

# *Understanding your digital identity*

Article

Accepted Version

Williams, S. A., Fleming, S. C., Lundqvist, K. O. and Parslow, P. N. (2010) Understanding your digital identity. Learning Exchange, 1 (1). ISSN 2043-6602 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/17011/>

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## Understanding your digital identity

Shirley Williams, Sarah Fleming, Karsten Lundqvist and Pat Parslow

University of Reading, School of Systems Engineering, Whiteknights, Reading, Berkshire, RG6 6AY

Contact email: [shirley.williams@reading.ac.uk](mailto:shirley.williams@reading.ac.uk)

### Abstract

The term “Digital Identity” is used here to describe the persona a person projects across the internet. Your Digital Identity as perceived by other people is made up of material that you post yourself (for example photographs on Flickr and your own web page) but it also is made up of material other people put there about you (blog posts that mention you, photographs in which you are tagged).

The “This is Me” project has developed resources that can be used by students and others to appreciate what their Digital Identity is and how they can control it to help present the persona with the reputation that they want

### Keywords

Digital Identity, Identity, Internet, Reputation, Social Networking, Web

### Introduction

The advent of the Internet and social networking sites have had a significant impact on the way in which an individual’s identity is perceived. Consider these scenarios:

*A generation ago if Bob got the final tie-break question in a pub quiz, it would be a fact known by the people who were there and a small number of others who’d heard about the competition - it may be mentioned in the local paper, but the event would fade from everyone’s memory. Now if Sally gets the right answer in the final round of a quiz the information is likely to be shared across her and her team mates’ social networking sites in words and pictures, posted on the team’s website, and to be accessible for many years to come. Indeed, it is likely to be accompanied by details of the post-quiz celebrations.*

Both Bob and Sally will have reputations as clever people, able to answer questions under pressure. However the details of Bob’s success will not be recorded in any detail, while Sally’s success is recorded in many places. This is a double-edged sword for Sally. Consider if she is looking for a new job: she has evidence of competences that may be useful in the role she is seeking, but if the post-match celebration got out of hand, she may also have embarrassing photographs scattered over the Internet. Bob had neither the positive or negative aspects to deal with.

### Social Networking Sites

In earlier times only small amounts of information were recorded about individuals and it was normally difficult to access, let alone search, whereas now individuals of all ages are creating an online presence for themselves, within social networking sites and elsewhere.

It is easy for individuals to link to and reference others across the Internet. Much of the material on the Internet is persistent and searchable, so these days aspects of

identity are widely accessible that in previous eras would not have been. Over a lifetime one person may choose to use many different social networking sites, sometimes simultaneously (for example people often use both Twitter and Flickr) or consecutively (the users of Bebo often graduate to Facebook). Individuals also post material about other people, who may be friends, relatives or even hardly known to them. Rarely do users actually attempt to shut down an account they no longer use, so there is a growing number of abandoned accounts that remain accessible, with information about the users and others associated with them.

## Digital Identity

Identity is an elusive concept, there is no single clear definition. Jenkins (2004) explores the concepts of identity, in earlier work he used the term 'social identity', but now believes the social aspect is an essence of identity:

"...all human identities are by definition social identities. Identifying ourselves or others is a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction: agreement and disagreement, convention and innovation, communication and negotiation."

The idea of Digital Identity is linked to identity, but is perhaps easier to grasp because it refers to aspects of identity that are reified as bits of data.

The FIDIS project (Rannenberget al., 2009) defines Digital Identity in these words:

"Digital identity refers to the representation of the identity of a person in digital environments, in particular in terms of representation of the characteristics (values associated to a set of attributes) of the person.

The digital identity includes both the explicit representation of the person (such as name, age, email, etc) and implicit representation of the person (such as online reputation)."

A more simple definition from Parslow et al (2009):

"...the term 'Digital Identity' (DI) to describe the persona an individual presents across all the digital communities in which he or she is represented."

In a pre-digital era Goffman (1959) addressed the presentation of self, and wrote of the *performance* that individuals are involved in when presenting themselves to others. In Goffman's term Bob (in the above scenario) was addressing the observers in the pub, where the quiz took place. Sally also addresses the people in the pub, at the actual event, but because of the digital part of the identity she needs also be aware that in the future other observers will be able to access aspects of this event. Sally also needs to be aware that it is not just material that she posts about the event that will be accessible in the future, but information posted by any of the observers at the original event, and indeed possibly a cascade of others who have heard indirectly.

## This Is Me

The This Is Me project was conceived to study aspects of Digital Identity, and to create resources that would allow users to better understand the concept and enable them to take control of their own Digital Identity. The project took a grounded approach based on action research (Coghlan and Brannick, 2004), concentrating on

the academic community at the University of Reading, ranging from newly arrived Freshers (first year undergraduates) to established researchers. Following a phase of desk research in which material related to Digital Identity was collected, the project progressed to collecting stories from within the target group, via focus groups and interviews. The stories were very rich with a range of perspectives from those who virtually recorded every movement of their lives on the Internet to those who strove to leave no digital footprint at all.

From the information within these stories a number of activities were developed that targeted different aspects of Digital Identity, these were trialled in workshops and then refined to suit different audiences.

An early decision within the project was that, whenever possible, resources would be produced that could be widely re-used. An early output was a workbook (Parslow et al, 2009), this was produced under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike licence and self published via Lulu, which allowed the content to be freely downloaded, or for potential users to order a print copy at a small cost which covered printing and posting. The open nature allowed others to re-purpose and translate the material (White, 2009, Social Media Exchange, 2009).

Examples of Activities include:

- Aspects of Identity
- Searching for a volunteer

### **Aspects of Identity**

When running workshops it was found that participants had not always thought about an identity. So a common ice-breaking game was adapted whereby the team gave each person a piece of paper with three circles (meant to represent faces) and asked participants to draw three different aspects of themselves. A typical response to this activity, with the participants attempting to depict aspects of their private and professional personas, is shown below.



### **Searching for a volunteer**

When working with groups it was found that while most people were familiar with search engines, only a subset had tried searching for themselves. A number of

activities were developed that allowed participants or a subset to undertake such searches. In many cases surprising material was found, and this could be classified in two ways:

- Material that the participant had posted themselves and forgotten;
- Material posted by other people that the participant was unaware of.

The forgotten material was a mix of positive and negative. Some showed achievements from a few years ago, while others included photographs that participants considered out of date or embarrassing. This led to the development of resources about how to retain access to one's own material, or what steps can be taken to regain access.

The material posted by others also contained a mix of positive and negative that impacted on the participants' Digital Identity. Possibly the most worrying was the material that relatives had posted related to family genealogy, which provided many of the answers to security questions traditionally asked by banks.

### **Conclusions and Future Work**

The down to earth nature of the This Is Me project has resonated with many members of the target audience, who have used the resources to better understand the identity they project via material they have placed on the Internet.

The This Is Me project is planning to continue working on developing resources aimed at a wider audience, from school children, through parents, to the employed and retired. The project team are also investigating the differences between material that is posted by the data subject and that posted by others, coupled with how readily findable the data is.

### **Acknowledgements**

This Is Me was originally an Eduserv-funded project based at the University of Reading, which aimed to help people learn about their Digital Identities by producing and testing learning materials for use by individuals and groups. The team have also completed a fellowship with the Centre for Career Management Skills (CCMS) to develop material to help individuals with career management.

We are grateful to many colleagues and students at the University of Reading and beyond for their contributions to the project, including Steve Warburton of the Eduserv-funded Rhizome Project for inspiring the Aspects of Identity activity.

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