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Gnozi seauton: identity artefacts in the (individualistic) social web

Angela Maria Sugliano, University of Genoa, Italy*

Abstract

In this paper we focus on the Internet as an environment where users may undertake a process of self discovery and self development. *Gnozi seauton* («know yourself»), Socrates suggested to ancient Greeks and to every man, is presented as viewing knowledge of ourselves as the key factor to understand the world and become able to find answers to all the philosophical questions a man puts to himself.

Internet and the Web 2.0 environments specifically offer useful places and tools to support self description, self representation, and self discovery. We refer to the results of these descriptions, representations and findings, as *identity artefacts*.

In this paper we also ask the question: are Web 2.0 environments individualistic places? This question arose from findings derived from an analysis of data from a social network formed by a blog and its blogroll. We registered very weak links among the nodes of the network, and this brings us to seek further

* Correspondence address: Angela Sugliano, Department of Communication Computer and System Sciences, University of Genoa, Viale Causa 13, 16145 Genoa, Italy. E-mail: sugliano@unige.it

validation of the following statement: the social web is an individualistic place where people are more focused on the production of identity artefacts than to the sharing of them.

Keywords: Self; identity; identity artefacts; virtual environments; social Web

Introduction

The World Wide Web is known as a social environment where people meet, share resources, and communicate: if interpersonal relations in (so called) Web 1.0 were based on forums or chat discussions, in (so called) Web 2.0 these relations are based on resources which each actor in a particular scenario decides to share with others. This kind of interaction focuses on the individual who produces these resources as a representation of himself/herself. In doing this, he/she answers to the Socratic call «gnozi seauton», «know yourself». When we describe ourselves in online community profiles, when we choose and upload our photos, slides, comments, music, in social network environments, when we choose our avatar in 3D environments, we are answering the Socratic call, undertaking the philosophical journey of self discovery.

The electronic description of ourselves objectifies who we are: in this process we can see what Abrams and Hogg (1990) claim when they define social identity as being like a «collection of self images». We refer to these self descriptions as *identity artefacts.*

From James's *Think I* to the Web 2.0 stages, through Hermans's *speaking voice*

The computer screen doesn't hide the individual, but allows every user to discover his/her identity characteristics in an environment of reduced social pressure. As Pravettoni (2002) argues, building a virtual self entails a hard cognitive activity for individuals: the process of choosing a nickname, an avatar, a resource to insert in a social network home page, represents a meta-reflection on who we are and the way in which we want to be seen by others.

Categorization (Allport, 1924) and self-categorization processes (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) are very evident in Web 2.0. We know that the first theories on computer mediated interactions – such as the Reduced Social Cues theory (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) – claim a reduction of the social categorization process due to the reduction of self control and social awareness in electronic environments. But in the production of identity artefacts we have evidence of a sort of reinforcement of the categorization process, of ourselves and of others.

In building electronic identity artefacts, we objectify what James (1892) described when he spoke about the process of self discovery: the self as subject, or the «I», and the self as object, or the «Me». The I is the knower, the subject who knows, and the Me is the object of knowledge. As we know, James claimed that the I, looking at the Me, encounters three basic dimensions: the material me, the spiritual me, and the social me.

James argued that the sense of a man's self is the sum of all that he can call *his* (from things to way of being), and that what determines the boundary between self and not-self is one's emotional attitude about an object or thought. What happens in electronic environments is just another element that sums up those listed by James one hundred years ago: if my web page is well organized, my friends list is long, my blog posts have a lot of comments, these elements without a doubt give an emotional input to the construction of the self.

Based on James's theory and combining it with Bakhtin's theory of the polyphonic novel (Bakhtin, 1973), Hermans and his colleagues (1992, 1993) have put forward another account of the self, which they call the «dialogical self». Hermans (2001) claims that each *me* in James becomes a character in the polyphonic novel of self, and each of these *me* formations has not a thinking *I*, but a speaking voice to represent its point-of-view in front of other characters and their voices in the polyphonic or dialogical self. Moving forward to «translations» of these principles, we can say that in Web 2.0 environments each *me* has not a *thinking I* (James), not a *speaking voice* (Hermans), but a *stage* on which it represents itself. From the psychological point of view the aim of this self presentation is the discovery of the self, and not the acceptance of self through audience manipulation, as Goffman (1959) claims from a social point of view.

Sometimes the different selves may conflict, but not in the virtual environments where they can live separately, but together. The objectivation of the different parts of the self in identity artefacts allows the representation of a unified self, not as the result of the repression of part of the self with the scope of a life project, but as a collection of self images: flexible, now and then contrasting and always in evolution, as Emily Martin (1994) maintains in «Flexible Bodies».

Identity artefacts

Referring to James's theory, we can divide identity artefacts into those which refer to the *material* and *spiritual me*, and those which refer to the *social me.*

Identity artefacts that empirically describe who we are and those that allow us to describe ourselves: the name of our website, the title of our blog, the name of our avatar. Many people decide to buy an Internet domain with their own name and to build web pages where they store every link to their dispersed pieces of identity. Some providers offer «complete» virtual environments where users may manage all the aspects of their virtual self, as is the case of Windows Live Spaces.

Near to the name, but not the same thing, are the words used for the *login name* and the *password*. Creating and managing our passwords is a hard work in terms of identity management. A recent report (Atreya, Hammond, Paine, Starrett, & Wu, 2007) claims stress related to password management: web users are usually overloaded with a number of passwords, or forced by their companies (at the work place) to change their passwords for security reasons. Having more than one password becomes a critical element in the self objectification process. Related to digital identity (our login and password) are *identification procedures*: there are many different schemes and formats for unique digital identifiers that allow individuals to have a singular login to enter several environments and to help individuals not only to «remember» their identificative data, but also the ability to maintain a feeling of uniqueness in the different objectification of their selves[1].

[1] For example, the Open ID authentication protocol, http://openid.net/

Usually login names refer to three main typologies: (1) proximity to real names, (2) fantasy names, or (3) evocative names. We can see here reality and fantasy interlaced in the same way as happens in a novel.

Other identity artefacts are the *text based description of us* (usually the «about me/who I am» pages), or the so called *profile*, where a user is asked to fill in some items in order to describe himself/herself: from a material point of view (name, age, race, physical attributes, marital status, country, city), and from a spiritual point of view (attitudes, hobbies, personality).

Multimedia identity artefacts are those which we refer to as *resources:* photos, pictures, pieces of music, slide shows, videos, things that say indirectly what we like and dislike, what we do, our aesthetic sense, our personality. Looking at the resources we produce or store in our Web 2.0 pages, we may discover an unknown or unconfessed part of ourselves: the music collection in our *Last.fm*[2] playlist, for example, may reveal part of us we usually hide or which we have forgotten: *…gnozi seauton*, Socrates suggested.

Another representation of ourselves is that which we make when we act in a virtual environment with an *avatar* (figure 1). When we define the name and shape of our avatar we give a self representation: it could be as we would like to be, as we are, or our opposite. Maybe the other

Figure 1. A group of avatars in Second Life

[2] http://last.fm/

cannot understand the value of our name or shape, but we know well the meaning of the strange words we choose or the emotion related to the shape we choose for our virtual self.

We can conclude the list of identity artefacts with the *kind of environments we choose to attend*: we reveal a significant part of ourselves when we attend a music based social network such as *Last.fm* or a book social network like Anobii[3], or an art social network like *Uqbar.* or *media art culture*[4]. If we consider instant messaging environments, when we use to communicate the aseptic and professional layout of Skype instead of the friendly and teen spirit MSN interface, we are adding a significant part to the collection of elements telling who we are.

Self textual description, graphical elements, resources which speak about us: such kinds of identity artefacts are the same as those to which Hevern and Annese (2005) refer defining them as «windows» through which others may «enter us» renewing their own positioning: becoming more aware of who we and others are. *Gnozi seauton* again.

The social part of the *me*: the Web 2.0 as an individualistic environment?

After James, we can refer to another founding father of the identity concept, Charles Cooley (1902), and to his «looking glass self theory» in which he argues that a person's self grows out of society's interpersonal interactions and the perceptions of others. In the social web are individuals more involved in the production of identity artefacts or in the sharing of them? In Web 2.0 environments, do individuals engage in deep interpersonal interactions in order to reflect each other as in a mirror and in doing so to discover who they are? In order to answer (also) this question, we performed an analysis of a Web 2.0 social network formed of a blog and its blogroll.

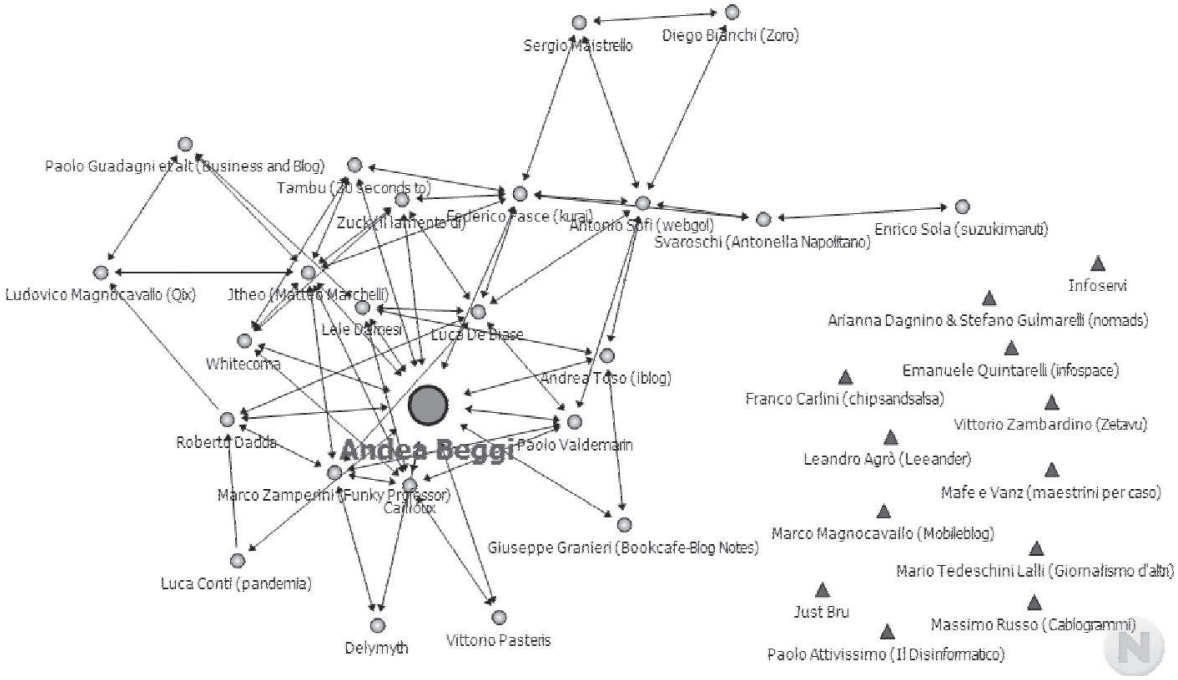
The blog under analysis is the blog of a geek blogger deeply involved in the Italian blogger community. At the time of the analysis (in 2007, as a part of a degree thesis at University of Genoa) it has 36 links in its blogroll. The objective was to understand the kind of interactions inside

[3] http://www.anobii.com/

[4] http://uqbar-mediaartculture.ning.com/

the network formed by the 36 blogs present in the blogroll: we wanted to understand how strong the bonds between nodes were, and so argue the extent to which each member of the network links the blogs of other members. In order to understand the nature of interactions inside the network, the Social Network Analysis (SNA) technique (Wasserman & Faust, 1994) was used[5]. One of the measures adopted in SNA is the *density* of a net, that is the proportion of their effective bonds relative to the maximum possible number of bonds amongst nodes. The maximum value of the density factor is 1, that is every node is linked with all the other nodes. The results of the study revealed a very low density level of the network analysed (0,0889): this means a network in which only 8% of the bonds are active (figure 2). In respect to the evaluation of the structure of the network, SNA considers the existence of cohesive sub-groups (*cliques*, where a clique is formed at least by three nodes): we found a number of cliques formed by 3 nodes, but only 5 cliques with four members. Moreover, we considered another element: which blogs are cited

Figure 2. The social network based on the red underlined blog's blogroll



[5] Two SNA tools were used in order to perform data gathering: UCINET (http://www.analytictech.com/downloaduc6.htm) and NETMINER (http://www.netminer.com).

in the 36 blogs' blogroll? Are these blogs part of the network considered by our research? We found that among the 986 blogs cited by the 36, only 189 are inside the network.

All these findings suggest a low level of cohesion and a low level of interaction, but we noticed a high motivation in «our geek blogger» who – although not in a central position in his network, nor with a relevant number of comments (a mean of 1.3 comments in 30 days) – carefully updated his blog every day.

From these findings we could conclude that individualism causes every blogger to care about their identity artefacts (the material and spiritual me), and less attention to interaction (the social me). May we say that Web 2.0 environments and tools emphasize an individualistic orientation? Authors like Wellman (2001) and Castells (2002) seem to confirm this orientation when they speak about «networked individualism».

Conclusion

In this paper we propose to refer to every self representation on the web as *identity artefacts*: textual representations, personal data (such as login and password), and resources we decide to share with others. These artefacts objectify the process of self discovery. We recall the Socratic *gnozi seauton* in order to give a deep foundation to the process of self representation and self discovery in web identity artefacts. And the plurality of these representations – standing together without falling foul – recall the plurality of the voices of Hermans's Dialogical Self theory. We matched the different kind of Web 2.0 representations with the three parts of the James's objective self: the social network analysis of a blogger's network suggests that the social part of the self seems to be poorer than the material and spiritual part of the self. Based on these findings, we suggest that Web 2.0 social environments be looked upon as individualistic places characterised by weak ties among nodes. Here we have spoken about the social networks of blogs; in alternative scenarios, some emergent tools force these ties, as happens in Facebook[6] where friends statements implode the individual homepage alongside the comments of

[6] http://www.facebook.com/

friends of friends. The themes handled in this paper brings us to the following conclusion: the Internet, as Sherry Turkle (1995) wrote, is «a significant social laboratory for experimenting with constructions... of the self that characterize postmodern life».

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