Chapter 2
Identity Theories and Technology

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ABSTRACT

Modern identity has been shaped by technology, which has in turn shaped theories in understanding identity. How one communicates who they are to others is given limitless possibilities by the advent of the Internet and computer-mediated environments. Thus, identity theory today must take into account computer-mediated communication theory and research. Such research indicates four ways in which identity is affected by technology. First, researchers have discussed the differences between an individual's true identity and the virtual identity he or she presents, via self-selected text and images, to an online world. Second, researchers have discussed how the Internet can provide both protective anonymity for those who seek it and cathartic disclosure for those who need it. Third, researchers have discussed ways in which users pursue both reflective virtual lives online and role-play with identities, often multiple identities. Fourth, researchers have conducted experiments that reflect the impact that virtual identity has on the practice of communication and the impact communication has on the presentation of the self.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in technology have provided humans a global communication network able to bridge oceans with little more than a keystroke. Computers, via the Internet, provide a particularly wide array of communication avenues ranging from text-based media, such as e-mail and instant messaging, to visual-based media, such as digital video cameras and virtual reality. Developments in

such a human endeavor raise a multitude of questions as to their effects and implications. For one, what does it mean when human interaction, once relegated to face-to-face limitations, can now be initiated, cultivated, and sustained solely through computer-mediated communication (Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995; Wellman & Gulia, 1999)? Psychologist and sociologist Sherry Turkle (1995) contended that identity in a modern electronic world is predicated on communication:

In my computer-mediated worlds, the self is multiple, fluid, and constituted in interaction with machine connections; it is made and transformed by language; sexual congress is an exchange of signifiers; and understanding follows from navigation and tinkering rather than analysis. And in the machine-generated world of MUDs [multi-user domains], I meet characters who put me in a new relationship with my own identity. (p. 15)

Identity in modern computer-mediated and online world has its foundation in concepts and theories tied to self-presentation, the communication of one's identity to another, (Biocca, 1997; Goffman, 1959; Lee, 2004; Schlenker, 1980; Turkle, 1995; Walther, 1996) and to telepresence, the immersion of oneself into a computer-mediated environment (Biocca, 1997; Lee, 2004; Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Minsky, 1980; Sheridan, 1992). Such theories could be considered today as the heart of all computer-mediated communication theories.

The Internet provides virtual worlds that, in turn, provide individuals an outlet for their virtual identity or identities (Turkle, 1995). Presence in virtual worlds provide space for individuals online to encounter others, present themselves, and participate in an ongoing identity communication, development and exploration. As Turkle suggested, the Internet provides a unique venue in which the self is not only presented, but also invented. It can also be sustained, changed over time, or changed every time a person logs on. This chapter introduces the historical and academic theoretical perspectives on identity, which ultimately ends with the most modern perspectives on the subject found in computer-mediated communication theory and research. Such research since the World Wide Web's inception reveals four major facets of technological effects on modern identity. First, as is the case in the offline world, there is a difference between a person's true identity and the identity one presents to others online. Second, the online self can be reflective of the individual

or experimental (role-playing). Third, the online self can remain anonymous or disclose the individual's identity. Fourth, the customizability that technology provides has an impact on both how the individual presents their identity and how he or she communicates that presentation.

IDENTITY THEORY: A BRIEF HISTORY

Philosophical Identity Theory

To begin any discussion of identity in the modern world, one must look to the philosophical inner-dialogues of René Descartes. Often attributed as "I think, therefore I am," Descartes' (2003) thoughts on identity speak to the very technological distance between the physical body and the psychological mind that technology researchers wrestle with today. Descartes ponders the existence of existence: what is real and what is illusion. He argued that if one is convinced that what he or she beholds is a deception, one would have to exist because one would have to be persuaded and convinced to be deceived. Thus, he wrote, his argument "I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time it is expressed by me, or conceived in my mind" (p. 80). Descartes makes it clear that it is the mind, not its surroundings, that defines existence and serves as the foundation for reality and identity. And he raised a question that is particularly germane to the present discussion of identity and technology: "Am I so dependent on the body and the senses that without these I cannot exist?" (p. 79).

Following in Descartes footsteps, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz discussed identity in terms of indiscernibles. In an exchange of letters with Samuel Clarke, Leibniz explained that no two individuals are so much alike that they are indiscernible from one another. If they are truly indiscernible, then they are the same thing (Leibniz, Clarke, & Alexander, 1970). The argument has become known as Leibniz's Law. As it pertains to people, two

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