The Construction of Personal Identities Online

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Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are building a new habitat (infosphere) in which future generations, living in advanced information societies, will spend an increasing amount of time. In the infosphere, it is progressively more difficult to understand what life was like in pre-digital times and, in the near future, the very distinction between online and offline will become blurred and then disappear. The phenomenon is variously known as "Ubiquitous Computing", "Ambient Intelligence", "The Internet of Things" or "Web-augmented things". GPs are a good example of this convergence: asking whether you are online when driving a car while following some GP's instructions updated in real-time is becoming progressively less meaningful. We already live mostly *onlife*.

Against this background, how individuals construct and maintain their personal identities online (PIO) is a problem of growing and pressing importance, affecting millions of people everywhere. Today, PIO can be created and developed, as an ongoing work-in-progress. They may provide experiential enrichment, expand, improve or even help to repair relations with others and with the world (e.g., in the case of abused children or of people with autism or Asperger's syndrome), or enable imaginative projections (the "being in someone else's shoes" experience), thus fostering tolerance in multicultural contexts. However, PIO can also be mis-constructed, stolen, "abused", infringed, disrespected, or lead to psychologically or morally unhealthy lives, causing a loss of engagement with the actual world and real people. Depression, addiction, delusion, escapism are all concepts easily associated to disorders that may be magnified by the wrong kind of onlife experience. The construction of PIO affects how individuals understand themselves and the groups, societies and cultures to which they belong and contribute *onlife*. PIO often contribute to individuals' self-esteem, influence their life-styles, and affect their

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values, moral behaviours and ethical expectations. The online construction of a personal identity involves not only personal data but, importantly, the significant participation in virtual social networks. Online communities—understood as dynamic, interactive and distributed networks, in which the individual is never a stand-alone entity but always a participant—play a vital role in the creation of PIO. The figures are impressive, and growing so quickly that any reference in print is bound to be outdated, so let me quote an already old newspaper article:

> […] a common complaint […] particularly from people in their 20s who were in college when Facebook appeared and have never lived as adults without online awareness [is that] participation isn't optional. If you don't dive in, other people will define who you are. So you constantly stream your pictures, your thoughts, your relationship status and what you're doing — right now! — if only to ensure the virtual version of you is accurate, or at least the one you want to present to the world. […] When cyberspace came along in the early'90s, it was celebrated as a place where you could reinvent your identity — become someone new. If anything, it's identity-constraining now. […] Young people today […] curate their online personas as carefully as possible, knowing that everyone is watching. (source: New York Times, September 7, 2008).

Increasingly less people fail to grasp the magnitude of such transformation. Thus, only a view utterly uninformed about recent developments in ICT and advanced information societies would equate the information revolution to the print revolution. Such perspective is inadequate and obsolete. The infosphere is not just a medium, but the new environment where groups and individuals continuously and increasingly define themselves.

The construction of PIO is therefore a phenomenon with important philosophical ramifications. Its practical consequences are not less significant. In the US alone, for example, identity theft, a crime that is very distinct from, but also clearly related to the creation, usage and maintenance of a PIO, has risen to macroscopic dimensions. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics:

> An estimated 11.7 million persons, representing five percent of all persons age 16 or older in the United States, were victims of identity theft during the two years prior to being surveyed in 2008 […]. The financial losses due to the identity theft totaled more than $17 billion. (Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Crime Victimization Survey, Identity Theft, http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/)

Of course, we should resist the temptation to reduce the problems affecting the construction of our identities online (such as gender identity in Second Life) to security and communication issues (such as setting up a password for online banking), which are ethically important but irrelevant here. The development and protection of online identities is not just an economic or business problem. Yet, it is important to connect such separate dots in order to appreciate the wider picture. Crucially, individuals as well as groups seem to lack a clear, conceptual understanding of who they are in the infosphere and what it means to be an ethically responsible informational agent online. This is unsatisfactory. Lacking a

clear and precise grasp of what it means to have a PIO causes confusion and impasse. It leads to uncertainty about how to follow ethical guidelines and legal requirements and about how to identify the sort of heuristic solutions that might be suitable for technological implementation, in order to facilitate a healthy and rewarding online experience. In order to ensure that individuals may be able to pursue a morally good "onlife", it seems crucial that we understand what constitutes a PIO and how, as well as to what extent, individuals can learn to create, manage and perceive their PIOs.

This special issue is intended to help the research community to fill this serious gap in our philosophical understanding. Its goal is to contribute to the development of the robust conceptual framework necessary in order to recognize and evaluate the qualitative features that characterise the "good life" of the self online and the right approach required to develop and maintain it. It is part of a foundational project, in the sense that the papers collected here may be seen as part of a reliable, conceptual platform on which other conceptual, technological, scientific and social developments can be based.

There is no point in summarising the contents of the articles, their abstracts do that better than I could. So I shall leave the reader to enjoy the actual contributions, with only a final word of acknowledgement. The five articles represent a selection of research papers presented at several meetings, sponsored by a 2-year research project funded by the British Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) on the construction of personal identities online. Without the support of the AHRC, the commitment and hard work of the authors and the participants to the meetings, and the help of James Moor and Gregory Wheeler (former and present editor in chief of *Minds and Machines*) this special issue would not have been possible. To all of them go my warmest thanks.