

THE DIGIDENTITY: *Evolving the Institution of Self-Representation*

The question of who we are – as individuals and as members of communities – inhabits all considerations of where our society stands in response to the increasingly ubiquitous stimuli of “digital media.” In fact, the seamless marriage of these very two words (“digital” and “media”) provides a potent platform from which to discuss notions of identity, especially given that who we are today has become increasingly defined by screen names, email addresses and “google-ability” on the World Wide Web. While the abstraction of self through media is hardly a new practice (one can argue that it is inert to human existence, exemplified by primitive paintings found in the French caves of Lascaux), what has emerged in the wake of the mass adoption of electronic, silicone-mediated communication is the “DigIdentity” (“digital identity”): an ever-on persona poised to remediate all previous practices of self-representation by becoming more *real* than the subject it was created to mediate.

DIGIDENTITIES DEFINED: <i>The Data that Drives Us</i>
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While classical portraiture from the Renaissance to modern Photorealism yearned for a transparent mediation of reality (employing visual devices of perspective and scale designed to evoke depth and verisimilitude on two-dimensional surfaces), DigIdentities are hyper-mediated abstractions of self that transform reality from being fully contextualized representations into dense aggregates of carefully selected – then segregated – data points. While personal profiles (such as those found on www.friendster.com and *MySpace*) can be created to counter the notion that the vast majority of what represents us in a data-driven economy are numbers and barcodes, the reality of modern existence remains thus: to the bank officer approving our home loan, we

are nothing more than our credit histories; to the retail industry stocking our shelves, we are nothing more than our purchase profiles; to the bureaucracy administering democracy, we are nothing more than our voter registration and social security number; and to the myriad of institutions that govern the boundaries of our agency, we are nothing more than a policy-driving statistic.

Recent security-breach scandals involving leading identity-verification firms like Choice Point (whose compromised multi-million-person database led to the theft of 144,000 profiles containing social security numbers along with health and credit histories) clearly demonstrate that in the modern Information Age, it is our digital selves that are most vulnerable. Though our bodies succumb to illness, heartaches and indigestion, both the cause and remedies for these ailments provide us even a modicum of agency; their very tangibility offers on and off switches that are *flickable* in our grasp. But the DigIdentity is a strange new being: an intangible entity void of physical gravity that can inflict palpable joys and sorrows at the anonymous, errant click of a mouse button. How many consumers know that the course of radio-frequency identification technology will allow grocery retailers to monitor their trajectory within their stores and have even promoted the surveillance of school children in efforts to track attendance? How many citizens are aware that their personal correspondences via email and short message services (SMS) are archived and readily available for external (often, bureaucratic) scrutiny? And how many people fully acknowledge that the private integrity of our habits and behaviors are compromised daily with every swipe of a credit card and (in a foreseeable future) every keystroke on a keyboard?

While re-creating a credit profile after a bankruptcy offers far less challenges than say, re-creating life after a disfiguring car crash, in the age of “data-as-self,” re-affirming one’s digital

identity can be just as cumbersome. We *are* our DigIdentities, especially when we create them ourselves. As mentioned above, one strategy for self-reaffirmation is the plethora of avatars that have become increasingly adept at representing what is fast becoming the hyper-mediated self.¹ When countering the de-contextualized databases of Choice Point or the Census Bureau (or simply yearning for web space in which to house last summer's jpegs), web-users turn to electronic networks such as *Friendster*, *MySpace*, *Facebook* and the myriad of niche-communities connecting millions of profiles throughout the world. What make these virtual avatars different from the Da Vinci portrait, or even a Kodak snapshot are the images, sounds, videos and daily-updated web blogs that together re-contextualize the self in an attempt for hyper-immediacy.

When a person is encountered on a street or in a social setting, codes imbedded in greetings, hand gestures, clothes and accessories can be immediately interpreted within that particular context. Unless a person is prone to traveling with their entire DVD collection, magazine library or a set of picture albums documenting life from the time of their birth, getting to know a person well is largely limited to direct, physical interaction or background research (most often referred to as "gossip"). And a re-telling of a recent adventure, however theatrically exuberant, is far easier to divulge when accompanied by video. Hampered by the realistic limitations of human storytelling, profiles have proliferated because of the convenience they provide in helping users "tell" the whole story (often by displaying the story itself through media). The attribution of media to cultural preferences and personal histories all contribute to a seemingly holistic representation that would not be easily possible in reality. Harkening to the original thesis, DigIdentities are a powerful new form of representation – one that allows a

¹ Bolter, 232

person to be consumed with a totality that renders the avatar more “real” than the subject it represents.

DIGIDENTITIES COME TOGETHER : A Case for (Virtual) Social Capital

Robert D. Putnam argues in *Bowling Alone* that the Internet- much like its user- faces a very important identity crisis: as a medium, does the web inherit the legacy of ubiquitous communication (once?) held by the telephone, or has television already bestowed upon it the mantle of entertainment?² In seeking to do both, the Internet re-mediate telephony and broadcast TV, forcing the reformation of policies that once held the older technologies at an indisputable hegemony.³ Recent legal battles involving net-facilitated long distance “calls” and the ever-contentious war over digital copyright, piracy and extra-legal media distribution demonstrate that while the web has the power to channel communication and information with greater efficiency than older media, it does so at a rate hampered by its very novelty. Legal frameworks governing the net are infantile at best; overall, it is still obscured by a nebulous web of do’s and don’ts in compliance with a contentious negotiation between public whim and technological innovation.

How these evolving legal strictures affect the DigIdentity is contingent on how they also affect the communities in which each digital persona lives. While our DigIdentities can never supplant our real selves, they are able to augment our physicality with opportunities and conveniences that facilitate interpersonal connections with others. While profiles can never completely represent a user’s persona verbatim, the multitude of media and the complexity of narrative that one applies can, in fact, present a proof of reality by indulgence in the imaginary.

² Putnam, 179

³ Bolter, 224

For at its core, all DigIdentities are illusory entities that can only exist within the hyper-text: no matter how much detail one employs in the creation of his profile, it is done so in a de/re-contextualized forum that allows others to decode it without the need for full inquiry.

Our DigIdentities are therefore wholly reliant on the “Digi-Communities” validating a person’s role in society much like the civic organizations of old. As Putnam points out, social capital is a prerequisite for, not a consequence of, computer-mediated communication.⁴ From the Multi-User Dungeons described by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin in *Remediation* to the vast networks of social progressives that used digital technologies to protest the World Trade Organization in Seattle and topple corrupt regimes in Manila, there emerges social networks that provide palpable social capital and personal agency. While not every online social network will produce a reincarnation of 20th Century egalitarian structural reform, it certainly does facilitate connectivity within a global community predominantly comprised of young people; a community that has grown remarkably suspicious of many institutions – including, ironically, the institution of media.

DIGIDENTITIES UNMASKED : *Blogs and the Institution of Reportage*

This essay will conclude with a quick analysis of the phenomenon of “blogs” (“web logs”). The advent of this form of public journal keeping (along with virtually all iterations of the personal web space which by default give birth to the DigIdentity) have become to the institution of media what Martin Luther’s printing press became to the Catholic Church (and the consequent Protestant Reformation).⁵ The printing press allowed for the inexpensive, mass distribution of the scriptures, thereby affording lay people a greater agency over their spirituality

⁴ Putnam, 177

⁵ Eisenstien.

and reducing the Church's role as the sole medium between the congregation and the divine. Similarly, digital photography and blogs, with their mutual ease in the production, reproducibility and (most importantly) mass distribution of images and text, provide all users with an augmented control over the channels of information from which we now receive our news.

While the acquisition of traditional news was once intended to be completely objective, it is now a common-place assumption that mainstream reportage is a tainted practice. What news is covered by which network and then framed according to an ideological spin is now so heavily mired in political agenda that consumers have little option but to either turn to other sources of information or (more significantly) produce their own reportage. When an officer in Iraq sends pictures of the frontlines that are not controlled by the military, or blogs broadcast the covert sexual orientations of closeted members of Congress, or a family announces the birth of a new sibling, these are all circumstances of personal reportage that derives their significance from the lack of mediation between news source and recipient.

To the budding young reporter, blogs are powerful tools to by-pass (perhaps even disintermediate) traditional channels of publication. To the DigIdentity, however, blogs are vehicles for social, political and even economic structural reform; and given the ever-escalating network of links and inter-critique, the *blogosphere* is poised to become one of the most powerful global networks ever constructed. Because blogs represent a universe of unmediated thoughts, desires, distastes and aspirations, it is also the ultimate form of hyper-immediacy. While this brings to question issues of credibility, it also heralds an ongoing reformation of the media that, like the Protestants of old, seeks not to destroy traditions or fundamental institutions, but make it accessible to everyone.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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