

Presence, identity, and the cloud of knowing

Introduction

Within the current module of the MSc (E-learning, Politics, and Society) it has often been the case that the members of the course have engaged with a number of differing means of communication in order to engage with each other. As the course is run entirely online, these contacts have been mediated through the technologies that have been used, the participants have never ‘met’ in a face-to-face geo-spatial sense, and may never actually meet as corporeal entities. This paper will investigate what this ‘detached’ inter-relation says about who and how the individuals on the course ‘are’. After a brief discussion around what ‘identity’ may mean, the rest of the paper will concentrate on how the creation (no matter how unconscious) of an online identity becomes part of the individual’s total ‘identity’, and how this may be assisted or hindered by engaging in e-learning.

What is Identity?

Who am I? This simple question opens up a huge vista of possibilities for identifying who or what an individual might ‘be’. Within my geo-spatial realm I am a man, a father, a husband, a librarian, a student, a teacher, a wearer of waistcoats, a lover of prog rock, and on and on ad infinitum. The ‘who’ of who I am is a hugely complex array of sensations and relationships between my ‘self’ and the world of stimuli in which I exist. These are only aspects of who I think I am. If I were to ask other people ‘who am I?’ I would get a range of differing answers dependent on their experiences and relationships with all aspects of ‘me’. So what then is identity? It could be seen as the intersection of the individual’s interaction with the ‘not-self’, whatever that may be, and the number of intersections offered by an online presence multiplies the opportunities for ‘identity’ to be observed. My interest lies in ‘what is observed’, rather than ‘what is presented’. Wiszniewski and Coyne (2002) explore virtual identity, with an emphasis on the concept of ‘masking’ identity, the fact that by interacting with online communities, individuals must ‘choose’ an identity to be, through the registration process. In the next section of the paper I examine how online and offline identities offer different views of the individual.

Online and offline identities

My offline ‘geo-spatial’ sense of identity has been a construction brought about by my interactions with other individuals, concepts that I have come across, experiences that I have had, and whims and fancies of my own, moving together to give a tapestry of ‘me’. My understanding of how this ‘me’ has been constructed leads me to believe that I have had some conscious control over the way in which this identity has been constructed, and that as identity “*is a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed one another with an inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux*

and movement” (Hume, 1739) that I will continue to mould my ‘identity’ experientially through time. Online ‘identity’ I see as something very different.

Online identity, because of its mediated nature, is a very different concept. Suler (1996) states that “*we can compartmentalise or dissociate [our] various online identities*”, but that “*bringing together the various components of online and offline identity... may be the hallmark of mental health*”. This dissociative aspect of our online selves illustrates a particular quirk on the online realm. Whereas I may feel that I am the same person as I was 5 years ago in the geo-spatial realm, when I have obviously changed through growing chronologically older, experientially more complex etc. In the online realm I *am* the person that I was 5 years ago, because the online self is constructed of the traces that have been recorded of the interactions that we had at the time. Also if we are to look at our ‘on-line-ness’ it is apparent that it consists of a number of different entities or threads that can be seen to make up an online ‘identity’. In this paper I am considering the concept of online identity outside of that coined by Gee (2003) in his work on video-gaming, “*in which the game-player creates a virtual identity*” – my concern is more with the hidden online identities that we generate through our mediated interactions with the online world.

Why should ‘online’ make a difference?

Whereas ‘I’ in the geo-spatial realm am centred around my physical instantiation, in the virtual world this is completely absent. My online presence is formed by a cloud of textual and visual trails that evidence my online interactions going back for some 20 years. In 1988 I first started to interrogate DIALOG for bibliographic records, so there is probably a record of my search terms and information retrievals from that time, in many ways that was the first facet of my on-line identity coming into being. Since that time I have been involved in many online projects and interactions which can be seen to have formed an online identity which has coalesced around the centre, my geo-spatial ‘self’. Aleister Crowley, writing in the early 20th century said that “*Every man and woman is a star*” (Crowley, 1904), and this cosmological model maps very well to the concept of a cloud of references coalescing around us in the online realm, and giving instantiation to an online ‘identity’, especially as this identity can only be expressed in the ‘informational residue’ that we leave behind us.

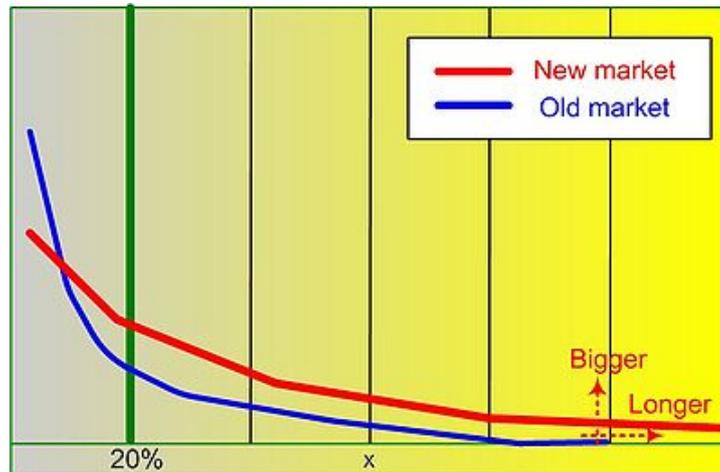
‘Identity’ and ‘Presence’

I have an online presence – a trail of mediated instances where I have interacted with systems and other individuals online, which can be tracked through the systems used for communication. But is this the same as having an online identity? The concept of ‘identity’ suggests that we can choose the identity that we have, that we are ‘free’ to construct the identity through which we wish to be known. Our presence online, however, is controlled by the instances of our interaction. In our working lives we have to interact with various systems such as e-mail, wikis, intranets, e-learning programmes, over which we have very little control, but with which we have to interact. These ‘forced’ interactions mean that our total online identity is outside of our control in many aspects. Of course it is possible to construct a distinct online

identity within an enclosed online environment by using an avatar to represent ‘yourself’ to a potential audience, but this only acts as a further facet in your total online identity.

The ‘Long Tail’

The ‘Long Tail’ was a concept first put forward by Chris Anderson (2004), it concerned “[the niche strategy of businesses, such as Amazon.com or Netflix, that sell a large number of unique items, each in relatively small quantities](#)” This stated that a business could “*realize significant profit out of selling small volumes of hard-to-find items to many customers, instead of only selling large volumes of a reduced number of popular items*” (ibid.). This acceptance that the traces of consumerism that remained after the initial action of purchase could be equally profitable enabled companies to operate in a different way in an online environment.



The concept of the long tail can also be applied to other online activities. In the case of an individual’s online identity, it can be seen that the long tail of their interactions with mediated systems can be seen to evidence their presence. In this way our online identities can stretch back to our first interactions with the online world. Indeed it may be that another’s understanding of who I am through my online identity could be entirely based around their interactions with an online identity that existed as an interaction some time ago, for example someone looking at interactions that took place as part of the ‘[VirtualSussexCollege](#)’ network would see an online presence that was instantiated and concluded over a decade ago – the fact that this particular instantiation of my online identity had a beginning and an end does not detract from the fact that this identity still exists at the end of a ‘long tail’.

Examples of my ‘identities’

In the same way that our geo-spatial identities are constructed from many different aspects of our interactions with our environment and other individuals, so our online identity is also an amalgam of interactions. For the purposes of this course I am

Our online ‘long tails’ can be seen in the same way, as an indicator of our online presence or identity, a virtual ‘tag cloud’ that can track ‘who we are and have been’ online.

E-learning: Help or Hindrance

The module has operated mainly through textual synchronous and asynchronous communication between the individuals undertaking the programme. This has led to many of the individuals being identified through their textual input only. This homogeneity of input can lead to a confusion of identity, especially in a synchronous exchange. By taking part in the MSc my online identity has changed in profile, and has made me more aware of the existence of an online identity as a concept. In this way it could be said that the experience of e-learning is both a driver of online identity, in that it compels the individual to expand their online activity, and at a meta-level an enabler of an online consciousness. The synchronous and asynchronous nature of the online interactions have differing impacts on the sense of presence that we feel in the environment. Within a synchronous interface such as Skype Chat we are intensely aware that we are interacting with another individual who is there ‘in the moment’. In an asynchronous interface such as the course Weblog this sense of presence is not so strong, as the timeframe of interactions is longer. If we are looking to build a sense of community within an online environment, it may be that the best way to achieve this is through concentrating on a synchronous interface.

The changing ‘shape’ of identity

Merchant (2006) quotes Thomas (2004) as stating that “*I went from being one person with a single name, to existing as a number of identities created by me, but not always recognisable as me, even by myself*”. Returning to the earlier Hume quote, it is likely that there is not a single ‘identity’ as such but a continuum of identities involved in our geo-spatial selves. With the rise of digital culture, however, we have seen “*a rapid increase in alternatives to f2f communication... and affordances [brought about by] the technology itself*” (Merchant, *ibid*). It is these ‘affordances’ that now provide a ‘hidden’ unconscious online identity which complements our already existant “*contingent, multiple, and malleable*” (Giddens, 1991) identities in the f2f world. Merchant’s (*ibid*) assertion that “*I am confident that a richer sense of identity may well be communicated at a deeper level, in ways that lie beneath the conscious control of the author*” is supported by this paper’s concentration on the ‘long tail’ that we create through these unconscious interactions with the affordances of the technology. There is also a strong parallel with Wenger’s (1987) work on ‘Transactive Memories’, in which he sees connections between “*individual memory [identity] systems taken together with the communication that takes place between those individuals*”. In building a memory [identity] system in Wenger’s view, the mediated communication is as important as the individual’s input/ identity.

Conclusion

The means by which we construct our identities has changed with the introduction of online environments and interactions. We are no longer 'who we are', but also who we have been in the virtual realm. This is due to the mediated nature of the online experience, and the fact that this entails the recording of our interactions within the medium. The online aspects of our identity are formed by the traces left in the mediated sphere by our interactions with other entities, which form a 'cloud of knowing' a virtual record of 'who we are'. Our 'presence' in the virtual realm, and our 'online identity' in that realm can be seen as 2 aspects of these interactions. Our 'chosen' identity (perhaps through the use of an avatar), and our 'forced' identity (through our necessary interactions with a range of mediated systems) combine to give a total 'online identity' which both shows us 'in the moment', and as organically growing (but recorded) individuals across time.

E-learning offers both an opportunity to fashion ourselves an online identity through our interactions with others within an online community, and a further conduit for our online presence through our interaction with e-learning systems. The chosen form of interaction with the e-learning system (especially the relationship between synchronous and asynchronous communications) allows for richer interactive participation in the virtual environment. At a philosophical level, e-learning also provides us with a meta-frame in which we can better understand our evolving 'identities' in an increasingly virtual environment. Further research into the possible shapes of our online 'clouds of knowing' and the ways in which these map to our understanding of our 'selves' as individuals would help to build a rich picture of our online interactions across time.

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