

Attribute Systems: The Location of Identity in a Digital Social Context¹

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I. Get the Look: Centrist Dads Come in Packs

The 'Centrist Dad' Starter Pack includes a Foucault's pendulum, an e-cigarette held between the thumb and index finger, a collapsible Brompton bike, a stylish blue and gold badge emblazoned with the figure "48%", and a copy of Anthony Charles Lynton Blair's powerful memoir, *A Journey*. At least it does according to the June 8 Shitposting Social Club². The "starter pack" meme has been circulating for more than two years as of the writing of this text. Gnomish, cringe-inducing, periodically actually funny, the meme touches on a phenomenon that social media culture is accelerating at nearly the same rate as the production of the memes themselves: the acquisition of cultural and aesthetic signifiers not merely as shorthand for interests or personality traits, but as almost atavistic substitutes for such interests or traits. To be the kind of person who wants to signal their Centrist Dadism, for example, is to sublime directly into a centrist dad—if not Centrist Dad³ himself—in the eyes all of those whom such aspirational signifiers might address. At the core of this dynamic is another set of concerns that extend beyond the interplay of presentation and aspiration: the location of identity.

The multiple, often welcome, destabilisations of identity and subjectivity that have emerged from the post-Second World War media theory and philosophical discourse may have ontologically dethroned conceptions of a sovereign, unified subject, but, in the world of quotidian interactions, the status and formation of identity—and its performance—remain central to negotiating societies and cultures in less abstract ways. In an increasingly online culture, where online and IRL identities inform and sometimes usurp each other, the question of where identity is located, and who authenticates modalities of identity, is of paramount interest. This is true not only for philosophical reasons, but, also, because identity, in an economy increasingly based on various forms of cognitive production, attention, and the harnessing and exploitation of personal data, is a site of power exchange. Identity has always been a store of value, but in the 21st Century, this fact is becoming more and more literal. In the sections to follow, the aim will be to consider the implications of what that literalisation might mean, and what kind of new forms of struggle and power it might entail.

II. Infinite Sets of One: The Creation of Intentional and Unintentional Digital Identities

Such questions, linked as they are to one's sense of self and the nature of individual action, touch on some of the most fundamental aspects of human cognition. The concept of "theory of mind", the ability to form a reliable heuristic for understanding the cognitive processes and potential actions of others, regarded by cognitive philosophers as the basis of the capacity for empathy and sympathy, provides a starting point for understanding how identities are inhabited, understood and exchanged. The capacity to form meaningful understandings about the minds of others, what they value and how they respond to being engaged, is at the core of how digital identities are constructed and enacted. An individual or group may create a digital entity that selectively incorporates or disregards features of real world identity but which traverses the precarious territory between "reality" and "fiction". Such identities are definitionally selective and composite, but they must link to properties of identity that are familiar from IRL interactions. This tension allows an online identity to mirror, reference, or, potentially, subvert IRL identities, thus, making such digital modes of being unique and, in some ways, richer than those available to individuals offline. Whereas, IRL, concepts like 'agency', 'intentionality', and personality—important concepts in structuring theories of mind—while far from rigid, lack the intrinsic fluidity and self-conscious performativity of their online manifestations. To create an online identity is also to assume the presence of an audience to receive that identity, and in doing this, a second order application of the principles of theory of mind occurs.

Forming a theory of one's ideal audience, using the tools of theory of mind, is only part of the story. One must also attempt to theorise the discourse into which one's acts enter, and how the minds of one's audience are expressed, as well as how they collaborate. Theory of mind, therefore, joins with the notion of "theory of context"—a concept explored in detail by philosophers including Deirdre Wilson and Daniel Sperber in their book, *Relevance* (1995)—in order to define, license and interpret the range of potential online identities. Online identities, necessarily, feed forward into online communities which coalesce into "sites" in their own right; they are sites where identity is performed and explored. These are, in essence, theories of mind reified, proliferating as theories of context. To understand what this means in practice, one may turn to the writing of Alice Marwick and Danah Boyd in a paper entitled, "I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately" (2010), in which they discuss the ways in which self-presentation, conception of audience, and context interact. The writers' notion of an "imagined audience" for

users of social media expresses how difficult the vagaries of identity presentation and performance are to grasp. They write:

Technology complicates our metaphors of space and place, including the belief that audiences are separate from each other. We may understand that the Twitter or Facebook audience is potentially limitless, but we often act as if it were bounded ... In the absence of certain knowledge about audience, participants take cues from the social media environment to imagine the community (Marwick and Boyd 2010).

The audience exists, but no one is certain who (or what) it consists of; to interact meaningfully with one's audience, one must draw a line somewhere, or a line must be drawn for one. Marwick and Boyd suggest that audiences and online communities have emergent identity properties. Identities emerge in dialogue, in part as a result of individual choices, but also in social negotiation with a group. Identities are, in this way, increasingly defined outside of individual choice or presentation. Communities take on a verificatory rather than passive role of merely receiving information or ideas from a single identity. In many ways this dynamic mirrors the offline world, but beneath this apparent similarity lies a greater complexity like that described above: social and material limits exist for the capacity for offline interaction, an online audience is potentially infinite. This infinity of perspectives is underwritten by another infinity: the infinite capacity for value to be extracted. While bloggers, tweeters and centrist dads of all kinds may find like-minded groups to interact with online, all the while they are producing identities in less self-conscious ways. Their data are being constantly collected, assessed and traded by the firms that provide the platform, and, of course, the customers of those firms. The performance of one identity then becomes, simultaneously and inextricably, the performance of a second identity over which the individual, and the community in which the individual is engaged, have very little control, or likely even understanding.

III. Owing Me, Owing You: Golems in a Shadow Context

A number of ironies ensue from the creation of this shadow identity, formed entirely of information measured in various ways and applied to various ends. One of the most troubling, perhaps, is that the more data one produces, the less one knows about how one's data is used. In a sense, the more of one's individual personality one presents online, the more of a commodity that person becomes. Danah Boyd is frequently credited with coining the term "context collapse" in her writings, the flattening of multiple contexts in which meanings and identity performance may be misinterpreted or uninterpretable, but what is at stake in the nexus of proprietary use of user-generated data rooted in the performance of identity is not merely this bleaching out of specificity and subtle meanings, but a kind of shadow cultural context in which every act performs multiple functions for different, highly aware, audiences.

In this alternate context, invisible and largely undetectable by design, identity is primarily formed through the measuring of keystrokes, eye movements and scrolling, but the individual is almost entirely unaware of the identity they are performing. The performance of multiple identities may consist of exactly the same acts, but have two different, even contradictory meanings (i.e. one may perform one's identity by posting pictures, writing comments, or blogging, but those acts contain an almost Newtonian equal or opposite meaning upon their completion). This push-and-pull of identity and commodification is the subject of the work of Dr. Bev Skaggs, recently presented at London School of Economics in the address entitled, "You are Being Tracked, Evaluated and Sold: an Analysis of Digital Inequalities" (2017). Skaggs and her team of researchers became interested in the question of how much Facebook knows about individuals, how they come to know this information, and what becomes of the information once Facebook has it. Skaggs found that Facebook was able to track users across websites, platforms, and browsers with an extremely high degree of specificity. The users' information was then sold on exchanges to the highest bidder. The more information Facebook could access, the fuller a picture of their targeted person. Skaggs found that advertisers and other clients of Facebook become interested not only in the capacity to work at scale which Facebook provides, but also its capacity to work at a granular level, locating, engaging (sometimes visibly, sometimes invisibly) individuals of interest. Fully articulating an online identity, theorising and accumulating an audience provides one's shadow web identity to grow exponentially. Potentially infinite amounts of money can be made by platforms like Facebook in the trading of user data. This market is, of course, augmented by automated financial trading and value extraction technologies like the ones that make high frequency trading possible. An individual's information and online behaviour might be documented and traded many, many times before that person could even physiologically register this fact.⁴ The location of identity, then, continues to migrate outward: individuals create online identities, online identities create communities, communities create norms into which new identities either enter or are rejected, and, as this happens, the information and data that these interactions produce become distinct identities of their own, commodities wholly at the disposal of the corporate entities that created them, used however those entities chose like digital golems.⁵

If identities thus created are stores of value, then, like all commodities, they can both gain and lose this value. There are many ways for this to happen, but one thing Dr. Skaggs' work makes clear is that to lose social capital is also to lose economic capital. The Twitter users interviewed by Marwick and Boyd spoke in different ways

about compromising what the researchers describe as their “authenticity”. Audiences would lose interest or respect if they behaved in ways deemed, as if by a community of good Sartrean existentialists, “inauthentic”. Ironically, authenticity would seem to be the opposite of a the kind of “performative identity” so intrinsic to internet-based identities, and, yet, it is, for many, a kind of bedrock on which their performative identities are founded. The significance of performative authenticity is not lost on the “users” of the data produced online by individuals positioned as “thought leaders” and “influencers”. A good golem produces new golems.

IV: This Dissent was Brought to You by Our Corporate Partners: Politics, Dissent and Data Identity

Among the most troubling potential manifestations of the ways in which this deep level of commodification and identity exploitation could play out is with regard to the integration of brand identity and politics. As personal identities become brands—the exact phenomenon spoken of as being both resisted by and created by the Twitter users Boyd and Marwick interviewed—then political identities are almost certain to become brands as well. In doing so, the content of political discourse further hollows out. The massive data piles accessible to for-profit entities allow them the ability to target audiences with self-reinforcing information, not only from the perspective of their personal brand, but, also, their political brand. Warnings have already been sounded about “filter bubbles” and self-selecting, but, until recently it has been hard to visualise what the structural consequences of this process might look like.

The data-journalism website 538.com has attempted to show what the outlines of this phenomenon might look like in practical terms. The 538 writers, Jeff Asher and Harry Enten, recently investigated the partisan character of favourable or negative views of Russia among Americans. Historically in the US, Democrats and Republicans have held similar feelings about Russia, with measured favourability ratings in polls tracking quite closely (Enten and Asher 2016). Since the election of Trump, however, Republicans have been increasingly responding favourably to questions about their views of Russia. The significance of this should not be downplayed, nothing of any material consequence has changed in the months preceding Trump’s election with regard to US-Russian relations (except for the emergence of rather sloppy accusations about the “hacking” of the US election by Russia which one would think, *prima facie*, would lower *all* Americans’ favourability toward Russia). Enten and Asher write, citing a poll conducted by the firm YouGov and *The Economist* magazine in December of 2016:

31 percent of Republicans categorised Russia as an ‘ally’ or as ‘friendly’ to the United States, but only 16 percent of Democrats said the same. That 15-percentage point gap by party is considerably wider than the 1-point gap YouGov found in late July when 18 percent of Democrats and 17 percent of Republicans thought Russia was an ally or friendly toward the U.S. (Enten and Asher 2016).

Democrats—already low—favorability ratings barely budged in the wake of the election and ensuing controversy, but, for Republicans, they surged. Who knew hacking a country’s election could endear you to the population of that country? Such a change in opinion, thus, seems purely to be a matter of branding, a kind of strange form of geopolitical *esprit de corps*. As the deepening of political identity branding continues, it is reasonable to be concerned about the impact this kind of partisan identity will have on the content of politics. If political activity becomes nothing more than an expression of one’s brand, then what can vulnerable communities depend on in societies where mass advertising or data manipulation can essentially rewrite the political discourse in a matter of months? Worse still, what kind of future is possible when the content of politics can be anything so long as its brand identity and mood music are acceptable to a majority of a population? A future in which corporations openly sponsor protest movements (and, of course, counter-protests) that offer financial advantages for themselves is a bleak but plausible denouement of this dynamic, one that is accelerating one click at a time. The expression “getting owned” has never felt so literal.

Notes

1. The title gratefully acknowledges and nods to Homi Bhabha’s classic work, *The Location of Culture*.
2. Further information of the Facebook group the June 8 Shitposters can be found at the following page: https://www.facebook.com/June-8-Shitposting-Social-Club-448953172117798/?hc_ref=ARTkoqjk1GeSqSgWByQcLL32QEsK6t7V011OTpKgAN6c0ikIquyz8r0VuhGJSy1UPu4&pnref=story
3. For further ‘research’ see the satirical twitter account @CentristDad
4. Those whose data did not mark them out as valuable commodities, it should be noted, were marketed debt, which is also infinitely divisible and tradable.
5. Golems, in Eastern European Jewish mythology, are beings shaped from inanimate material who try to integrate into the world of animate beings, frequently with unpleasant results.

Works Cited

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