
INTERNET AND IDENTITY

Paul Teusner

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INTRODUCTION

[Slide 1]

Questions to the class. Before I start, I'd like to get a sense of your current exposure to the Internet and your knowledge of its attributes. Please raise your hand if you check emails daily. How many of you have a myspace.com or MSN Spaces or Facebook site? How many of you have checked out a video on YouTube? Uploaded a video there? How many of you have posted a picture on Flickr? How many of you have visited SecondLife? Are paid-up members of the SecondLife community? How many of you have a blog? Of those, how many of you blog at least twice a week? How many of you think blogging is a bit nerdy or geeky? At lastly, how many of you have written a homepage or web page straight from HTML code, or have at least tried? How many of you have used a content management system like TYPO3 or Joomla! to make your web site? How many of you have used CSS or XML in writing up a web page?

This lecture is based on the premise that for everyone of you who had put up their hand, your interaction online has necessarily involved a production and projection of your identity. Some researchers in the field of Internet and identity have been concerned with how you project your identity on the great WWW, while others are more concerned with the identity you create online, i.e. whether you want to paint a picture of the self that you know intimately, or create a completely fake persona, or somewhere in between these two.

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In these couple of hours I'd like to talk about what we mean when we say identity, especially the phrase "identity construction", and then I'll turn to looking at the Internet and how it frames and facilitates identity construction. I'll be talking about the Internet firstly as text, then as a technology and finally as a social institution. I believe these three themes offer different perspectives of how the Internet affects our lives as individuals and as a society, and therefore about the interplay between our own process of identity construction and the media by which we do it.

In keeping with the style of these lectures, I will be showing you pieces of media for your learning and enjoyment, but since it's the Internet and not film, I'll be showing you a web page and some flicks from YouTube. These pieces are quite short and will be interspersed throughout the lecture, so don't sit back and relax for too long.

Questions to the class. Why is it that we talk about identity at this point in the series of lectures in this course? Why talk of the relationship between the Internet and identity and not television or radio or newspapers?

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In his book, *The Internet and Society*, Slevin points out four reasons why identity construction on the Internet is an important area of research. Firstly, the Internet is *vast*. While in Melbourne only two major newspapers will give you at least only two perspectives on a story, the Internet has the potential to show you a multitude of opinions,

perspectives and arguments concerning events in the world. We are presented with an immense reservoir of information, and we are compelled to actively choose which pages to read, whose opinions to agree with, and assess the authority of these opinions with others we see.

Secondly, the Internet is *navigable*. Hyperlinks allow us to follow paths of information, and Internet programs offer us the tools to bookmark, tag and store information offered to us. Despite the vastness of the Internet, we are given opportunities to place our own footprint on the Internet, and determine for ourselves which information is important and which is not.

Thirdly, the Internet is *diverse*. Online communities and discussion groups give rise to an increasing number of subcultures and groups that allow us to participate in social, political, environmental, cultural, religious, recreational, professional engagements, and at the same time compel us to be more articulate about who we are as individual.

Lastly, the Internet is *empowering*. With better access to information and greater connections to people all over the world, we optimistically see the Internet as endowing us with better resources to cope with day-to-day strains and turmoils, especially in cases where in the offline world we are different or isolated. (Slevin, 2000)

All this means is that the Internet allows us to explore new ways of being, and compels us to greater *agency* in our own development of self. What I mean by agency is actively deciding to define who you are, e.g. showing a “punk” side of yourself by getting a nose ring, or declaring to your parents that you will vote Liberal in the next election. These are cases in which you actively promote an aspect of your identity to produce a desired response by people around you. As the picture on the slide suggests, the Internet, as a mediated environment, requires greater activity on your part in presenting a certain identity. So let’s explore this thing called identity.

IDENTITY

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Now, in our discussions about the Internet and identity we do not concern ourselves with questions like “How well do we know ourselves?” or “What is our inner purpose?” or “How far can we go into our psyche?”. What we are concerned with is that part of ourselves that is presented and interacts with the outside world, as in the root meaning of the word *persona*: to sound through, as a performer in a stage play will interact with others through a mask and costume.

Indeed, Erving Goffman, the author of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, believed that all identity is a performance. Goffman believed that we learn how to interact with others by watching people perform, learning appropriate utterances and bodily actions that provide coherent meanings about ourselves. For all of us there is a back stage and a front stage: the front stage being the world in which we present our identities to interact with others, and the back stage being the safe place where we can try out new actions and utterances in the exploration of our own development. Examples of back stage would be the bathroom, using a hairbrush as a microphone, or in the bedroom with a tennis racquet as a guitar, trying out what it means to be a music performer. We may call these things play, because that is exactly what they are, but followers of Goffman would contend that the function of play is indeed identity development. (Goffman, 1969)

I know this well watching my own kids. When my daughter was three years old I took her shopping at the local supermarket. In the cereal aisle she stood up in the trolley and called out as loudly as she could, “Can I have everyone’s attention please?” when she saw that people in the aisle stopped what they were doing she giggled to herself and hid back down in the trolley, leaving me to suffer the embarrassment. Everyone in the aisle saw the humour in it because she was a small child, however I’m sure they wouldn’t afford me the same consolation were

I to have called out such a thing. This is because we all appreciate that children play, but we expect that adults would have already learned how to act in a supermarket, how to perform in the given scene, and I am not allowed to be back stage.

I have a YouTube video here that highlights some norms and performance criteria for Western men, and I'll show it to you now. Now, it's a long video, so I won't play all of it, and it gets rather unpleasant, but I hope you appreciate it while it lasts.

[Play YouTube: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=IzO1mCAVyMw>]

While it is quite far-fetched, we can all recognise that these rules do indeed exist. We men follow these rules so we may be perceived in a certain way and not perceived in another, less desirable way.

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Berger & Luckmann would contend that identity necessarily involves socialisation into a community, where we internalise norms of living and ways of seeing things. In the book *The Social Construction of Reality* these authors contend that the world as we see it is because we have learned how to interact in it through the community. Who we are and the way we see the world are a product of a reflexive process between ourselves and those with whom we communicate. (Berger and Luckmann, 1967)

What is important to note here is that we are talking about identity as not something that is inside us, but something that we **communicate** with the outside world. And because identity is communicated, the means of communication, the medium, becomes an important site of consideration.

Writers like Giddens believe that society in late modernity has seen face-to-face interaction having less impact on identity in favour of non-localised social activities. Giddens calls this a disembedding: where social interaction is "lifted out" of the local context. Knowledge becomes more relative and identity construction becomes more uncertain. Increased mobility, dependence on technology to communicate with and make connections with others and the demise of social institutions make "local" connections less important in making us who we are. (Giddens, 1991)

MODERNIST AND POSTMODERNIST CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY

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Indeed, the "modernist" construction of identity is tied up in our identification with or against social institutions. An institution is, stated simplistically, a structure of social relationships in which social goods, like power, norms and values, and access to materials and resources, are distributed. Examples of institutions include the family, government, organised religion, systems of education like schools and universities, etc. So I can say the following things about myself and they would make sense to my audience, who would attribute to me certain expectations about how I would behave and interact with them. Likewise I would dress according to my profession, gender and social status, that would determine how others perceive and interact with me. My associations with others, and the places and times I would do this would also identify my affiliation with certain institutions. For example, as an adult male I would not be expected to stay at home each day, even if I had children, and if you saw me all dressed up on a Sunday morning you would imagine I would be coming home from, or going to a religious ceremony.

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The breakdown of social institutions in late modernity has been both a product of, and a factor in, changes in how we construct our identities. An example I'm well aware of is religious identity. Religious pluralism, the separation

of church and state, and the appropriation of religious symbols and narratives in popular culture have allowed people to explore spirituality outside of organised religion, thereby weakening the hold of these institutions in defining what it means to be a religious person.

Angela McRobbie, a founding researcher at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, has written extensively on fashion, culture and identity. For McRobbie, the purpose of fashion has shifted considerably over the decades. Until the nineteen-seventies, fashion houses designed specifically for the “adult”, to reflect profession and social status, where haute couture symbolised wealth. When popular music merged with social conscience in the late sixties (for example Bob Dylan and John Lennon), cultural figures started “dressing down” as part of a protest against the elite. The seventies saw the fashion industry finally making and marketing fashion for “youth culture”, where jeans and T-shirts become fashion items. But the industry followed the trends of young people in the street, especially those with more creativity than money, who would take a discarded object like long-johns or army pants and make something new from them. Eventually fashion trends lose their alliance with status and more with social grouping, or what we call tribes, to reflect our personal associations. So in fashion, at least, postmodernism is characterised by pastiche – the removal of meaning from a symbol to a celebration of the symbol itself. (McRobbie, 1994)

Likewise, associations, activities, places and times are also undergoing a postmodern change:

The entry of women into the workforce has meant that the workplace is no longer a male domain, and the house is no longer female.

A rapidly changing workforce has meant people are returning to study after periods in the workforce, or even concurrently. This coupled with increased incapacity of young people to buy homes, and the delaying of marriage and reproduction, are challenging long-held conceptions of what it means to be an adult. (Dwyer, Smith et al., 2003)

THE INTERNET AND IDENTITY

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So what has all this got to do with the Internet? Sherry Turkle, in her book *Life on the Screen*, proposes:

[Postmodernism is] difficult to define simply, but [it's] characterized by such terms as “decentered,” “fluid,” “nonlinear,” and “opaque.” They contrast with modernism, the classical world-view that has dominated Western thinking since the Enlightenment. The modernist view of reality is characterized by such terms as “linear,” “logical,” “hierarchical,” and by having “depths” that can be plumbed and understood. [...]

In a surprising and counter-intuitive twist, in the past decade, the mechanical engines of computers have been grounding the radically nonmechanical philosophy of postmodernism.

(Turkle, 1996)

For Turkle, as for other writers involved in Internet and identity, that I'll introduce later, the Internet has fuelled theories about postmodern constructions of identity. Here are three reasons why:

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The Internet has become a space where the rules of identity can be played with, to the extent that “front stage” and “back stage” are on the same stage. Turkle calls this a “moratorium” (Turkle, 1996). The Internet is seen as enabling further “disembedding” from the local context, and yet offers a place for re-“embedding”, challenging notions of community and even place. As a medium of communication, and as a source of a vast amount of information, with increasing penetration into our daily lives, the Internet is positioning itself as a cultural institution that challenges the place of others in modern society.

Enough of the “why Internet and identity”; let’s move on to the “how”.

THE INTERNET AS TEXT

Question to the class: So, in what ways do we portray our identity? What things do we do to show who we are or aspects of ourselves to others?

Anyone in the discipline of cultural studies, including ethnography, gender studies, etc., as Rebecca has mentioned a few times, would call of these things text. Let’s have a look at the text used on a personal blog and what we can find out about this person.

[Present blog page: <http://jen-reed-candid.blogspot.com/2007/03/international-womens-day.html>]

Questions to the class: Everyone, meet Jen. By looking at the text in front of you, what can you tell me about Jen? What can you tell about her from the photo (is she professional?)? What about the discussion she has placed on her site? What does the colour scheme tell you about her? What about the information in the sidebar, title, subtitle?

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For the Internet, text can encompass everything that can be replicated and transmitted electronically, and can be accessed through a graphic-user interface, or GUI (Do you know what I mean by GUI?). But it also constrained by those factors. That means we can display words, sounds and pictures, but not smells or tastes (yet). On simple web pages like this one interaction is fairly bound to text alone (i.e. conversations on blog are text-based), but in other arenas more can be done, such as Second Life, where our interaction is visual rather than literal – so body language can be transmitted through the avatars we create and control. However we have always been able to play with the constraints before us to produce new possibilities, and the emoticon is an example of this. In our text-based interactions a simple colon and bracket can show we are happy, sad or ambivalent, giving more information about ourselves than words can do alone.

But it’s the presence of hypertext in Internet communication that is most salient for considering the Internet and identity. Hypertext is the method by which we make and hold connections between pieces of information on the Web, so it seen as the “currency” of online interaction. Indeed, search engines like Google and Technorati rate the authority of web pages according to the number of links that other sites make to them. Hypertext gives “depth” to an otherwise 2-dimensional web-page, offering the reader directions to move and delve deeper into cyberspace. Hypertext gives the illusion that there is something behind or beyond the web page currently viewed, and invites the reader to go deeper. Peter Horsfield (he’s an associate professor at this university) in his CD-ROM *The Mediated Spirit*, lists several impacts that hypertext have to how we approach and use text:

- Hypertext demands activity from the reader, and so the division between sender and recipient of text is blurred. The fluidity and multiplicitous nature of hypertext means that not all readers will follow the path of information in the same way. It means we are not just recipients of Internet texts; we are users, and each reading of Internet text is unique.

- Unlike the text of a book or report, or even television show, the Internet has no beginning or end. Therefore it has no centre, no boundary to mark inside and outside. Therefore the context in which a piece of text is read is loosened, the domain of the reader/user.
- Internet text is not related to other texts in a linear or hierarchical fashion such as in printed works. Each web page has the potential to be an entry to other text. (Horsfield, 2002)

[Reload page: <http://jen-reed-candid.blogspot.com/2007/03/international-womens-day.html>]

So, returning to Jen's Musings, we can say that:

- Jen is not just presenting herself on this page, but inviting the reader to interact with her.
- Jen should expect that how she presents herself is up to many interpretations, and that her page exists in a variety of contexts that are created by the reader/user, not herself. So she is taking a risk in that. at the same time, she is actively constructing that context too, by joining in online conversations and creating links.
- At the same time, she situates herself in a certain interaction between other sites, such as those listed in her side bar. The hyperlinks listed there are not just to show you the cyberspace she lives in, but invites the reader/user to take part in that interaction as well.

THE INTERNET AS CULTURAL ARTEFACT

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We normally view the Internet as a piece of media, a piece of technology, a tool for creating and transferring artefacts or information from one place to another. Rarely do we talk of the Internet being an artefact, a thing in itself. But we do have opinions about the Internet and we talk about what the Internet does to us and for us and imagine how the Internet will change our lives in the future. So it is important to consider the Internet as an artefact, a thing that exists in our homes, libraries and offices, and even pockets. And because it is an artefact, a thing in our culture, we don't just communicate through it. We communicate with it. We place values on it in the way we approach it and employ it in our daily living.

Consider the introduction of radio. At the time of its invention, the only other technology available that could transmit a message from one point to another, without carrying a physical object to contain the message, was the telegraph. A message was sent from one point across a network of wires to another specific point. It was only natural that radio was termed "the wireless telegraph".

However this metaphor constrained people's thinking about radio, and its usage. Radio was used to transmit messages from one origin to one specific destination. When developers realised that on message could be sent to numerous receivers simultaneously, a new metaphor needed to capture the technology's use. Broadcasting was adopted, taken from the earlier suffragette campaign of pamphlet distribution.

Being on the other side of the planet, our common knowledge of the Amish mainly comes from American movies, which tell us they are a people who reject modern technologies. This is not exactly true. Campbell recalls that the introduction of the telephone into Amish communities was not rejected outright. Instead, seeing the home telephone as a means of fostering individualism and threatening household living, the Amish chose to forbid the use of them in private homes. However telephones are placed in community centres where groups of people can communicate with other Amish groups around the countryside. Thus for the Amish, the telephone is a means of connecting communities. (Campbell, 2005)

Years later, the Internet comes along, and a decade ago yours truly hears the Japanese and the Germans are developing fridges that have Internet access and thinks, “Why on earth would you want to do that?”. Yet yours truly, having never used the Internet to purchase products other than Internet programs, and having never used the Internet outside of his office, cannot conceive the benefits of having the Internet in the kitchen, let alone on a kitchen appliance. Ten years later fridges display shopping lists and ask their owners to authorise home delivery orders to replenish themselves, and we imagine a future where we tell our grandchildren how *in our day* there were times when we forgot to buy milk, and actually had to leave the house to go and buy milk, and imagine how shocked they would be at how primitive our lives were.

How we use a technology like the Internet is governed by what we think about that technology, the values we place upon it and the futures we imagine with it in our society. The really short history presented in this slide shows that the life of the Internet is a story rooted in both fear and promise. Originally designed to transfer secret information between military computers, the Internet was seen as a tool for administration, secrecy, response and ultimately destruction. When the technology was released to teaching institutions, still in the form of simple messaging and databanks, the Internet came to be seen as a universal storage of knowledge, a vast and ever-growing library, a site of communal memory. In the next decade the Internet was offered to commercial providers, called ISPs. Thus anyone who could access a computer, a modem and a subscription to an ISP could access what was now called “The Internet” – talked of as a new site of not just information but of interaction, a global marketplace, full of possibility and freedom.

What is most interesting for me is the creation of language for the Internet around the idea of space. In reality, the Internet is not more than a network of connections through which data passes through. It is linear, one-dimensional. Yet in our language and through our graphic user interface we have given the Internet two more dimensions to create “space”. Most everyday language associated with the Internet has references to this idea. We find pages on our web-browsers by typing in “addresses”, we call site users who do not have memberships “guests”, discussion group moderators are called “hosts”, we thank people for “visiting” when they view our Myspace.com pages, and the buttons on our browser programs say “GO”.

Cyberspace was a term first coined by William Gibson in his 1982 short story *Burning Chrome*, and then it appeared more famously in his novel *Neuromancer* two years later. Gibson’s description of cyberspace contains the idea that a networked stream of data can create a three-dimensional space in the same way that the flickers of electrons in the brain can create illusions, creations and memories of space in our minds. Cyberspace is then a mental space, but unlike the spaces in our minds these are spaces that are created by consensus, by a multitude of minds. It is a shared space.

If we align the concept of Internet as space with the historical roots of fear and promise, we create ideas about the Internet as an agora or a panopticon. The agora is the town square of our tales of ancient Greece where democracy bloomed, where citizens stood alongside each other as equals, freely sharing knowledge and jointly carving out society. The panopticon is the imagined fully functioning technologised prison, where at any point in a cell-mate’s life they are watched, as in a Big Brother house. Here is a view of the Internet as panopticon.

[Play YouTube: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=9zKXCQpUnMg>]

Visions of the Internet as agora and panopticon influence not only our fiction writers and documentaries, but our law makers, our web designers and even users. Margaret Wertheim, in her 1999 book *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, explores our understandings of the Internet as space further. In medieval times, before the enlightenment changed our worldview, the Europeans believed that both above and below the physical world existed other levels of space, sometimes named Heaven and Hell. These were not physical spaces, but none less real as spiritual realms where other identities travelled and resided. This belief was called the dualist worldview.

With Enlightenment came rationalism and a monist worldview, the belief that beyond this world there is only more physical space, as far as the bounds of the universe. Wertheim asserts that the Internet has filled the spiritual vacuum created by the monist worldview. She writes:

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Although it is true that cyberspace is realized through the by-products of physical science – the optic fibers, microchips, and telecommunications satellites that make the Internet possible are themselves all made possible by our tremendous understanding of the physical world – nonetheless, cyberspace itself is not located within the physicalist worldpicture. It is a fundamentally new kind of space that is not encompassed by any physics equations. As the complexity theorists would say, cyberspace is an emergent phenomena whose properties transcend the sum of its component parts. Like the medieval Empyrean, cyberspace is a “place” outside the physical space.

(Wertheim, 1999)

While the data transfers that comprise all Internet activity are the product of technology, cyberspace is more a product of culture. Our interaction with that technology is in part due to our cultural apprehension of that technology.

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So what has this to do with the Internet and identity? Consider the prefix “cyber”. It is added to so many words in our language today, e.g. cyberpunk, cyberspeak, cyberculture, etc. Cyber basically means “through a computer”. Brenda Brasher, in her book *Give me that online religion*, ponders the word cyber.

Like the words vassal, lord, citizen, and proletarian before it, the word cyborg paints humanness in a historical context. It discloses how the organization of contemporary social and political life is working in consort with computers as the reigning means of production to influence the range of humanness possible in our era.

(Brasher, 2001)

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Our apprehension of the computer, the way we interact with it, the relationship we make with it, not only plays a part in the way we interact with others online, but in the offline world too. How we make use of the computer and the Internet makes us different from other peoples in other places and generations; it impacts on the language we use, the issues we discuss, the jokes we find funny, the clothes we wear and the music we listen to. In this sense, cyberculture is something we all have an awareness of, but not something that exists just online. It is part of the wider culture we live in, and frames many of the ways we interact with people both online and offline.

Are there any questions about this? If not, then we’re done with the Internet as a cultural artefact. Let’s turn now to the Internet as an institution.

THE INTERNET AS AN INSTITUTION

PRINT, RADIO AND TV

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Now, as I mentioned earlier, an institution is a system of relationships through which certain social goods may be distributed. When I think about institutions the thing I'm first drawn to think about is how power is distributed. And when thinking about media institutions, I'm drawn to thinking about the power of information, to collect, withhold and distribute information.

From the sixteenth century the printing press rose to dominance as the only technology that could reproduce information with speed and accuracy. Now that printing was available, people could produce a piece of information and distribute it with relative ease, without having to spend time or employ others to manually rewrite. A declaration of protest, announcement of important events could be sent from one city to others in Europe as quickly as transport was available in a multitude of directions. This had a number of effects on the distribution of power in what was to be modern Europe:

- Print favoured the literate. In an era where education was not free for all, those who could read were at a better position to control which information to share with those who could not read. The illiterate were dependent on the literate to bring in the news from out of the towns.
- Print gave rise to the academy. With writing the need to keep memories in our heads was loosened, but with printing, new sites of social memory emerged. The same information could be stored in a variety of locations, and libraries could hold material to suit specific needs. The nature of creating print works demanded a level of rational thinking, that could be specialised in given fields. Authority of wisdom was transferred from cultural leaders who could create stories of how to live communally, to the academically qualified who were trained in fields of specific knowledge.
- Print helped forge the nation. In a time where political domains were divided into small principalities and duchies, printing helped centralised governments exercise greater power, by issuing edicts and laws that could be put in place at roughly the same time in a wider area of concern. With print people became more aware of the world beyond the village or duchy, and more aware of the boundaries between this kingdom and the next.

While we may like to think the electronic age is the age of television, before television there was radio, and before radio there was the telegraph, and before that there were various events and social processes occurring that would impinge on how we receive these new technologies. In the late nineteenth century the photograph became an increasingly popular vehicle for maintaining connections with far away family, and without photography we would not have film and television. However it was the development of journalism as a social institution that would have the greatest impact on how we used radio and television. Following the American civil war and the Franco-Prussian war in Europe, followed by the industrial revolution that would attract people into the metropolis and away from historical roots, people were calling for ways to explore social and existential questions that politics, schools and religion could not account for. The newspaper grew as an independent forum of thought. So the radio and television became primarily a higher vehicle for the distribution of news. (Williams, 2000)

The expense of electronic production demanded greater support on sponsorship than printing has had, thus there has been a dependence on the advertising dollar to keep the airwaves busy. The audience was then transformed as the consumer, being sold to the advertiser by the media corporation. The creation of the celebrity was a

necessary factor in this process, not as an authority of wisdom, but as an attractive element to bring the consuming audience to the advertising space.

I contend, also, that as printing gave rise to the nation, electronic media has fuelled globalisation. As television became live television, which became live via satellite television, and as the corporation became the multi-national corporation, and as journalism grew ever strong as an independent forum of debate outside of other institutions like churches and governments, information transcended national borders with increasing ease. Not just news but entertainment, not just information but culture, crossed borders and infiltrated local cultures, to the extent that Westernisation was apparent all over the world.

WEB 1.0 VS 2.0

If we consider the Internet as institution, then the power resides with the ISP, who allows the user to enter the web, the search engine, that determines the answers to our search questions and the web designer who publishes the information for us. Yet I believe there is change afoot.

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The phrase, Web 2.0, was first coined by Tim O'Reilly and John Battelle to describe a new set of Internet applications such as *social networking sites*, *wikis*, *file sharing networks*, *folksonomies*, and *syndication sites*. *Social networking sites* include websites such as myspace® and Facebook, where users create their own personal web pages in order to create and maintain connections with other users. *Wikis* are single web pages that allow for “collaborative authoring”, i.e. data input and editing from many authors in any location. *File sharing networks* include sites like of flickr™ and YouTube™, where users offer still images and videos (respectively) for storage and free distribution among other users. *Folksonomies* (“folk taxonomies”) are websites like Technorati™ and del.icio.us, where “tags” are employed by the sites’ users to collect, order and reference information found elsewhere on the world wide web. *Syndication sites*, or “feeds”, are pages that appear in a range of web sites, like weblogs and wikis, that contain data read by web-based programs (like Bloglines.com and Google Reader) and some web browsers (such as Mozilla Firefox and the latest version of Microsoft Internet Explorer), in order to alert these programs to new information published on their host sites. A user can create an account on Google Reader and list the location of the syndication feeds of all the weblogs the user likes to read. Google Reader will then alert the user when new information is posted on the weblogs.

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These new systems of online information storage and sharing represent a new step in the evolution of online technology, communication and culture. Ten years ago, as Internet connections started to become commonplace in Australian households, online communication accessible to the ordinary user was limited to email, news groups, instant messaging and chat rooms designed by outside operators. Personal web pages were created by only those who had some time to learn basic HTML script, and some money to buy web space through their Internet service provider (ISP). These pages were fairly static; any change to web content required the author to remove the page from the site, edit it and send it back. This is called “back-end authoring”. Audiences, or users, of online content were separated by its producers by technical knowledge, access to online storage space, time and money.

Now web-based applications allow users to create and store information online without as much need for knowledge of HTML and other web languages or the purchase of web storage space. Web 2.0 applications allow ordinary users to create personal web pages, contribute to the creation of online content on group pages, store information online free of charge, and even create systems of online ordering and retrieval. “Front-end authoring” is the creation and publication of HTML pages from another HTML page.

A technological innovation that has enabled Web 2.0 to function is the ability to separate form from content. A major component of Web 2.0's structure is that the design of the web page is defined by script that's kept on a different file than the content that is framed by it. The following video will explain it.

[Play YouTube: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=6gmP4nk0EOE>]

Yet there are social factors that have led to this new step in the evolution of online communication. The first is the increased access of households to the Internet. Ten years ago the basic Internet set up in an Australian home was a dial-up connection, offering no more than 48kbps (or 6 kilobytes per second), that was turned on for no more than one hour per day on average. Now broadband connections carry up to 1 megabyte per second (though the basic set up would only carry 30-35 kilobytes per second, or 256kbps), that is available all day. Australian households, being the greatest media consumers in the world, have seen the web-connected computer move from the parents' study to the family room and children's bedroom desks. Australian life has become more "connected", and we are relying more on the Internet for information and entertainment than ever before.

Another factor is diminished trust in major corporations and institutions holding control of information, especially newspapers and television news programs. Web 2.0 applications have been welcomed by those seeking alternatives to mainstream news sources, and Crikey.com.au is a popular example.

The open-source movement is a third phenomenon that paved the way for Web 2.0. Fed up with the poor quality of software produced by the big companies, and their lack of response to the changing needs of their own markets, individuals have collaborated to produce and share alternative software without restriction. The movement has also been guided by the principle that access to information should be free from constraint. In an open-source environment, software is available free of charge to any user, yet there is an assumed agreement that any user that develops improvements on currently used programs will also offer their versions freely. (Holtz, 2006)

Considering these factors, Web 2.0 may be seen as a challenge to the institutional structure of information distribution in our society, or even a revolutionary act. The buzz words that are often associated with Web 2.0 are *producers* and *democratisation*. In the world of Web 2.0, the producers of online content are not separated from their audiences. They are, in fact, members of the same group. People logging on to YouTube™ or Facebook to check for new information are using the same sites in the same way as those logging on to offer their own video or music creations. The audiences of YouTube™ and Facebook consist of both users and producers of the sites' contents.

As a consequence, Web 2.0 applications provide alternative settings for the sharing of information that may be rejected, downplayed or ignored by mainstream media platforms. It allows people to congregate according to issues of concern, certain values and beliefs which may be marginal in their offline communities, or general interests, beyond national borders, space and time. The move then is from globalisation, where a dominant culture imposes values and language over the planet, to "glocalisation", where small groups find havens for the development of sub-cultures as if they are local settings, yet the environment is online.

If we consider that the media institutions exert some control over the way we share cultural information that guides how we live and interact with others, then these shifts in power from producer to "producer" and from globalisation to "glocalisation", call us to rethink how we interact with people both online and offline. Web 2.0 allows us, even requires us, to be more active agents in the creation of online identity, but more so, we express our identity not in the way we use the resources available to us (like our blog or Myspace.com page), but that we are expected to interact with the information provided by other users. In a sense, the Internet registers the footprint we leave on it. On the Internet there are no "audiences", only networked communities of active participants.

CONCLUSION

So in the course of this lecture we've covered:

- What we mean by identity, and how it is constructed in interaction with others
- What postmodern identity may be like, and how the Internet is fuelling it
- How we portray ourselves online in Internet text
- How we interact with the Internet and how that impacts on our identity, and
- The place of the Internet as a social institution and how it changes relationships between us.

[Slide 16]

I'd like to finish with a few thoughts. While it is entirely possible for users to present themselves as entirely different identities online, or even have more than one identity on the Internet, we cannot assume that we all do it. Researchers now recognise that identity "play", as it were, is not just play. Users present an identity, whether false or authentic, in order to gain something. It is important for people like me (and for those of you doing today's tutorial presentation) to consider what is it that offers the user some meaning or purpose to their online interaction.

In order to comprehend this, we must not just look at the Internet alone, but place it, and its usage, in the context of people's entire social lives, both online and offline. As Christine Hine puts it, "the virtual automatically transcends the real" (Hine, 2000). Our online lives must and does impact how we relate to others in all parts of our lives.

[Slide 17 and close]

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