Future Identities: Changing identities in the UK – the next 10 years

DR 2: What is the relationship between identities that people construct, express and consume online and those offline?

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1. Identity – A brief introduction

There is no single or consistent theory of offline identity. Charles Taylor (1992) provides the broadest history, but a more relevant starting point is Sennett (1977). He argued that in more ancient times identity is almost entirely ascribed. A person was born to a class, occupation and role. If a butcher went on the street inappropriately dressed for that role, he should be publically reprimanded. This changed with the enlightenment and new genres such as theatre. When people appreciated that a person could act out identity as a theatrical performance, the contrast was with an identity assumed to be authentic or real. A trajectory leads from this all the way to a 1960's search for a purely personal identity found deep within. Online possibilities exacerbate this fear that we are losing real or authentic identity.

Today we think more in terms of chosen or multiple identities. An influential account by Giddens (1991) examines identity as a constantly re-worked personal narrative striving for coherence. Cohen (1994) emphasised individual creativity against Durkheimian social conformity. The most resilient influence has been Goffman (1975) who emphasised multiple identities equated with differentiated roles, framed by context. For example, the feminist notion of woman as simultaneously mother, lover, housewife and worker. Identity has many temporalities. More permanent such as place of birth and gender, institutionally fostered as in an East Asian firm where taking a job meant long term identification with an employer. Finally there are more transient and selective identifications with football teams or clothing styles. Identity is clearly a varied historical and cultural condition both ascribed and adopted rather than a given psychological state. This was precisely the starting point for understanding online identity. The first major review following the development of the internet by Turkle (1984) suggested that experiments in online identity extended this experience of offline identity as plural, transient and contextual. All these debates remain parochial in the light of anthropological research that would contest the export of these Western conceptions and arguments about identity to non-Western areas such as Melanesia or Korea, where the experience of and the concept of the person may be very different (Carrithers *et al*, 1985).

2. Problems with the concept of online identity

Many of the studies reviewed in this paper assume a generic concept of online identity. But by 2012 it has become clear that quite apart from issues of anthropological relativism, this is no longer valid. The online has now fragmented into a number of highly differentiated fields and there is no reason to assume consistency between them. This is evident in the comparison between my study of the impact of the internet on a population in 1999 (Miller and Slater, 2000), compared to a subsequent study of the impact of Facebook on that same population in 2010 (Miller, 2011). Most people assume that Social Network Sites are simply the latest form of internet activity. But my studies reveal that in most important respects these two show entirely contradictory consequences.

The internet initially appeared to expand the field of anonymity, which meant people could explore new forms of identity, shift identity or secure multi identities with relative freedom. This was best enunciated by the 1993 New Yorker cartoon which has one dog saying to another `On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog`. By contrast Facebook has been associated with not just the loss of anonymity but as a threat to all aspects of privacy, as even people who don't take part may be tagged in photos online. As a second example the internet facilitated people with identities that were unusual in their immediate setting, such as a passion for organic meat or extreme sado-masochistic sex. Such people could network online and find virtual `communities' based on this single shared identity as separated out networks. By contrast Facebook started with student friendships but these were then joined by families, work colleagues and others, which in effect put what had been separated out identities all within the same muddled online space. These are two of many examples that suggest `The Internet' and Facebook so far from having a consistent impact upon identity are in most important respects diametrically opposite to each other. As Zhao, Grasmuck, and Mason (2008) demonstrate they create very different modes of online identity construction.

The situation is still more complicated by other online platforms. The most common forms include:-

1. Social Network Sites. The most recent and ubiquitous sites for online identity, but retaining important differences between Facebook, the work oriented LinkedIn, and regional sites such as Cyworld in Korea or RenRen and QQ in China.

2. Blogging. This emerged as the online analogy to the private or restricted diary. Today it includes hugely popular and widely read alternatives to conventional news. This poses the problem of conflating such a private and such a public mode as though they were the same thing (Rettberg, 2008).

3. An avatar. These online figures stand for the offline person as analogous to embodied identity. Avatars on Second Life have been a particular focus of academic study. While less important in the UK avatars are hugely important in East Asia, where much of online commerce revolves around buying clothes and other accessories for the avatar as one's online identity (Wallis 2011).

4. A Twitter account. Far more prominent in the media than in ordinary practice because of its significance for journalists, this is closer to media broadcasting and facilitates the development of a public identity.

5. Membership of an internet group. Although leapfrogged by more recent innovations these remain a key aspect of online identity, for example in bonding within a Diaspora community, or maintaining the viability of rare or dispersed interests and hobbies.

6. Gaming. Again we see a radical transformation between earlier gaming that was almost entirely private, to the rise of highly socialised inter-personal games. Some such as *World of Warcraft* have shown sustained presence leading to questions as to the impact of fantasy identity offline. But there are equally massive offline equivalents such as the rise of cosplay (costume play – where groups dress as characters from video games or cartoon series, (Lamerichs, 2011)) in East Asia. The most commonly played games today, such as Farmville, bear no relation to teenage action fantasies.

7. Personal webpages. Originally these were constructed by the individual on an ad hoc basis, but have mainly been replaced by social networking, or work profiles.

8. Default online identity. The aggregate effect of identities constructed by commercial, governmental and other institutions such as Wikipedia is evident in the ubiquitous idea that one can `Google' someone - an online identity that may be almost entirely constructed by others and in that respect quite different from the personal webpage.

9. Smartphones. Being mobile these reverse the experience that one goes to a computer to create and live out a separated online identity. Smartphones partially return identity to the embodied figure of the individual person.

10. Webcams. The latest version of increasingly ubiquitous online activity, this is a form of hyper realist identity with unprecedentedly intense face to face communication potentially changing our offline identity through increasing self-consciousness.

This summary reveals that almost every online platform contains contradictions within itself, such as private v public blogging. They also contradict each other, while Facebook is closed, Twitter is open. They change radically over time, socialised gaming replacing individualistic gaming, while smartphones negate the impact of the computer as separated from the person. All of which reinforces the initial point that a generic concept of online identity is increasingly problematic. Given the brief I will continue to use the term online identity in this paper. But clearly we need to concede that this is now an anachronistic formulation and consider alternatives.

3. General consequences of online for offline identity

One of the most significant observations of the consequences of online identity, are for populations who feel that they only achieved real identity online. Ginsburg (2012) discusses various forms of disability including autism and muscular dystrophy where typing or having an avatar are the first time the person is seen by others as an articulate human being (see also Ellis and Kent, 2011). At a broader cultural level Humphrey (2009) suggests that many Russians feel that only online has it become possible to behave with the passion that reveals their true soul as Russian. For different reasons, some Trinidadians argue that the performative nature of Facebook means that the person seen online is closer to the truth of who they are than the person one meets. Less extreme, but probably much more common, is the experience of the internet as allowing people to realise their identity, for example people who have been shy or lonely or feel less attractive discover they can more successfully socialise and be themselves on line. This may be one of the main ways in which online identity transforms offline identity (Miller 2011).

Far more widespread is the opposite assertion that online diminishes real identity and offline sociality. It obviously matters that colloquially online identity remains largely contrasted with `real life'. This seems mainly an issue of conservatism, as older people unused to the latest devices assume that online identities are more superficial or less socialised. The clearest recent academic expression of assumed loss of authenticity is Turkle's (2011) *Alone Together*. Journalism is replete with fears about online identity. This includes fake identities as a means to paedophilia, or exploitation of vulnerable women. The most common genre is fear projected onto children's usage. But Livingstone (2008) who represents the most sustained scholarly study of children's online identity suggests a variety of forms of identity construction, changing as they become teenagers. This seems more reminiscent of teenagers' use of clothing or room decoration (see also Horst 2009). She acknowledges risks in online disclosures of identity but finds that children usually understand these. Parents fear of children's orientation to online appears to reflect a more general concern with their loss of control over children. The issues that actually dominate children's concern, such as evidence of their popularity, are rather more mundane. Because of these fears research on topics such as cyber-bullying is now sufficiently extensive that it becomes a useful domain for considering how far there is a `bleed' between online and offline identity. So far research suggests that online activity has limited impacts upon offline behaviour (Görzig, 2011; Livingstone and Bober 2005).

Similarly, fears that online identity leads to a loss of community or offline sociality tend to rely on nostalgic projections of prior community and non-virtual society, which are problematic (e.g. Woolgar 2002). There is as much evidence that online networking increases offline socialisation as that it diminishes it (see Hampton and Wellman 2003; Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 2002). As Baym (1999) showed with fan sites, shared identity may be either expressed or created online. But Postill (2008) suggests that claims that online identity constitutes a brave new community or destroys established communities are both overwrought.

There is no good evidence that online identity raises particularly different issues from offline with respect to domains such as gender, ethnicity or class (see for example van Zoonen (2002) for an assessment of the debates about gender). It provides a place for experiment, but these exist offline. Liberal hopes that online identities would diminish prejudice, but equally fears that this would exacerbate them, can be found in very specific cases, but have not been

demonstrated as a common or major consequence. It has been shown that the separation of online forums from offline public debate means that more extreme views can become acceptable and general within those isolated contexts. But this was also true of isolated spaces of debate in offline settings (Marotta 2011).

The spread of global platforms such as Facebook might be regarded as axiomatically a reduction in global diversity and cultural specificity in terms of identity. But my work shows that this is not the case. There is no evidence that Facebook has made Trinidadians less parochial or nationalistic (Miller 2011). With each new internet platform they find ways to transform these into localised genres. So Facebook become *Maco* or *Fas book* associated with local concepts of being nosy or interested in the lives of others. There also remain regional differences in the use of particular genres such as avatars in East Asia or texting in the Philippines.

Importantly once people have access to phones and computers the cost moves from usage to pre-paid infrastructure, so issues of access and cost recede. At which point an individual can choose to employ a wide range of platforms without a consideration of cost. Madianou and Miller (2012) argue this constitutes for a new condition of `Polymedia', where people are free to choose between several equally available forms of media. They suggest that this has major consequences. With pre-paid phone plans and internet provision we no longer explain the choice of this or that media as arising from access or cost. As a result an individual is now held directly responsible for that choice. They will then be judged by others - why didn't he phone me, instead of just putting this on Facebook? This is not an individual judgement, but is subject to the development of new cultural norms as to appropriate behaviour. For example, in the Philippines texting is considered more suitable for the sincere expression of love, than would be the case within the UK. Polymedia, and a concern for the consequences of choice between media for identity and communication, are likely to become still more important in the future.

Finally, there is also a methodological issue. Academics that favour more dualistic and particular notions of online identity tend to be those who study online identity in itself. A trajectory may be traced from Hine (2000) to Boellstorff's (2008) work on *Second Life* of academics arguing for the legitimacy of such studies. These have been directly opposed by Miller and Slater (2000), Postill (2012) and others. We argue that it is impossible to make claims about the consequences of online for offline identity unless one studies both of these together with respect to the same populations. It is the studies that include offline identity that have been consistently more sceptical of claims to radical consequences of offline identity. I would strongly argue that any research making claims to the consequences of online identity that did not also include offline identity should be treated with considerable caution. But clearly there exist powerful counter arguments from Boellstorff (2008) and others.

4. Specific consequences of online for offline identity

A short paper cannot review every field of online identity, so I will use just three examples as illustrations:- Politics, Sex, and Family. These have been selected since they tend to attract the more sensationalist and sweeping claims about the consequences of online identities.

Politics has become one of the most charged areas for asserting the radical implications for online identity. Perhaps the most sustained and general impact seems to be at the level of ideology. Young people's experience of online tends to include phenomenon such as peer to peer and Open Access. These may be transforming our concept of democracy itself and may have a significant impact on political identity as evident in the transformation of The Pirate Bay into a serious political force in Europe. In short the very meaning of politics itself is being influenced by internet experience towards a model of greater openness and shared identity.

Journalists have made sweeping claims with regard to recent events such as the Arab spring and twitter revolutions, implying that the internet more quickly disseminates political potential and allows for new ways of identifying with these events. Others such as Morozov (2011) in *The Net Delusion* have dismissed these claims. The fall of communism, included equally spontaneous popular revolutions such as the fall of Ceauşescu without the internet, and there is evidence for the use of internet activity as a means to identify and suppress political freedom as in Iran and Syria.

There are many studies of online national identity but the results seem mainly trivial, such as the usage of local dialect or `liking' national or cultural sites. Far more important is the use of online media to maintain social connections with diaspora and home family and friends. There are many studies of migrants' online identity e.g. British Asian, Iranian and Greek. The most common argument is that identity has become more `fluid.' Less documented is the evident capacity for migrants to now spend most of their leisure time in an online space with those of their natal country, potentially isolating them more from the host society.

Extremism and hatred clearly have an online presence, but from the start of the internet it became evident that extrapolation from this presence is problematic. Several authors have warned of the consequences of online spaces such as web forums and chat rooms for radicalisation the spread of extremism and terrorist recruitment (e.g. Stenersena, 2008; Seib and Janbek 2010). But we need to be cautious in the face of evidence of political activity that is easy to locate online. Often material ends up online precisely because it is not taken seriously, or it is ineffective, offline. The most plausible evidence concerns the globalisation of extremist ideas and the way internet communication bypasses traditional gatekeepers. The Arab Spring can just as easily be used as an argument that the internet has made moderation in politics more pervasive.

In creating a public space for every kind of unusual identity it is possible that this makes extreme views normative and may accentuate them. If we look at the less politically febrile areas there is evidence for a growth in low level conflict such as cyber-bullying, cyber-baiting and trolls. Nevertheless, in the larger context internet hate content may actually have declined proportionally since the days of the early internet. When people first encountered online those they had always opposed, they engaged in vituperative debates called `flaming' (Alonzo and Aiken, 2004). The emphasis in the literature has been more on the potential for political

mobilisation, such as in US presidential elections rather than identity creation. Similarly arguments that online activity facilitates political identity are countered by discussion of `clicktivism' which note that claiming online political identification is so easy, where a mouse click requires so little commitment, that it may actually weaken political identity. The field of politics makes particularly clear the danger of drawing conclusions from the mere existence of online presence, a fault in most previous studies. Postill (2012) provides a balanced survey of these issues.

The issue of online identity is often discussed in terms of sexual fantasy and practice. This is partly because pornography has always been in the vanguard of internet development. Research by Phippen (2009) suggests 40% of young people in the UK have shared sexually explicit materials, so the problem of unauthorised public release of what a participant had assumed was private sexual activity is likely to grow in the future. There is certainly evidence that people use the internet for exploring fantasy and sexual orientation that is less legitimate. More extreme forms of BDSM and other sexual practice can find communities of practice through the internet. Anonymity facilitates homosexual companionship in countries where this is illegal or disdained and may change the dynamics of such relationships where that community is free such as with the impact of grindr, a device that directly locates nearby potentially interested others. Ben Ze'ez's (2004) study notes that couples may find it acceptable for a partner to explore homosexual or more varied sexual relationships online, but only online. In that sense the internet has allowed latent forms of identity to find expression or indeed fulfilment.

What is less clear is how far this diversity of online sexuality has migrated or changed offline sexual identity. Kahr's (2007) study of the role of fantasy in sex suggests that it may be long term established couples that most depend upon what might be considered illicit fantasy for the maintenance of their accepted sexual activity. So while we are becoming aware of the more fantastic and more illicit sexual fantasies that have been promulgated by internet pornography and sexual identification, these may still not have reached the levels of prior offline identification and fantasy about which we have tended to be less aware precisely because they are less open. With regard to sexual behaviour my evidence is that we need to take each platform separately, since once again they have opposite consequences. A study of mobile phones in Jamaica showed that these facilitated adultery and multiple relationships, but by contrast in Trinidad the use of photographic evidence and identification of persons within Facebook may have led to a decline in adultery and multiple relationships (compare Horst and Miller 2006 with Miller 2011).

Perhaps the best studied field of online identity is that of family relationships. Prior to the internet the general assumption was that the family was in decline with the rise of separation both in couples, and through migration and other forms of dispersal. At first it was assumed that online identity must be simply the latest iteration of this historical trend. But increasingly the evidence is that platforms such as social networking may be heading in the reverse direction and being used to address our general sense of dislocation in the modern world. The internet has a particular impact upon family in low income countries such as Bolivia, Paraguay and the Philippines (e.g. Greschke 2012). As the modern political economy leads to migration patterns that divide families so the internet becomes a resource in re-connecting them. Madianou and Miller (2012) carried out extensive work on transnational mothering by Filipina women working as domestics and health workers in the UK. By locating and interviewing the children of these women in the Philippines they were able to show that a given category of identity such as that of being `a mother' becomes both contested and contradictory when it is

largely practiced through means of the internet and new media. The children and mothers had very different views as to the impact of new media on the very possibility of being a mother.

While at first there was speculation that young people were fooled into thinking that Facebook friends are `real' friends, there has never been good evidence for such global stupidity, rather internet relationships are accepted as new genres of relationship. Broadbent (2011) and others have shown that the intensity of online relationships generally mirrors that of offline strong ties. But some platforms including social networking sites have also facilitated the continuation of weak social ties such as old school friends or cousins because Facebook facilitates passive following of others while being less demanding of immediate attention. Once the shock of `my mother tried to friend me' passed, kinship has been accepted as part of social networking and as a result families are probably more in contact and aware of each other's activities.

Putting the evidence with regard to these three topics together suggests that we should be more circumspect in claims made about the consequences of online identity. We should recognise that while the media is dominated by more extreme and sensationalist claims as to the consequences of online, it is because these sell newspapers. While academic scholarship suggests that these instances are not typical. There may be other fields that have been entirely transformed by online infrastructures. Modern finance would be one example, but this survey is limited to the specific area of online identity.

So far we have considered the consequences of online identity for separate arenas of identity formation such as politics, sex and family. But it may be that the internet and new media have had more sustained impacts upon the relationship between these arenas of identity. The most important and dramatic example of this has been the demolition of the previously strong separation between work identity and non-work identity that had been increasingly imposed over the last two centuries. Broadbent's (2011) extensive research in Switzerland shows just how much has changed thanks to new media. It is much harder for businesses to prevent people from maintaining linkages outside of work, for example, mothers keeping contact with children. By the same token email has led more people to remain identified with their work during the evenings, weekends and other leisure times. As a result there has been a marked breakdown in the separation of these fields of identity and this seems likely to remain true for the long term.

It is possible that this breakdown in the barrier between separate fields of identity is more important than the impact within any particular field. It can only be speculative at this point but it seems that social networks blur distinctions between kinship, peers and work. One result of this may be that people who felt their identities to have become fragmented, for example, between home and work, may now be able to return to a more coherent and consistent sense of identity centred around personhood itself.

5. Conclusions

To conclude with regard to past research, most previous work should be regarded with caution where:-

1. It fails to ground online evidence in knowledge about the offline context of that same population.

2. It ignores cultural and sociological diversity, extrapolating generalisations from specific populations, most often US college students.

3. It conflates different and contradictory platforms within a unified concept of online identity.

4. It focuses on only a single media platform or single arena of identity, ignoring the situation of Polymedia where it is the combination and selection of media that matters. Or it fails to recognise that the key shifts may be in breaking down or erecting new barriers between different arenas of identity such as the distinction between work and leisure.

A wide literature review makes clear that it is the most thorough and respected academic studies, such as those of Livingstone (Livingstone, 2008; Livingstone and Bober 2005) on the impacts upon children's identity, Wellman on the impact of networking on communities (Hampton and Wellman 2003, Haythornthwaite and Wellman 2002) and Baym (1999, 2010) on the impact of personal communication, who all conclude that we need to move from overwrought, moralistic and simplistic arguments based on a dualism between online and offline to an appreciation that most people now engage with a mix of communication and identity platforms which usually include a multiplicity of online and offline identities without any clear break between these. Online is now as integral to everyday communication and self-representation as is the telephone or television, and we should abandon the idea of a separated out `virtual' domain. No general theory or claim about the impact of online identities is likely to substitute for the hard work of targeted scholarship and adjudication based on specificity not just of platform but also regarding the particular field of identity. It should be conceded that there remains a strong counter-argument, exemplified by Turkle's (2011) book *Alone Together* presenting the case for a genuine loss of previously more authentic identity. But in general these more nostalgic arguments tend to be also more anecdotal and less well supported by evidence.

Indeed as studies become more contextualised it seems that the real lesson of online identity is not that it transforms identity but that it makes us more aware that offline identity was already more multiple, culturally contingent and contextual than we had appreciated. In that sense the study of online identity extends lessons about identity more generally that we have learnt since the time of Goffman. Although this review has tried to neutralise the more sensationalist claims, it would be wrong to minimise the impact of online identity either. In areas as varied as sexuality to gaming, online platforms have greatly extended the potential for plural and dispersed identity. If as a result people develop new aspects of themselves in sexual, political, familial and other arenas, this is not trivial, but may substantially alleviate frustration at the limits of identity in the pre-digital world.

In conclusion we should also note how changes in the online world have acted in tandem with changes offline. My own fieldwork suggests that there has been a trend in the UK, most especially in London (Miller, 2008), against the concept and practice of sustained public identity. While multiculturalism tried to provide broader acknowledgment of diverse identities, this concerned the public display of identity in appropriate contexts, such as display at a festival. But otherwise overt or recognisable identity may have declined as demographic dispersal prevented ghetto formation, as changed patterns of property - where individual streets range from gentrification to housing associations - dispersed class identity and as feminists critiqued ascribed gender identification. Many people migrate to London to separate from identities of birth such as not wanting to be Serbian but without wishing to replace this with an identification as English or Londoner. People are also less identifiable thanks to more neutral clothing such as drab colours and blue jeans. So offline identity becomes either a temporary phase - such as the teenage Goth, occasion appropriate - such as a football scarf, or part of a predictable identity surge - such as during the Olympics, or at times of war. Selected fragments of identity are picked up from travel or the media and temporarily ascribed to, for example, a phase of *feng shui* home decoration or mediaeval re-enactment at the weekend. But the same research showed why it would also be a mistake to conflate plural with superficial, or to assume that identity has become more individualistic and less subject to social appraisal. These movements from ascribed to plural identity in the offline world seem to echo all the points made in this review about the impact of online identity and reinforce the conclusion that the two are best understood in tandem.

6. Predictions – The next ten years

This survey leads to the following predictions. There is no reason to expect a let up in the proliferation of new platforms. There is no reason to think these will have any consistent impact and the results are likely to be commonly contradictory. This is true both in general and with respect to particular fields of identity such as sex, work or politics. Online usage will very likely increase but the term becomes less coherent as the computer loses its dominance as an interface. This diffusion should lead to still greater integration between online and offline identity. Under the condition of Polymedia, with growing access to diverse media, societies will develop new moral codes which hold individuals responsible for their selection of particular media within which to express their identity. These will result in the development of new but diverse cultural norms and expectations. There may however be some general impacts that reflect the general experience of online, as where our understanding of politics itself reflects our increasing experience of open source, open access and other forms of online freedom and dissemination.

Given these diverse and contradictory effects, policy cannot rely on a simplified and over generalised concept of online identity. Each policy question depends upon understanding the impact of particular configurations of these platforms for particular populations. The same underlying trend is likely to continue equally in respect to online and offline identity, where people identify less with any specific identities which become more contextual and partial.

With regard to governance and policy, the main call for intervention will come from the legalistic challenges of definition posed by the ambiguity inherent in online identity. The core problems were raised in the 1990's. For example Julian Dibbell's (1998) essay *A Rape in Cyberspace* concerned people whose online identities (avatars) had been taken over by others for inappropriate acts. Some offline participants saw this as at least analogous with offline rape. Similarly Slater's (1998) early work posed the question of whether online sexual action was experienced as actual adultery. More recently we have questions as to whether posting or even accessing online radical politics is sufficient to brand the individual as identified with that politics or whether racist incitement or incitement to looting online should be subject to prosecution. I have argued that the media exaggerate these consequences compared to academic assessment, but as in the reaction to the UK riots of 2011 the media and informal discussion may impact on legal, formal and governmental responses. So we may predict that governments will be increasingly embroiled in the legal consequences of online identity.

Overall this review has failed to locate any areas in which the construction of identity online seems markedly different to or entirely detached from offline identity. For which reasons a generally liberal attitude to online identity is to be recommended, which is just as well since it would be hard to maintain anything else. It remains important to monitor impacts upon vulnerable groups such as young children. Above all this survey has shown how important it is to retain a tradition of high quality scholarly research to counter journalistic emphasis upon sensational or extreme cases.

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