. How can we keep a single identity closed, when professionally it is arguably much more beneficial to keep it open? Or how do multiple identities fit in with the credibility of our identity? This last question takes us to the last issue we aim to present in this paper, which has to do with the veracity of the information we put online.

An example that illustrates this dilemma: in one of the projects mentioned above, participants raised the question about single identity or multiple identities. One of the participants went as far as to choose a different identity for each of the services she was experimenting with. Her argument was that she did not want her digital identity to be a snapshot of her real-life identity. Hence, she so chose this approach as to make sure that no one could track her real identity back from the logins she was using when opening accounts.

### Genuine or fake?

It can be argued that cyberspace, as a newly acquired space for interaction, presents a new space for the re-construction of the self as a new persona, or even personas. Yet, this raises questions regarding credibility and reliability. The web alone already creates a lot of suspicions and skepticism for the anonymous autonomy it yields. If we are to encourage people to develop several personas, are we encouraging a responsible environment, or

are we creating new playgrounds? Furthermore, how much can we trust a person who ‘owns’ different characters online?

A student participating in a study about the use of Web 2.0 tools for learning created “fake” identities by using an avatar which did not represent his real self, and by creating a login not related to his name. This had the effect of “killing” the conversation whenever he participated with that identity. He was only accepted back into the dialogue when some of the students who knew about this identity acknowledged his participation and gave credibility to this identity. Peer validation played a key role in his integration with the group, as his digital representation was not enough.

In this last section we aimed at raising very pertinent questions we deal with when mentoring knowledge workers into the conscious development of their digital identity.

## DISCUSSION

This paper aimed to make a statement about the importance of digital identity in the current *networked* society. We have briefly reviewed the current panorama of the participatory web, and raised a set of questions regarding the advantages and implication of consciously developing one’s digital footprint. This paper has targeted at opening the discussion regarding the issues openness, uniqueness and honesty in connection with one’s digital identity. This paper is also a reflection of thinking and practice in progress, drawing from examples and real-life situations observed in a diversity of projects.

In the end, we think the matter is reduced to the issue of consciously being a part of the digital world (or not), and how one manages that participation. The creation of even one single account marks the beginning of our digital self. In fact, it can be argued that any online information about us -even if it was not added by ourselves in the first place- defines a part of our digital identity: school records, mentions by third parties, tagged pictures, blog comments. It is up to us to manage it wisely, and guide others in their journey to create theirs. To be, or not to be (a part of the networked society): that is no longer a question but an issue we have to deal with.

The question is now, perhaps, how we interpret, manage and deal with our online existence.

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**Resumo:** A emergência da web tem tido um impacto profundo a níveis diferentes da nossa sociedade. A web tem vindo a mudar a forma como os indivíduos interagem, partilham informação, aprendem e trabalham. Na economia do conhecimento actual, a ‘participatory media’ tem um papel fundamental nas interacções diárias das pessoas, que, cada vez mais, estão relacionadas com as tecnologias digitais. O termo ‘identidade digital’ está a tornar-se parte do nosso léxico e existência.

Este artigo explora alguns dos aspectos relacionados com as práticas e abordagens de professores no que toca ao uso de tecnologias web para criar a sua identidade digital dentro das redes sociais a que pertencem a fim de desenvolvem uma presença social que complemente os seus perfis profissionais e académicos. De facto, este artigo aponta para a necessidade de discutir a relação entre a presença social de um indivíduo online e a sua via profissional, uma vez que no mundo virtual ambas as facetas da nossa existência andam, muitas vezes par a par, ou até entrelaçadas.

Os autores discutem as questões que a web levanta acerca da identidade digital através de várias dicotomias - Identidade Digital: aberta e fechada, genuína ou falsa, única ou múltipla. A discussão é ilustrada com exemplos extraídos de projectos recentes onde questões relacionadas com a criação de identidade digital foram levantadas e postas em prática.

Este artigo incide sobre a importância da identidade digital na “Sociedade em Rede” actual, sendo o seu principal foco alguns cenários contemporâneos relativamente ao uso da web interactiva no que toca ao estabelecimento de uma presença social online. O artigo propõe explorar uma série de questões acerca das vantagens e implicações que os indivíduos enfrentam quando decidem desenvolver a sua identidade digital de forma consciente, discutindo assim as ideais de abertura, singularidade e integridade em relação à identidade digital daqueles que usam a web para esse fim.

Este artigo reflecte as ideias e práticas progressivas dos seus autores, tendo as conclusões aqui apresentadas sido extraídas de exemplos e situações reais de uma série de projectos relacionados com o tópico.

A questão que este artigo pretende levantar pode ser resumida de uma forma simples: se o indivíduo está alertado para as questões que a sua presença digital levanta e como a sua participação na web é gerida. Cabe ao indivíduo, como ‘Educador’, gerir a sua reputação e guiar outros a fazer o mesmo.

**Palavras-chave:** Identidade digital, sociedade em rede, literacia digital, trabalhadores do conhecimento.

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