

Choosing who you want to be. Identity management in online communities.

The internet provides many people around the world access to personal networks, and social communities they may not have been able to be exposed to otherwise. Part of the nature of online networks and communities is the ability to manage the identity that you project to others you interact with. The ability to choose the identity you show online, is crucial to many of these communities and the anonymity provided by the internet often allows for more free and open discussions. This paper will look at various ways people manage their online identities to argue that it is crucial that anonymity is protected online. This paper will examine a case of online character creation in a game, it will look at identity management by simply omitting information, it will explore the idea of identity performance, and finally it will look into the idea of purposefully deceiving others and projecting an entirely false identity. Even where there are examples of online anonymity causing certain problems within communities, the benefits of anonymity are shown to outweigh the few problems caused by it.

The ability to choose your public identity online is an important aspect of online communities and networks. The degree of anonymity allowed by the internet allows people to connect in ways they may not have had the chance, or skills, to do in the physical world. In the early days of the internet, Multi User Dungeons (MUDs) were a common online gaming platform which allowed users from all over the world to connect and play games against each other. In these environments, players often crafted identities or character which the other players would see, often with very few clues to the player's true identity. Turkle (1994, pp 161-164) describes how important an online alter ego is to a MUD user, Peter. She describes Peter as a sickly recluse whose only friend is more reclusive than he is, and who has suffered from health problems since he was a child. However, in the MUD, Peter has created a character which is an idealised version of himself. Through this online persona Peter learnt 'what he knows of politics, of economics, of the differences between capitalism and welfare state socialism' (Turkle, 1994, p.162'. The MUD was also the only place that Peter ever knew romance or intimacy as he met and courted a female user of the MUD at an online 'wedding' of two fellow MUD users (Turkle, 1994, p.162). Peter's online identity allowed for him to connect to people all over the world and learn and experience things he may never have otherwise been able to.

The example of Peter in the MUD, is an example of almost complete anonymity. It is also an example from a time where the internet was only accessed by relatively few people when compared to current times. In modern times, it is becoming harder to be completely anonymous in many online communities and networks as many sites, like Facebook, insist on using your real identity, and websites are collecting more and more data about their users, making it difficult to remain entirely anonymous. Despite this, it is still important for members of online communities and networks to have control over the identity they project online. Donath and Boyd (2004) discuss how on social network sites, where many online communities and networks form, it is

very difficult to deceive others regarding your identity. By displaying your network of connections, you are essentially verifying your personal identity (2004, p. 3). However, even in a community or network where you must use your true identity, you still have control over the identity others see. Many people who live in the public eye, like politicians, famous athletes, celebrities, and prominent business people take great care to manage the impression they present in communities both offline and online. The idea of impression management predates online communities and even the internet. The idea was presented by Erving Goffman as early as 1959 who argued that people are strategic about the image they portray to others. Rosenberg and Egbert's 2011 study show that the traditionally theoretical frameworks to study impression management, such as those presented by Goffman, are still valid when discussing identity in online communities. Another example of impression management is outlined by DeCamp, Koenig, and Chisolm (2013) who discuss the challenges of physicians who are trying to manage their professional and personal identities in their online networks. DeCamp et al. discuss possible solutions such as having separate profiles for professional and personal networks (which is quite common) and the possible psychological or physical burden on maintaining two online identities. The solution they propose is that physicians maintain one profile, but before they post anything reflect on whether the content 'is appropriate for a physician in a public space' (DeCamp et al. 2013 p.582). This approach is suggested as it is seen as being the more honest approach in that the physician is not hiding anything from his patients who may be in his network online. However, the simple act of censoring oneself is in itself an act of crafting one's identity to one that they want the network or communities they are a part of online.

The examples used thus far are examples of what Pearson describes as the performance of identity in social networks (2009). Pearson likens crafting and displaying of one's identity to a performance. This performance includes front-stage performance, which is the observable or public, identity, and the back-stage which is the more intimate and relaxed, or private, identity. Pearson describes the online space as "suspended between the private and the public" in that online identities often include intimate details of oneself, but are also publicly available. Schwartz and Halegous (2013) take the concept of identity performance and discuss it in the context of location. They discuss how the act of 'checking in' to a location on social media is part of one's identity performance as it is an act which crafts ones online identity. Where one 'checks in' tell ones network a lot about them (or the 'them' they want their network to see). Someone who regularly checks in to bars, restaurants, and night clubs wants their network to know they have an active social life. Similarly, someone who checks in at the airport each time they go on a holiday want their network to see them as adventurous and well-travelled. Whether the identity performance is one of carefully selecting what personal information will be publicly available, or one of selectively allowing your network to see where you have been, it is a performance which allows one to shape their online identity to one they wish others to see.

So far, this paper has explored ideas of enhancing ones 'real world' identity to create an online persona. This approach is relatively benign, and not particularly dishonest. However, some do use deception and create false identities online. As early as the 1990s, when the internet was still in its infancy, Donath was writing about the challenges faced by UseNet groups by people performing identity deception (1999). Of these deceptions 'Some are quite harmful to individuals or to the community; others are innocuous, benefitting the performer without injuring the group. Some are clearly deceptions, meant to provide a false impression; others are more subtle identity manipulations, similar to the adjustments in self-presentation we make in many real world situations' (Donath, 1999). Some examples of deceptions which can be harmful to a community are trolls, who purposefully look to bait other members of an online community into contentious discussions. This behaviour can be particularly damaging as it undermines the social cohesion of the group. It can also lead to legitimate new comers to the group to be considered a troll due to the naivety of their questions, which is a stigma that can be hard to shake (Donath, 1999). Other examples of malicious identity concealment provided by Donath include category deception and impersonation, both of which can be harmful as information from an unqualified source may be interpreted as having come from a reliable source due to the deception.

However, despite there being a degree of malicious identity deception in online communities, there are very legitimate times where one may need to remain completely anonymous. One such example highlighted by Donath is system administrators using pseudonyms when asking for help online as they are too embarrassed to admit they don't have the answer. Another example is people discussing very personal matters such as illness, or mental health issues, who may wish to conceal their identity (Donath, 1999). In another example of a situation where concealing your identity is desirable, if harmless, is in the case of Reddit's r/Gonewild subreddit as discussed by van der Nagel and Frith. The r/Gonewild subreddit provides an anonymous, safe and secure medium for people to post provocative pictures of themselves online without the risk of being identified and shamed (van der Nagel and Frith, 2015). Whilst some may see this as pornography and perhaps exploitative, and as such see its existence as an argument against online anonymity, measures are taken to ensure the photos being posted are legitimately of the person posting them, and that consent to publish the images has been given (van der Nagel and Frith, 2015). These examples of identity deception or concealment are benign, and are arguably beneficial to the communities or individuals involved.

Further to the relatively benign, and one could argue, relatively low importance examples above, there is one another example of where online identity deception is crucial to the rights and safety of those participating in the deception. In many parts of the world, people live under very repressive regimes. The internet is often heavily monitored, and in most instance anything you post online can be traced back to you. Motahari, Zivars, and Jones go into detail discussing how many measures taken for anonymity online, are often insufficient (2010). However, there are tools

available which can effectively mask one's identity. Jardine discusses the use of the deep web browser 'Tor' by political activists in both liberal and repressed countries to express their political views and disseminate information which may otherwise be censored (2016). For some in these repressive regimes, the ability to use identity deception in online communities is literally a matter of life and death.

There are many ways one can modify their identity in an online network or community. In most cases, this modification is minor, such as the socially awkward gamer creating a character which is an ideal version of himself or someone carefully managing who is visible within their networks so as to ensure their desired identity is supported by their networks or even a physician choosing carefully what they post on their private social networks to ensure they come across as professional. These examples of 'identity performance' are not attempts to completely deceive others in their networks or communities, but merely a means of enhancing one's identity in a desirable manner. This type of identity modification is also known as impression management, and has been utilised by people well before the rise of online communities. In other situations identity is not so much modified, but more created. In these cases we see identity deception taking place. In some cases these deceptions are malicious and damaging to the network or community. Examples of malicious identity deception include trolling, impersonating others online, or falsely claiming expertise in an area where one has none. However, in many cases identity deception is done in a more benign manner. These cases include merely not wanting to admit you don't know an answer, or a desire to post provocative photos of yourself for people to see, but not wanting to be identified. In some rare cases, such as that of political activists, identity deception can be as serious as life and death. It is clear that despite the few examples of how being able to create or modify your identity can be harmful, overall it is crucial to the maintenance of online networks and communities that people have the choice of how they wish to be seen online.

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