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Future of Authenticity

The Global Challenge

Authenticity has great salience in our times because new information and communication technologies have greatly expanded the scale and scope of the inauthentic. For example, they have made identity fraud possible and also playful; many of us now have multiple personalities online. When it is easy to choose an identity, what does that imply for the underlying reality? How do I know who I am, and how do you know who I am, and how does my bank know who I am?

It is now so easy to make imitations that the value of the authentic has been enhanced. This phenomenon was pointed out by the critic Walter Benjamin long ago (in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction). Furthermore, given the historically unprecedented declines in the cost of computing and communication in the past 20-30 years, copying and sharing information has become easier and cheaper than anybody of an earlier generation could have imagined - especially when so many goods and services are digitally delivered. Managing this explosion in imitation is one of the real challenges of the digital age.

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Options and Possibilities

People can be authentic or not.

Online identities can reflect the multiple ways we think about ourselves: A work and a home email; Several different sign-ups for accounts; a Twitter account; perhaps Facebook profiles, or a character in World of Warcraft. These are the benign possibilities. There are malign ones too. Thieves will seek our log-ins and passwords to bank accounts. Malicious spirits will hide behind fake identities to spread rumours, attack other people, incite violence even.

What are we to think about the cloak of anonymity online? It seems to encourage intemperate comments, rudeness and viciousness in online forums. On the other hand, it is essential to protect whistleblowers, or those who post information in a country affected by violence or a repressive regime. The technologies which seem to protect the bad guys - the identity thieves or spammers - also seem able to lead repressive authorities to clamp down on the good guys. This is a genuinely difficult dilemma.

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Fakes are proliferating in the online world. Fake drugs are sold over the internet, to the great harm of the customers. 'Fake' music, films, software are sold too, to the benefit of customers but not of copyright owners. Piracy in this metaphorical sense is absolutely rampant.

What's more, the majority of reasonable people don't seem to believe there's much wrong with intangible piracy - it's a different matter in the tangible world of medicines or aircraft parts. What is the authentic reality that the full force of the law and the state should be protecting? After all, an online copy of a song is no different from the original.

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Information can be authentic or not.

This has always been a fundamental issue in how we navigate the world but is overwhelmingly important now that so many people have access to so much information. The internet, modern communications, amplify the questions of veracity and reliability which have always affected the mass media. Urban myths move with the speed of light down fibre optic cables. Rumours and incitements to violence are spread, as always, person to person - but each person can now reach many others, very quickly. A flash mob can be assembled either to dance in the streets of London or beat up and stab neighbours in Kenya.

The skill of verification has become fundamental. Can you identify spam email? Can you recognise bias in your source of news? Is Wikipedia a good source for homework?

Finally, experience can be authentic or not.

Authenticity has an existential value. In rich countries, where most people have lots of stuff, experience is more valuable. Activities that take time - ballooning, cooking lessons, a holiday, book club meetings - are considered good presents, treats. Representations of experience have value too. Street style sells - as does home made jam or hand-made crafts. But of course being packaged and sold makes the authentic instantly inauthentic.

These reflections contain an enormous range of challenges and trade-offs.

The Way Forward

A number of steps will have to taken so that we can establish some form of order in the digital world. These are

1) The establishment of credible, digital identities. This is essential for trust - and hence any economic and commercial activity - online. But conversely it is equally important to protect privacy - and anonymity too where it's needed.

2) The protection of intellectual property in the online world while continuing to protect civic space, an intellectual commons - what James Boyle has entitled The Public Domain in his recent book of this title.

3) The continued provision of widespread access to communications and information. This brings enormous benefits especially to people largely excluded from the privileged information access of the past (libraries, print media). At the same time we must build in verification mechanisms, ensuring the reliability of widely-accessed online information.

The issues raised in all these different contexts are varied, and difficult. For some of them, it is quite likely that there will be many technology-based solutions forthcoming in the near future.

There are key areas where technology is already playing a major role in authenticity: Digital Right Management (DRM) uses technology to limit access to certain content - technology having created the potential for access in the first place. Equally biometric identity uses technology to limit the potential to form multiple identities. If my avatar can always be traced back to the me of my DNA, is there any point in having it?

I predict technological 'solutions' will be commonplace in the next few years. Sellers of content, government agencies, airlines, and others will put up hurdles designed to identify individuals. The world of 'Minority Report' will lurch closer. But taken too far, this is a dystopia. The technologies ought to open up the world of information and creativity. If the full potential of the information and communication technologies for the majority of people is to be recognized, technology can not be used to build mechanisms which protect existing interests or structures and prevent change. ICTs are disruptive technologies. Printing was ultimately absolutely revolutionary - it's why we all (in the rich west and many other countries too) have an education and the vote. The internet is revolutionary too. This is uncomfortable for those who were previously comfortable.

So although technology can certainly in the short or medium term clamp down on its own effects, it is at the expense of restricting some of the positive potential. In the longer term we need to look for better solutions.

The most promising will depend on greater transparency of information and reputation. Here are some examples.

Misinformation is dangerous in any context, including misinformation spread via conventional media. It's all the more so when it can be spread rapidly via the internet, email and mobile and potentially change people's behaviour. While SMS messages have been used to positive effect to spread correct information and encourage positive action - as in elections from the Phillipines to Zimbabwe - there were concerns that messages containing misinformation and lies were being used to encourage and incite the violence after Kenya's December 2008 election. The most effective way to counteract falsehoods in future will probably come from the pooling of many messages and reports so the people can see where there is a consistent story. The aggregation of different sources - which can be done using new social media applications such as Ushahidi - could be a powerful tool for verification.

For reasons of food safety as well as personal preferences - for organic food, or fair trade food perhaps - traceability has become an important issue. The prototype Fair Tracing Project uses online maps to follow products on their journeys from farmers to consumers. Tracing will involve 'tagging' individual products with information readily accessible by both producer and consumer. The information that may be attached to tagged products is virtually limitless, beginning with details of the product's date and cost of creation, as well as its individual creator and his/her working environment and pay, through the various steps of its transport to the eventual point-of-sale to the consumer." (http://web4.cs.ucl.ac.uk/students/v.shah/fairTracing/)

Another example is Sourcemap, a new tool which permits the researching and optimization of supply chains, using transparency to deliver sustainability. (http://ow.ly/rgRs)

Finally, online security and encryption are ways of protecting personal information and safeguarding personal identity. That identity is created offline. The likely next step in establishing identity is likely to be biometric technology which will link the physical person

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to the digital environment - a thumbprint pad on the computer screen, perhaps. But a person's online, connected identity could potentially be impossible to copy when it consists, as it eventually may, of all the accumulated patterns of their digital activities. Each individual's activities and conversations and searches is as unique as a fingerprint. Dave Birch, who runs the Digital Identity Forum, says in a recent blog post: "the "common sense" notion of identity, rooted in our pre-industrial social structures and pre-human cortex, is not only not very good at dealing with the properties and implications of identity in an online world, but positively misleading when applied to system and service design. The fact is that virtual identity and "physical" identity are not the same thing, and they differ in ways that we are only beginning to take on board." (http://digitaldebateblogs.typepad.com/digital_identity/2009/09/what-identity-is-important.html)

Technological solutions are likely to need changes to social and legal institutions as well. Thus it is feasible to imagine identifying a person through the pattern of their communications and online activities, but this ability will be irrelevant unless government authorities in particular will accept alternatives to the present paper-based proof of legal identity.

Impact and Implications

The journey is unlikely to be easy. A comparison between the valuation of any company and its physical assets shows that the vast majority of value in the economy is intangible and based on an understanding of what it is - whether or not it is authentic. Intangible value can evaporate overnight - and we've seen many examples of that, for instance in banking recently, in the case of Enron before that. This makes reputation everything, and the only way to sustain a reputation is to live it constantly.

Reputation is fragile - taking time to build but able to vanish overnight - it and will be more robust the more it is the product of personal experience and recommendations. Personalization will, paradoxically, become increasingly important even as new technologies stretch the range and geographical spread of connections between people.

However, there will be an 'arms race' between efforts to market products or create or shape a reputation and resistance to any message which is not wholly authentic. This is a pattern familiar from the world of fashion: the cool people move on from a certain style as soon as many others take it up because it's cool. We can already see this expansion of the dynamics of fashion in the evolution of social networks as means of word-of-mouth recommendation. Trends such as Facebook or Twitter are subsequently taken up by companies and other organizations as a means of conveying messages, but this 'official' and inauthentic use of a social medium in turn leads to resistance amongst users of networks who move on to another online location.

The triangulation of information from different sources will become an essential skill, an aspect of 'media literacy' without which consumers and citizens will be unable to navigate daily life.

Trusted guides will come to play an increasingly important role. These could be social networks, media organizations, certain connected and well-informed individuals, or companies or other organizations. For these guides, too, reputation will be all-important and will require constant vigilance.

A long, collective conversation about authenticity, in at least some of its aspects, is needed. Personal identity, verification of information, piracy - there are huge challenges in this list. They will be best addressed by creative thought about the potential of the technologies which are amplifying the challenges of authenticity to provide solutions too.

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