

Do others decide who we are? Or sense of Self in Web 2.0

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To be is to do. Plato
To do is to be. Jean-Paul Sartre
Dobedobedo – Frank Sinatra
-graffiti

When I first logged on to a social networking site, I was prompted about my religious and political views. Not having either, I did the usual “Spiritual but not Religious” default and then clicked on the arrow for Political views, expecting to find the usual, ‘Very, not very, apathetic.’ Instead I found right wing, left liberal, liberal etc. Which got me thinking. I think very little of the political parties at home and I do know that aside of posturing every now and then on an issues, they don’t correspond to these political types. Except perhaps the Communists. So I chose Left Liberal because I thought that best described my political views and not at all the way I would choose to vote when I was reinstated into the electoral rolls.

Also I spend at least ten minutes every fortnight searching for my name on different search engines and seeing what comes up. I spend a little more than ten minutes checking for ex-girlfriends and school crushes. And the results are fascinating. I find myself making value judgments. Then if I’m feeling objective enough, I make judgments on how I appear to be on the Internet. Analyse how I come across by the sort of comments I leave on people’s blogs, the stray news item eight years ago and (only because I know it’s me) through some comments on other blogs.

This, and the absence of a presentation to write, got me thinking about identity in an Internetted World.

But before I can make a healthy conjecture it becomes necessary to get academic and discuss what communal wisdom says on the subject of identity.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states that “we often speak of one’s “personal identity” as what makes one the person one is. Your identity in this sense consists roughly of what makes you unique as an individual and different from others. Or it is the way you see or define yourself, or the network of values and convictions that structure your life. This individual identity is a *property* (or set of properties).

George Herbert Mead argued that our psychological sense of identity comes from both I and Me, viz. is created both for ourselves and our perception of how others see us.

Leibniz’s view which has held sway in mathematics and helped develop predicate calculus is that x is the same as y if and only if every predicate true of x is also true of y.

To sum, Identity has been seen to be a set of attributes that we can apply to ourselves, whether temporary or permanent. (I am a person born on such and such date; I am thirty four years old.) From the different sources above it's clear that our notion of identity is a very predicative one - There is an entity x to whom n predicates apply.

Long, long ago, in a city far, far away when I first began a job hunt in the Delhi of 1995, I was a graduate of philosophy, from a certain college, from a certain family. In that order. That's what I thought was central to my being the way I was. There were things that lay outside that – notions of class, caste perhaps, ethnic identity. And on the outside lay things like personality, whims, traits, etc.

When I went to meet someone for a job, I carried my mark sheets, I carried some evidence of extra-curricular ability and a Curriculum Vitae, that listed more or less the same things: My name, my contact address and then a much larger section on the whole education, extra curricular spiel.

It was to repeat the wisdom of philosophers quoted above, highly predicative. Definitional almost.

Today on facebook I'm the guy who's struggling to get up in the mornings, has three hundred and something friends, does not want to comment on his relationship status and has made similar apathetic comments about religion and politics. Where there wasn't information on a question it's been created, or reacted against. Google gives 4 or 5 pages of search results, a page of which is genuine links to things I've done or said. And if you were to chance upon my blog, you would find some of my darker thoughts.

The information revolution has created a whole lot more information about me than my CV contains. However, when I look at my online profile I feel a certain distance from it that I don't with my CV. What could the reason be?

You may well argue that reading all the information about me gives a more rounded picture of me, that the CV was a highly objective and a somewhat formal version of things achieved, time spent. But the fact about my CV is that it was a true personal history.

And thus a more genuine source of the list of predicates that made me.

But a conversation I had with an HR friend of mine made me realise that this wasn't quite the truth. She said that the first thing she does when she gets a lead on a possible recruit is to look up the person's Orkut scrapbook. Not only does she get a sense of the conversations the person has, the friends and fans, but also how that person thinks and acts. She uses this to abstract some sense of the person before she interviews them.

What's more she says this is a well-established fact. That some people actually have two or more profiles – say a facebook and a MySpace or Orkut. They forward one to the HR recruiter which is like a glamorized version of them – a well maintained interactive Bio-data if you like, and the other is perhaps the more real version. (Which if nothing else, explains why Indians have such large numbers on social networking sites)

But an artificial profile didn't seem counter-intuitive - while browsing profiles I have often thought that some people appear wholly different.

There are the really unfriendly types who have hundreds of friends online, their scrapbooks are full, and they have fans and admirers. Yet some of these guys are quite the opposite when you meet them.

And the opposite holds true as well. Quite a few of the really popular people I know aren't that popular online. They either haven't made the effort, have little time or don't have the qualities to be popular online.

This leads me to two conjectures –

- a. the Internet changes how you appear and
- b. the more complex one sociologically - perhaps the Internet is changing our notion of self.

While it may be easy to establish that the nature of the Internet makes us appear different from how we are – people good at using the written word and a dry wit turn out to be more popular than people who don't, the second conjecture seems far more interesting to investigate.

So has our sense of self changed?

Searching about change in self – I found a beautiful analogy. It's a comment by Wade Roush on Joho the blog, and I quote verbatim.

“In the original series of Superman comics (1940s to 1985), Superman is the real person, and Clark Kent is a phony front he presents to the world, his so-called secret identity....In 1986, after the Crisis on Infinite Earths series, DC Comics hired writer/artist John Byrne to recreate the Superman character from scratch, dumping all the previously established continuity, and offer a fresh retelling of the Superman mythos...

In this post 1986 series, Clark Kent is the real person, and Superman is the front that he presents to the world, his so-called secret identity. He adopts this secret identity to prevent his enemies from taking advantage of him by hurting his family or friends. However, most of the world does not know that Superman is hiding his real identity at all because he does not use a mask which suggests that he does not have anything to hide. The concept that Clark is the real man, and a man shaped more by his parent's ethics than his alien power, is a deliberate reversal of the earlier comics.”

It was serendipity. That we wear masks isn't new – but that the face and the mask may have changed places is profound.

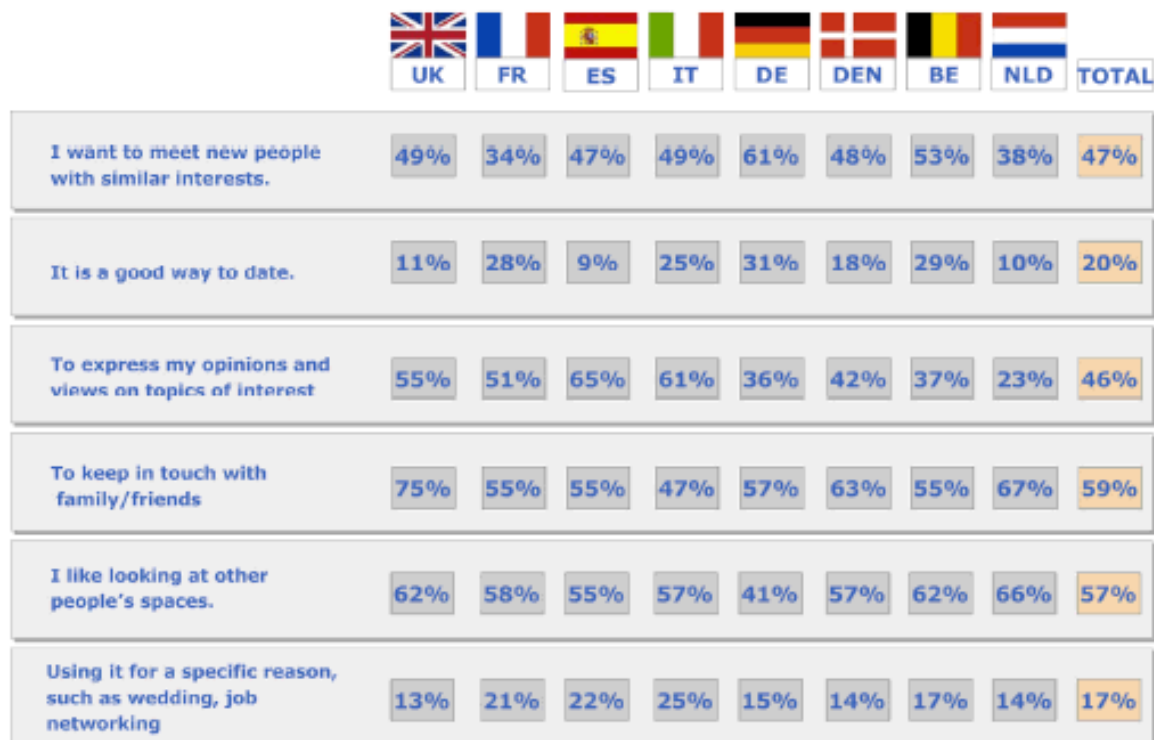
So far the notions of identity seemed to emanate from predicates, almost a log of personal history. A very passive notion – as the early Wittgenstein would say – a person is made up of facts.

Given how much information we generate about ourselves today, the ease of personal expression and the ease of public consumption of that information and feedback – there seems to be a new being – the expressive self. A person who is a complex product of the avatar they embody, the comments they make, the pictures they put up, the friends they accept or reject, the blogs they post, the groups they belong to, their status updates, etc.

What do people do online?

| Author's behaviour | Underlying needs | Key characteristics |
|---|--|---|
| Popularity seeking Keen to appear popular, cool, vital, or exciting to friendship group. Some underlying insecurity. | Friendship & belonging | Often younger females. Content within the space is used to cement author's role in the friendship group and to project a desired self-image. |
| Documenting the moment Documenting a key moment e.g. baby's first year, wedding, freshers' week. | Personal achievement or individualism & creativity | Driven more by seminal moments than demographics. Often a first attempt at a personal web presence. Features photos and/or blog entries. |
| Keeping in touch Used as primary communication tool with friends / family (geographically separated) | Friendship & belonging | Often students, immigrant families, older friends. Sites often photo-heavy. |
| Social co-ordinating Online and offline friendship groups are merged. Maintain through Messenger, photos, communications. | Friendship & belonging | Typically younger influencers who drive high volume of traffic among social network. Online and offline worlds collide. Key events re-lived through photos and visitor comments. |
| New dimensions Add extra layer to (one-dimensional) persona on Messenger or other personal spaces. Tell people more about me / my life. | Individualism & creativity | Transcends demographics. Space is designed entirely to help visitors get to know the author better. May feature 'evidence' of personal achievements, photos, lists of favourites. |
| Self-expression Creative self-expression - because you can. For wider consumption. Exhibit your talents and hope for feedback. | Individualism & creativity | Particularly common in France and China, the space exists as a vehicle for the author's self-expression: can include photos, art, poetry, blogging or music. |

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Which of the following describes the reason why you use social networks?

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Let's say my identity ten years ago was like an onion – with the inner bulb reflecting core beliefs about myself and the outer rings expressing things like personality and the effects of the inner belief. If I acted on something, the agent was acting from inside out.

I feel the shift has started, reversing this sense of identity to an outside-in model. Where whims, comments, expressions, even vicarious living shape our sense of who we are. And the primary reason for this is feedback and the quantum jump in giving and receiving feedback that the Internet allows. At last count there were 47,092,584 people on Orkut, 90 million on facebook, 110 million on MySpace– all scrapping, posting, commenting.

There are two possible outcomes I see coming out of this shift. The first is that we have become more accepting of our complexities - which is healthy. We see ourselves as beings with many different sides and facets. The information available at the end of a search query, allows us to come to face with some of these and give definition to what was hitherto amorphous.

The second outcome is a slightly scarier one.

To use George Herbert Mead's notion of Identity – if we were more 'I' centric earlier – we have become more 'Me' centric now.

I find a whole host of my friends online upset that I hadn't commented on their note, or asking me why I didn't post my comment online instead of emailing them. As a matter of fact, I too get upset when people read my blog, say they like something but don't bother to leave a comment. I did a quick dipstick and I found that most of my colleagues find it a little disappointing – when they receive no email, or no new messages on their site. In fact, this drives them to put up a comment or a note, or change their status update so that people are moved enough to comment. That's how feedback dependent we have gotten. It's as though we have become mini-celebrities – craving fan mail or liking to read about ourselves. Thus managing our public persona almost becomes a part-time job.

Whether this was a latent need that has just been fuelled by the Internet or whether there has been some psychological change triggered by new technology is hard to say, but it is a behavioural trend that needs some investigation.

I generated some possible outcomes of this sort of semi-celebrity behaviour and did a little searching.

The propositions I tested were:

1. There should be a number of psychometric tests/ pop quizzes taken online
2. The average of the number of friends online should be going up – in fact should far exceed Dunbar's number

(Wikipedia: **Dunbar's number** is a theoretical cognitive limit to the number of people with whom one can maintain stable social relationships. These are relationships in which an individual knows who each person is, and how each person relates to every other person. Proponents assert that numbers larger than this generally require more restricted rules, laws, and enforced norms to maintain a stable, cohesive group. No precise value has been proposed for Dunbar's number, but a commonly cited approximation is 150.)

3. People should be far more amenable to making small changes in themselves
4. Internet exclusion should cause withdrawal or depression – it should move from socializing to reward seeking behaviour

My searches did not yield any answers for point 1, but I did find 216,000 pages on google that respond to “take a free psychometric test online”. What is far more interesting is that on queendom.com a site which allows you to take many tests there are six categories of tests to take – Career, IQ, Personality, Health, Relationship, Attitude & lifestyle. Perhaps they’ve classified it, but I remember a few years ago they had far fewer tests and no categories.

On personality100.com a banner on the top of the page proudly announces that Men and women who have taken the Personality100 Test: 3,245,844. Inconclusive data perhaps, but not stuff that negates the hypothesis.

There is a bit more proof on point 2 – Sean Moffitt writing for Buzz Canuck puts the average number of facebook friends at 164. Sometime this year, facebook published data that states that people have trophy friends and that they collect them like people once collected stamps.

Dr Will Reader and his team at Sheffield Hallam University have been studying how social networking sites, notably Facebook and MySpace, are changing the nature of human relationships and whether they represent "the next stage in evolution." And they have found that people have massive networks of friends – from hundreds to even millions.

As far as point 3 goes, I don’t have any information about it. However, I feel an increased receptivity to feedback is bound to happen.

Point 4 - Internet addiction or dependence is undergoing extensive research. The following are two excerpts from the many articles I found online.

Monash University graduate Julian Cole uncovered addiction as part of his research into the use of Social Networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace. He found many openly admitted to their addiction and some even contributed to online confession groups. Further he found that for these self-confessed addicts, signing onto Social networking sites is an “automatic and compulsive” behavior. They sometimes sign onto their web site of choice in excess of 20 times a day.

Jerald J Block an MD in psychiatry writes in his paper that Internet addiction appears to be a common disorder that merits inclusion in DSM-V. Dr. Block adds that all internet addictions had four common components: excessive use, withdrawal, tolerance and negative repercussions.

What we haven’t discovered yet, is whether this is addiction to mere socializing or whether the addicts have flipped over, to require constant affirmation or rewards from their network of friends. At present much of the research on Internet addiction focuses on

gaming, sexual experiences and messaging; more conclusive medical research on Social Networking addiction is lacking. But here's an interesting factoid -there are 155 odd Facebook Addict Anonymous groups on facebook itself.

I'd have to say this isn't the conclusive proof that I set out to find, but it does seem like the semi-celebrity thesis holds water.

Finally, as an advertising man, I have to ask now how this translates into opportunity for advertisers and marketers. The only conclusion I can reach seems somewhat unethical.

Namely, that instead of looking for feedback on products we could be actively engaged in giving it to consumers. Engage people in self-discovery, personality & character development. In designing applications that tell the customer what they are like or could be like. A great use is Schick's award winning application of the beard generator. Applications like this that speak to the narcissist without proffering judgment, seem guaranteed to work. But we could go further.

There is great talk of the Internet making a two way conversation possible. But so far it is marketers telling people what they offer and people telling them back what they think about them. It isn't yet a conversation. Perhaps it's time for companies to tell individuals what they think about them. Advise them on how they could become more popular or better-rounded personalities. Albeit incredibly politely and in a lawsuit proof manner.

Engaging in this kind of feedback may seem like an Orwellian manipulation, but it's doubtful that consumers will ever fall for anything more than beauty secrets, till one has actually earned their trust.

And for that Marketers have to be their friends. At least at first, completely honestly.