

Understanding your Online Identity

An Overview of Identity

In 1993, when nobody knew if you were a dog, Internet users felt shielded behind an electronic veil of anonymity, able to take on any persona they pleased. Since then, Web-based businesses from Amazon to Zappos have adopted technologies that build profiles of customers, offer product recommendations, and keep personal histories that can go back more than a decade. While some Internet users appreciate the convenience those digital identities afford, others worry about how much of their personal information is being stored and how this information is being shared.

This paper is intended to help explain the various different identities and profiles that represent you online.

What is your identity? And what is your identity, on the Internet?

Identity has many definitions, but without getting too meta-physical, we can sum it up in a few words: you are who you are and what you do. Simply put, your identity is the sum of your characteristics, including your birthplace and birthday, the schools you attended, your shoe size, and so on. Some of those characteristics never change, such as your birthday, and some change over time, such as your hair color.



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Similarly, when you are using the Internet, your online identity is the sum of your characteristics and interactions. Because you interact differently with each website you visit, each of those websites will have a different picture of who you are and what you do. Sometimes the different representations of you are referred to as *partial identities*, because none of them has the full and true picture of who you are.

Your online identity is not the same as your real-world identity because the characteristics you represent online differ from the characteristics you represent in the physical world. Every website you interact with has its own idea of your identity because each one you visit sees you and your characteristics differently. For example, Amazon has established a partial identity for you based on the products you buy, whether it's you at the keyboard or someone else using your account. Yahoo! Finance has established a partial identity for you based on the stocks you are following, whether you actually own those stocks or not. Neither one has your full identity, even if they were to put together your partial identities.

The result is that you have one true identity and many partial identities. Some of the information associated with a partial identity is under your control; other information may be out of your control or even completely invisible to you. Regardless of what you can and cannot control, they all contribute to "who you are and what you do."

What is an identifier? And how is that different from my identity?

An *identifier* is a way of referring to a collection of a person's characteristics or what we have described here as a partial identity. For example, if you have an Apple MobileMe account, your identifier at MobileMe may be something like "myID@me.com." Most websites, including search engines, prefer to have you sign up (or register) so they can maintain information about your identity, such as a profile, or store your profile information more securely.

In some cases, the identifier may be invisible to you. For example, if you use Microsoft's Bing to search for something on the Internet, Bing will assign you an identifier and store it in your Web browser as a cookie.

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Every time you use Bing, the cookie that Bing stored in your Web browser acts as an identifier that links together all of your characteristics into Bing's idea of your identity. If you use Bing from both your laptop and your smartphone, you may even have more than one identifier, each representing you to Bing, even though they may be completely disconnected from each other.

The identifier that a service like Bing or MobileMe has assigned to you does not actually refer to you as a person; it is simply a way of pointing to, or tagging, a set of characteristics that have been collected to form a profile of you. Some of those characteristics may match your real identity and some might not. When you provide personal information, such as your name, age, and hometown, to a website operator, you are creating your own partial identity, which is called a *persona*.

Table 1 summarizes some of the terminology used in describing identity and identifiers.

| Term | Explanation | Example |
|------------------|---|---|
| Identity | The complete set of characteristics that define you | Name, nicknames, birth date and any other unique characteristics that combined make you who you are |
| Identifier | A way of referring to a set of characteristics | Your email address (myID@me.com) or user name (RaulB) or an account number (7633) |
| Partial Identity | A subset of the characteristics that make up your identity | Demographic information about you or any purchase history is stored in your account at a website |
| Profile | Information collected by others about your actions and characteristics, | A search you conducted for "discount shoes" or a list of websites visited |
| Persona | A partial identity created by you to represent yourself in a specific situation | A social network account or your online blog |

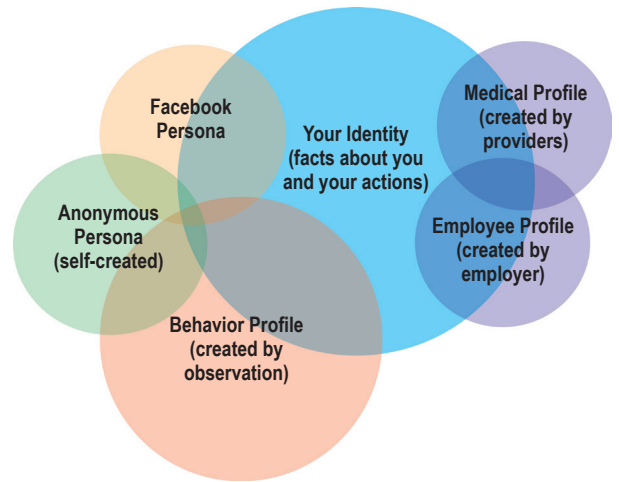
Table 1: Identity and Identifiers

Why are websites assigning identifiers to me and building profiles about me?

You probably have figured out why various websites are asking you to create an account with a unique identifier—they need a way to maintain information about you so they can provide you with a personalized experience. Beyond the information you explicitly provide, you may be wondering why those websites are also building profiles based on what you search for, the links you click on, your location, and so on.

One of the reasons that online companies and organizations want to build a more extensive profile about you is *security*. Websites that are engaging in commerce, such as your bank, have serious concerns about online fraud. By profiling your interactions with them, and then noticing changes in your behaviour, they can act more intelligently to protect your interests, and theirs.

Another reason for creating a profile about you is referred to as behavioural targeting, a fancy buzzword that means a company can make money by selling ads aimed specifically at you. This



type of advertising surrounds a significant amount of information that is available on the Internet. Without the revenue provided by advertising, many of the most popular websites would cease to exist. In fact, most of the free content on the Internet is available due, in part, to paid advertising.

In the physical world, not every advertising placement has the same value: a billboard downtown may cost a lot more than one on a lonely highway in the countryside. Similarly, the more relevant an advertisement is to a target audience, the more value it has to the advertiser. The same is true on the Internet: an ad for baby clothes that is visible to someone who has just been shopping for baby clothes has a lot more value than the same ad being shown to a biologist looking for information about leaf shapes. The more a website operator knows about you, where you've been, and what you're doing, the better able they are to control the types of advertisements you see, which is what earns them the highest revenue.

The information in this paper should help you understand how your partial identities and identifiers are linked together and how you present yourself to various websites you use. Leveraging different personae and different identifiers will give you more control over how your identity is stored and shared on the Internet.

About the Internet Society

The Internet Society (ISOC) is a nonprofit organization founded in 1992 to provide leadership in Internet related standards, education, and policy. We are dedicated to ensuring the open development, evolution and use of the Internet for the benefit of people throughout the world.

