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[IDENTITY AND ONLINE PROFILING]

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Dr. Bibi van den Berg: Mirror, mirror on the wall...

On identity and online profiling

Introduction

In the last century-and-a-half 'identity' has become a widely discussed, debated and even contested topic, both in various fields of science and throughout popular culture.¹ Why this sudden increase in interest? One answer to this question is the fact that identity as a concept has become destabilized. Until the twentieth century people's identities were relatively clearly defined and circumscribed, and linked to relatively unchangeable factors such as their gender, nationality, social-economic class, and the religious faith they belonged to. During the twentieth century identity turned from a 'given' into a 'life project' for the vast majority of people in Western countries. Many reasons have been given for this development. Some argue that the rise of globalisation and mass migration, and the cultural exchanges (and clashes) that this entailed played a pivotal role.² Others point to the impact of the rise of global media³ and the spread of modern technologies, including the (mobile) internet⁴. In all likelihood, all of these factors have played a role – and have strengthened each other mutually, resulting in a new conception of identity: a 'life project', something to be discovered, shaped and evaluated by each human being for him/herself⁵: "*Needing to become what one is is the feature of modern living... [...] Modernity replaces the determination of social standing with a compulsive and obligatory self-determination."*⁶

Identity in interaction

One of the most influential current conceptions of identity is *interactionism*. Interactionism stipulates that identities are constructed and expressed in and through interactions between people. Whenever people engage in interactions with others they go through the following cycle: they formulate an interpretation of what is called the 'definition of the situation'⁷ – i.e. they attempt to answer the question 'what is going on here?', what behavioural repertoire is expected or called

¹ Parts of this article have been published previously. Please see (Van den Berg, 2010a, 2010b).

² Cf. (Giddens, 1991; Massey, 2005).

³ Cf. (Meyrowitz, 1985, 1989, 2003).

⁴ Cf. (Castells, 2000, 2004; Chambers, 2006; Chandler, 1998; Fortunati, 2001, 2003; Frissen & De Mul, 2000; Gergen, 1991; Meyrowitz, 2003; Miller, 1995; Turkle, 1995, 1996, 2008, 2011; Van den Berg & Leenes, 2011b; Van den Berg, 2008, 2010b, 2012; Vasalou & Joinson, 2009; Wellman, 2001; K. Young, 2013).

⁵ (Bauman, 2001, p. 142).

⁶ (Bauman, 2001, pp. 144–145, emphasis in the original).

⁷ (Goffman, 1986, p. 8; Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 24, 1990, p. 67)

for here, both for themselves and others? Based on that definition they choose a certain 'role' to play. Assuming that role they then engage in 'performances' or 'presentations', with the aim of convincing the observers "*to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess...*"⁸

When roles are frequently portrayed and consistently valued by both the audience and the performer himself a person may come to identify with that role to such an extent that it becomes part of his self-image. In the words of Robert Ezra Park: "*In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons.*"⁹ According to interactionists, then, identities are not 'essences' – ready-made, up for grabs – that we display in front of others. Rather, they are *constructs*, and more precisely, they are the social result of interactions with other people. As identities are constructed in social interactions, they are dynamic and open-ended. They may change over time, and a person may have conflicting sides to his or her identity: through identification with and internalization of conflicting roles in different situations people may display selves that are incoherent and complex, yet nevertheless exist alongside each other in one and the same person. Identities, thus, are multidimensional, multifaceted, variable, and changeable.

At the same time, though, there are social constraints both on the performance of roles and the construction of selves. Thinking of identities as constructs may seem to imply that we are entirely free to create our selves at will – that by choosing whatever role we want, we may actually become whatever we want. This, however, is not the case. Individuals choose their performances on the basis of their interpretation of the 'definition of the situation', a definition that is thoroughly imbued with ideas on social rules, the appropriateness of behaviour, and the limits within which a person's performance 'ought' to stay if (s)he wants it to be labelled as befitting the situation and the expectations that apply there.

The interactionist perspective on identity has also turned out to be highly relevant when studying the potential impact of novel technologies on the construction, expression and experience of identity.¹⁰ The assumption there is that, if such technologies are going to have an impact on the construction and expression of our identities in everyday life, we are most likely to see these effects of this in and through our *interactions* with these technologies.

⁸ (Goffman, 1959, p. 17).

⁹ (Robert Ezra Park, quoted in Goffman, 1959, pp. 19–20)(Robert Ezra Park, quoted in Goffman, 1959: 19-20)

¹⁰ Cf. (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Meyrowitz, 1989, 2005; Riggins, 1990; Roosendaal, Fennell, & Van den Berg, 2012; Van den Berg & Leenes, 2011a, 2011b; Van den Berg, 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Vasalou & Joinson, 2009).

Identity and new technologies

New technologies entering societies change those societies and their workings. Evidence of this can be found throughout the history of technological development, from the advent of writing to the introduction of print and on to our own days of digital technologies.¹¹ Much research has also been conducted into the impact of new technologies on humans' self-perceptions, and the construction and expression of their identities.¹² This impact plays out on several levels. For one, using information and communication technologies allows people to have new ways of, and new channels for, expressing their identities to others.¹³ More than in the old days constructing and expressing (aspects of) selves has become a matter of choice: we can choose the people we want to interact with and the networks we want to participate in. And in these networks we can choose more than before what parts of ourselves we want to make visible. These facts, in turn, have a bearing on people's self-conceptions.

Moreover, our identities are affected through our interactions with technologies *as objects*. Research in philosophy of technology has revealed that our embodied engagements with the world around us are always relational, not just vis-à-vis other people, but also with regard to the objects that surround us, and the environments that we inhabit and move through in everyday life.¹⁴ Objects are never 'simply there' as props, tools, and décor. Rather, as we move around and act in our everyday world, our actions always necessarily involve a condition of *relating* ourselves to the objects that surround us. This applies to all objects, but especially to technological artefacts.

Research has found that technological artefacts may invoke a whole range of social responses in humans – responses that we would normally only expect in interactions with other human beings.¹⁵ For example, people tend to display high levels of loyalty to machines that 'help' them complete a task,¹⁶ and are significantly more polite in evaluating a machine's performance when they fill out the evaluation on the machine in question rather than on another machine.¹⁷ Interestingly, machines do not even need to be very fancy, complex or intelligent for people to act socially towards them – acting socially apparently comes so naturally for human beings that it is the 'standard way' of approaching the world for them, regardless of whether the object they are interacting with is a social being itself or not. Rosalind Picard calls it their "*default model for relating*

¹¹ Cf. (Luhmann, 2000; McLuhan, 1962; Meyrowitz, 1985, 2003).

¹² Cf. (Castells, 2000, 2004; Gergen, 1991; Turkle, Taggart, Kidd, & Dasté, 2006; Turkle, 1984, 1995, 1996, 2011).

¹³ (Turkle, 1984, 1995, 1996).

¹⁴ (Ihde, 1990; Verbeek, 2005).

¹⁵ (Nass, Moon, Fogg, Reeves, & Dryer, 1995; Nass, Steuer, Tauber, & Reeder, 1993; Nass, Steuer, Henriksen, & Dryer, 1994; Nass, Steuer, & Tauber, 1994; Reeves & Nass, 1996).

¹⁶ (Nass & Moon, 2000).

¹⁷ (Reeves & Nass, 1996).

to others”¹⁸: a social model, originally aimed at human-human interaction, but applied automatically and unconsciously whenever small hints evoke it – even if the evocation is conducted by a machine instead of a human being. Humans thus tend to respond to media and computing technologies *as if* they were human beings.¹⁹

It is safe to assume that the smarter technologies become, the stronger this response will be. Elsewhere I have argued that the increasing levels of personalization and proactiveness of modern technologies may ultimately lead us to start perceiving such smart technologies as ‘*genuine others*’ of some kind or other.²⁰ Not only will these technologies take over various tasks and chores from us, or will they actively engage us in activities by providing us with (self-chosen) product suggestions, ads, and content-relevant information, but, more importantly: by providing us with all these suggestions, smart technologies will give us an insight into *who we are* – or are perceived to be by them. They may at times provide us with suggestions that we didn’t know we would find interesting or worthwhile to pursue. And strangely enough, this means that the technologies *may teach us things about ourselves* that we didn’t know yet.

One recent technological development plays a pivotal role in the emergence of such smart, proactive technologies: profiling.

Online profiling

When individuals use the internet, they leave all sorts of traces as they search for information, share information with their friends, chat and play online games. They leave some of these traces intentionally and consciously, for example when they buy products in an internet shop and leave behind their names, addresses and credit card details in order to be able to receive the products they order. But they also leave less transparent and obviously visible traces, oftentimes without being aware of it. For example, websites use cookies to track and trace the behaviours of individuals, sometimes only in a single domain and sometimes across many different websites. Thus, companies can gather information about what users click on (so called ‘clickstream data’), what they read, how long they look at specific pages, what they buy, and so on and so forth. This information is compiled into profiles, and the activity of creating such profiles is called *online profiling*.²¹ Companies can use profiling for various purposes, e.g. for targeted advertising, personalisation or price discrimination.

¹⁸ (Picard, 1997, p. 15).

¹⁹ (Reeves & Nass, 1996, p. 6). Also see (Fogg, 2003; Turkle, 2007).

²⁰ (Van den Berg, 2010a).

²¹ Cf. (Hildebrandt, 2008; Rubinstein, Lee, & Schwartz, 2008; Taipale, 2003).

Often, individual online profiles are combined with data about large groups of people. The information that is collected as individuals surf across the web is stored in large databases, together with similar information about other individuals' behaviours. Such databases can then be used for data mining (also known as data analytics): uncovering patterns and correlations in the data. Such correlations may provide predictions on the likelihood that individuals will be inclined to buy specific products, have an interest in specific items of information, or be inclined towards specific behaviours.²²

Online profiling and identity

When going online individuals leave behind their bodily, physical selves, but on the internet they also have identities. This is so in a very basic sense – whenever users surf the internet, their computers must be identified to enable them to visit websites, buy products and communicate with others. *Identification* is a fundamental aspect of identity. As we've seen individuals also actively share *identifying information*, for example when they provide an online store with their personal details. And since the rise of web 2.0 end users also present their identities in more elaborate senses, for example on Facebook. Taken together, the activities of an individual on the internet give rise to a certain 'online image' of that person. One can call such an image our 'presented persona'.

A presented persona represents the individual (or who (s)he thinks (s)he is) in the online world. It is a representation of the offline self of an individual. Because others can also leave information about us on the internet, individuals do not have full control over the persona that they present online. This is why, aside from their presented persona individuals also have what we could call an 'imposed persona'. The imposed persona refers to the image(s) that are created by others about individuals. In other words, the presented persona refers to a person's *own* self-presentation online, while the imposed persona refers to others' images of that person, that is to ideas and characteristics that are *attributed to* that person by others.

Of course, most people have multiple presented personae on the internet, that is, they use different representations of themselves in different online settings. Most people who have a Facebook account and a LinkedIn account share very different information about themselves on the former (private, personal) than on the latter (professional). Also, most people tend to share different information about themselves with an online store like Amazon.com (name, address, credit card information) than with a dating site (name, picture, hobbies, preferences, looking for...)

²² Cf. (Han & Kamber, 2006; Taipale, 2003).

IDENTITY AND ONLINE PROFILING

or with a bank (bank account number, login codes). To phrase it in interactionist terms: individuals show different sides of themselves, or 'play different roles', in the online world, just as they do in the offline world.

As said, we have quite a bit of control over the presented personae we present online. We can decide what we share about ourselves and with whom, and we can think carefully about the content and the format of whatever it is we share about ourselves. However, unfortunately we have much less control over our imposed personae, over the image(s) that others spread about us on the internet. Moreover, the rise of *profiling* further decreases this control. A new category of imposed personae may, in fact, be constructed on the basis of the tacit, salient traces individuals leave behind on the internet, outside their awareness and control.

When businesses create profiles of individuals in/across websites, these profiles contain images of each customer, of who they are, what they like, and what they're interested in. One could view this as a kind of imposed persona. It's an image of an individual (or a set of individuals) that is created by someone else (the company that has created the profile), and that may or may not match quite nicely what visitors want, like and prefer. Businesses that engage in profiling tend to use very large data sets to generate their profiles, to get a very rich and nuanced view of individual – but each profile is still *their* interpretation of people's interests, preferences and identities, rather than the self-understandings or presentations of individuals themselves.

As we have seen above, businesses that build profiles may use the information a person intentionally shares with them, but also information that (s)he tacitly leaves behind when surfing the web (for example, clickstream data). Profiling is often the result of a combination of these two streams of information: of information voluntarily, explicitly shared with a business, and of harvesting the tacit traces end users leave as they surf the web. The latter type of information, then, is not left behind deliberately by the user, but rather is distilled from their behaviour patterns. Precisely because profiling *also* builds on the information that we leave behind unintentionally and unconsciously, there can be a significant difference between the personae that an individual actively presents online (presented persona), and the personae that are projected onto on him or her by a profiling entity (imposed persona).

The information that a person intentionally shares about him/herself may give rise to quite a different image than his/her clickstream data. An example will reveal how this works. Karen has a Facebook page, on which she shares information about the things she does, the people she spends time with, and the things she likes on the internet. On her Facebook page Karen shows herself as

favourably as possible – as most people tend to do.²³ But when Karen is not on Facebook, she is using Google to find out more about mental illness. Karen's mother suffers from severe depressions, which puts a significant stamp on Karen's life. Hardly anyone knows about this. She never says anything about this on her Facebook page. But since she's keen on helping her mother as best she can, she uses Google regularly to search for information on the causes and potential treatments for depression. What's more, she also chats to other people who suffer from depressions sometimes, using a discussion platform – all to learn more on her mother's condition. She uses a nickname there, not her real name.

On the basis of Karen's clickstream data, a company that profiles her may have added her to categories such as 'suffers from mental illness', 'suffers from depressions', 'needs medication for mental illness', and 'seeks help in a support group for depression'. This company may know that her searches for information on mental illness are due to her mother's illness, but they also may not. They may wrongly conclude that Karen herself suffers from depression.

Regardless of this fact, Karen's imposed persona may now contain information about mental illness, or depression to be more precise, *despite* the fact that she has never shared information about her home situation on the internet. This information is derived from her online search and chat behaviours, and not shared actively by her. But the imposed persona that is projected onto Karen in this way diverges radically from the picture she presents of herself on Facebook. A secret that she has been careful to keep may be revealed, at least may become attached to her person, outside her active doing.

Each Facebook page is lined with personalised, so-called targeted advertisements. These are advertisements that are offered to individuals on the basis of profiling, i.e. based on the interpretation of a person's interests, wants, needs and identity as created by businesses. Targeted advertisements are an expression of an individual's imposed persona: they reveal the image that 'others' (in this case one or more companies) have of a person. When applying this idea to the example of Karen this entails that chances are that Karen will be offered targeted advertisements for medication against depression on Facebook, based on her search behaviour (outside Facebook!). It is not difficult to imagine that the confrontation with such an imposed persona may be surprising or even unsettling for Karen. Karen's presented and imposed persona will then coincide, and collide, within Facebook – the image that she is keen to show the world would be expanded with information that she didn't put there, over which she has little or no control.

²³ Cf. (boyd, 2008; Tufekci, 2008; A. L. Young & Quan-Haase, 2009).

Of course, one could argue that this is not a problem. The only person who sees the targeted advertisements in Facebook is the owner of the profile page. Unfortunately, things are less simple than that. The targeted advertisements that are posted alongside individuals' Facebook pages are the result of a mix of what individuals *themselves* like (according to their profiles), and what *their friends like*. This means that individuals see product suggestions based on the traces they've left behind on the web, but also on the basis of their friends' likes, wants, needs and wishes. By consequence, an individual's friends thus also see product suggestions based on his or her imposed persona. This is very bad news for Karen. If targeted advertisements for pills against depression are going to show up in Facebook based on her imposed persona, chances are that these will show up on her friends' personal profiles, with the added information 'Karen likes this'...

Imposing a persona on the individual

We now see how through the effects of imposed personae profiling can have a significant impact on people's perception of each other. And it is not a far stretch to assume that, by extension, such imposed personae can also have an impact on a person's self-perception. After all, when individuals are exposed to products, information and messages on the basis of imposed personae, this may have effects on several levels. First, because individuals are exposed to personalised ads and offered services that are tailored to their (presumed) preferences, they are, by consequence, less exposed to information that is deemed less applicable and relevant to them, as is the case, for example with advertisements on television, which are targeted as a mass audience. Individuals thus all end up in their own personal 'information bubble',²⁴ and because of the imposed personae they are offered chances increase that they will purchase products and services that align with these imposed personae.

Second, the personalised information bubble that surrounds individuals in this way may also have an impact on their self-perceptions in the sense that it reinforces ideas about the self that they may have. As we have seen above, interactionist theories of identity place emphasis on identity as a construct, as something that arises in, and is perceived through, the playing of roles. Individuals express parts of themselves in front of audiences within the (social) bounds of specific situations. At the same time they are also influenced by the audiences' perceptions of, and responses to, such self-expressions. Thus, individuals establish and experience their identities through so-called on-going 'identity cycles': self-expression, self-perception, self-construction. That modern, smart,

²⁴ (Keymolen, n.d.; Pariser, 2011).

responsive technologies can also function as an 'audience' that may affect users' self-expressions and perceptions has already been explained above. Online profiling may very well be another one of these technologies. The imposed personae created through profiling, and materialised through e.g. targeted advertising tell users who/what 'they think' these users are, and may thus, over time, have a subtle effect on users' self-perceptions.

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