

On electronic identity and 'personal identity'

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In psychological terms 'personal identity' is the explicit side of personality, i.e., it is the side that others can perceive, while personality is the 'backbone' behind it. How can one study electronic identity? How does this explicit identity behave in a new virtual environment? Is it worth looking at the theme of electronic identity-or cyber-identity-trying to perceive and establish relationships between this category and the more familiar category of 'personal identity'?

Electronic identity or cyber-identity emerges in the social spaces created in computer networks, most commonly known as cyberspace(s). It consists of the construction of a 'digital persona', i.e., of a self-image with which an individual presents him or herself to others. Electronic identity is usually characterized as being the result of an active construction, and many believe that it provides the best opportunity to express who we really are or, who we really would like to be. The new Self is said to be multiple, distributed and fluid and, most of all, a representation of its possessor 's will [1].

I believe that this statement is misleading because cyber-identity is, in many ways similar, to personal identity. First, cyber-identity, similarly to 'personal identity', is not free from the influence of its possessor's personality. And, in turn, personality traits are not autonomously chosen. Thus, while some may argue that the expression of 'the possessor's will' is the true expression of the self, I think that this expression is, to say the least, the result of a constrained personal will. Second, the stereotypes that guide interpersonal communication and that are principal shapers of 'personal identity', are still present in cyberspace and, in fact, due to the lack of visual cues, these stereotypes can be even stronger in cyberspace [2]. Lastly, it is necessary to point out that although cyber-identity is not bounded by the physical constraints of the body, it is not free from restrictions. These restrictions arise both from the necessity of using certain technologies in order to express ourselves, and from the specificities of these predefined technologies. The need to use certain technologies translates in an exclusion of all those who do not have access to them, or who do not possess the expertise to create the cyber-identity they envision. Furthermore, it translates into limitations -due to technical constraints, such as bandwidth- in the contents that can be used to construct and express 'identity'. The specificities of the technology relate to the 'politics' of the artifact itself. For example, digital technologies are potentially control technologies, i.e., technologies that can be used to monitor the behavior of the individual.

The establishment of this analogy sheds some light into the development and nature of electronic identity: Cyber-identity is as much a technological product as it is a social product. It is bounded by social rules and its developmental patterns are shaped by the intervention of a series of actors - e.g., other individuals with their own interests, the

technology itself, technical innovations, etc.- just like the 'personal identity' isl.

References

[1] Stone, Allucquere Rosanne. (1996) [1998]. *The war of desire and technology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Turkle, Sherry. (1995). *Life on the screen: identity in the age of the internet*. New York: Touchstone.

[2] Wallace, Patricia. (1999). *The psychology of the Internet*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.