

Web Presence:

Understanding persistent and interlinked content as the basis of identity formation and promotion through the contemporary Internet

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Matthew Allen, Internet Studies, Curtin University of Technology
m.allen@curtin.edu.au

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Web presence: a normative model for curriculum

Context

The context for my first efforts to develop some understanding of what is “web presence” on the contemporary Internet is provided by the following three aspects of the developing BA (Internet Communications) curriculum and related aspects of educating people as communicators and media workers. The context has three aspects:

1. Having run a BA (Internet Studies) for a decade now at Curtin, we are seeking to reform the degree to both sharpen its focus on ‘communicating’ via the Internet and to create curriculum that better meets contemporary network media needs. Web Presence will serve as a key organizing device for the curriculum across three years, in several units, which – while having many aspects – currently emphasizes the production by graduates of their own ‘web presence’ as nascent online creative and knowledge workers.
2. In concert with colleagues, I am working on ALTC-funded research into the pedagogic benefits of authentic assessment via web 2.0 technologies, primarily the directive to students to create and contribute real-world knowledge via and to the Internet for assessment; an authentic context for this work will be the students’ (and Internet Studies’ own) web presence
3. I am exploring, in the research also, the idea that learning is a sub-set of knowledge work, and thus as knowledge work becomes networked, so to must learning: the networking concept, amongst other things, mobilizes the idea of identifying oneself as a knowledge networker and enacting that work through a diverse online presence

which is both centred and decentred: web presence is the ‘knowledge-networking’ self on the Internet.

This context is important because it makes my initial presentation of web presence more didactic than it might, in the end, need or turn out to be. Teaching – especially in courses that have an applied focus - requires, I think, a subtle mix of opening up complexity for students – the critical moment beloved of academic commentary, but founded on the modeling of ways of acting that provide a way forward to achieve results, even if those results are not a critique of society, but the performance of social functions. Thus web presence, at the moment, is more of a normative model for particular kinds of communicative, knowledge-forming action, rather than a thorough-going analysis. It has purpose, which requires the repression of doubt or alternatives.

What was web presence? (or what web presence is *not*)

Before delineating web presence as I am developing it, what are some of the ways which we might think of that term which, in my view, do *not* accurately or effectively meet the needs of the kind of online presence emerging and necessary at the moment.

1. Web presence is not the ‘home page’, or the singular, central ‘locus’ on the web (think here of metaphors such as homesteading whose insistence on spatial occupancy speaks to the long-forgotten frontier times of the net). Web presence is not ‘where I am’ as a unique location jostling alongside so many others for browser interaction; a shingle hung alongside others for users to encounter and thus ‘enter’. That said, the homepage remains, in an analog form, one of the aspects of web presence as we will see.
2. Web presence is not (just) the maintenance care and feeding of a blog – whose purpose is similar to a homepage (and indeed has largely replaced it, for most users – this is why geocities doesn’t matter, but blogger.com does). In particular web presence is not about establishing a blog, or similar, and utilizing automated technologies to drive content *to* that site through feeds; nor is it really concerned with driving traffic to that single site, of getting one’s ‘oeuvre’ up the google rankings.

3. Web presence is not participating in one, several or many social media / social networking services though of course the profiling, communicating and content production implicit in such services is intimately part of an overall web presence

I think these three ‘ what web presence is not’ comments mark out the historical development of individual users’ engagement with the web as a place to present themselves, outside of the channels of co-present communication which have probably been more significant in identity terms over the years (MUDS, IRC and so on). The 1990s was about ‘home pages’ and the early 2000s was about ‘blogs’, and in each case the goal was to create a single place whose quality, content and interaction with other sites would draw attention to the single site, as a destination, an end point in the searching process. More recently, this kind of online being is now performed not through my space...but via MYspace and Facebook and so on, though the individual pages which form *from* the lifework done through such services still remain as singular analogues of the homepage.

So, in this model, what is it?

First, some context concerning knowledge work

We now take for granted the networked basis for contemporary society – drawing on such canonical early sources as Castells, theorising what we do by reference variously to the rhizomatic thinking of Deleuze or the sociological reformation of Actor Network Theory, and always conscious of the very real difference ‘networks’ have been shown to make to everyday life (for example, Benkler’s *Wealth of Networks*). We are busy connecting, being nodes, social networking, thinking, talking and analysing the world as if networks were well known and understood things. Of course they are not. And the context for my interest in web presence is a concern to appreciate better, to find a way think about what happens when knowledge work become networked work, when ‘doing knowledge’ is now about circulating ideas in creative collaborations with others both human and computer in a network. To put it another way, one of the consequences of increasingly visible, interlinked and readily available networks of knowledge is that knowledge networkers – the people in the network – also become a key part of the overall networking process. In this networking process, we are both fragments of knowledge and creativity dispersed across the web in networked fashion; and we are the originators, commentators, and recipients of those fragments. The knowledge-working self has a curious presence inside and through all of the linked artefacts and processes of knowledge work in networks.

I am developing a concept of web presence to make sense of how knowledge and knowledgeable people all combine to form the 'network',. Web presence, put simply, is the total 'presence' that an individual has across all places and processes of the World Wide Web. It is both a presence in the sense of being there, online, and also a presentation of the self in the sense of performing identity (or one of a person's identities) in the context of the interlinking of activities and content which are identified with that person. Web presence emerges, in one way, through knowledge networking activities (with a very broad definition of knowledge, admittedly), but also, knowledge networking depends on that presence, for presentation of who one is and does builds the capacity to become part of knowledgeable networks. I should also add that, for some people, web presence is the online component of the lives they lead - the living out of certain aspects of their everyday experiences via computer mediated environments.

There are three main elements to a 'web presence' that someone might maintain and develop: core, extended and linked. All three add up to a totality of web presence. Such a presence does not necessarily align completely or exactly with all aspects of a person's identity, but does represent a significant component of 'who they are' and 'what they do' online. I will describe these in personal terms, since it is essential to maintain awareness of the link between presence and identity.

1. My **core web presence** is the single place at which I put most of the important material that forms my presence on the web. It is my site, controlled by me, and mainly authored by me, though some people's CWP will include the ability for others to comment and add. It is probably best thought of as being a new way to describe the idea of having a 'home page' - a home on the Internet - which so dominated 1990s web discourse. It will be aligned with the identity of 'me', at least so far as I establish an identity for that presence. This site is, by definition, singular. While my presence may be distributed over many sites, in many ways, to have a 'web presence' demands this central reference point.
2. My **extended web presence** involves the sites that I also have significant control over and which contain material largely generated by my own activities, or activities with which I am closely associated. Crucial to this group of sites is capacity I have to control and manage the content of them. Anything which passes from me into

another's control when web published does not belong in this component of web presence (it is linked). Self-evidently, the whole purpose of thinking about 'core' and 'extended' presence is that there are significant hypertextual linkages between the two. These other sites may include quite a bit of 'identifying' information but would not of themselves clearly identify and present 'me' without the links back to a core presence.

3. **Linked web presence** consists in all of my contributions and activities at all the places where, though not controlled by me, there is some element of my online presence. These are 'linked' in the conceptual sense that these sites are actually part of someone else's core or extended web presence, not mine; they are also linked in the more technical sense that a good core web presence should link outwards to most of them.

Ultimately, the purpose of thinking about what we do online as a 'web presence' is to distinguish all of what I do, across several – perhaps many – knowledge networks such that it is all about me, as a knowledge networker. A web presence links – through its owner – all of those knowledge networks. A single knowledge network will contain links to many different web presences, large or small, of all those loosely or closely connected to that network. Web 2.0 makes this concept viable and significant, because a person no longer is 'online' at a single place, but distributed through several networks of interconnecting content, activities all loosely associated with knowledge. This is a fundamental change from the time 'before' Web 2.0.

I should add that I am still unclear as to where in this triptych the activities of services such as Twitter and Facebook fit; part of me wants to 'assimilate' them into the model (and they probably will be – for the model's simplicity enables them to be ascribed as follows – our content on our own pages in such services are extended presence; our content on other pages is linked presence). Another part of me – the old 1990s part – sees them perhaps as forms of communication which are the enacting of the network linkages in web presence, rather than being part of it. I have no answer at the moment. I guess it all depends on what one means by 'the web'.

So, now, key operational features

Let me sketch out three points which are, either, key operational features of web presence or, perhaps realistically, the two didactic conclusions which students might need to learn through this model.

1. Web presence is normatively *distributed* presence. The reason why it is unlike homepages, blogs (as usually understood), and the ‘my page’ effect of social networking sites, is that, even with one of those core components, presence is actually maintained, understood and – exploited – by others and the self more through the extent and the linkage. How extended (which can also imply extensive) a presence is, and the degree to which it involves linked engagement with other web presence create the conditions for successful management of a web presence for the purposes of building reputation, creative opportunity, and the like. While dependent on the core to *fix* the identity of the knowledge worker, extent and linkage produce the difference by which web presence as a concept comes to make sense for contemporary internet communications
2. Web presence is about relationships which are embodied in it. Presence is networking: dividing and distributing the ‘whole’ of the self online enacts network connections between ideas, their purposes, the contexts and their creators – thus, if the hyperlink always fails, to some extent, because it doesn’t explicate inherently the why, who, and when of an incipient knowledge connection, web presence attempts to explicitly build in the possibilities of recovering and using context, purpose, and the like, especially for the purpose of building reputation and generating *considered* attention and purposive use of the contents of a web presence, as well as the conditions for interlinking web presences in fruitful ways.

In conclusion

Web presence as I have described it is a normative model for more or less autonomous online knowledge workers to use that

- Presents the self constituted by performing knowledge networking, while distributing that self across the web
- Generates reputation, attention and association through that distribution, while not diffusing identity

- Creates the conditions for knowledge networking.

Obviously, these activities go on, regardless of what we call them; but to teach students how to do them effectively, and to do it mindful of purpose and outcome, web presence seems to offer something for us in Internet Studies. Ultimately, I think, it turns the 'core' of online presence into something thinner, less substantial and less of a destination that current models of building a profile online via a blog or homepage equivalent; instead the core web presence becomes a gateway which people can traverse as they move through the network of knowledge which is an individual's online life; if the Internet tends to fragment identity, by distributing its artefacts; core web presence fixes that identity to an extent, while it still extends and links profitably: web presence is, therefore, an enactment of the networked identity which is both here and there, at home and away, all at once.

Web Presence and understanding Identity

Identity has been traditionally considered from two perspectives by scholars of the Internet, either as a general condition or phenomenon of networks, or as a specific practice to be performed, in various ways, through network technologies. In the first case, Castells for example wrote of the way that identity operates in his network society by concentrating on the emergence of legitimising, resistance and project identities, all of which are the network society's response to the changes in spatio-temporal organisation brought on by timeless time and the space of flows. As Barney puts it: "identity is ... an energetic dialectical force opposing the dislocating dynamics of the network society" (Barney, 145). Identity, while never stable in itself, becomes in the hands of such broader social theory, a part of the process of either continuity or change for each individual in a world of rapid and constant transformation. In the second case, many scholars have explored the play of identity which is enabled by the Internet: the capacity to create a self who is not like the self normally inhabited and presented to the world. Turkle, most famously, considered the playing with identity possible in online worlds, as well as the manner in which computers and other technologies (in most cases not networked) provided children with a form of engagement with others and the reflected self that promoted "fluid and emergent conceptions of self and life" (Cyberculture reader, 52). Perhaps the difference between the two is the degree to which networked computing is seen as either a challenge against the authentic actualisation of the self, or an opportunity for activities which make the self sensible in ways that are positive for individuals. In some conceptions of identity, the Internet and its many variations and applications are the most direct expression of forces which lie beyond the control of individuals and which, in classic structural terms, 'make' the identities which people are permitted or encouraged to occupy and which become the sites of resistance to the politics of capitalism and other hegemonies. In others, grounded far more positively in observations that are acutely local, and not general, the Internet affords, through its spaces for play and creation, spaces for identity play and identity creation which are satisfying in and of themselves (though not without hazards, missteps, and failures brought on by the disjuncture between the online and offline spaces).

Neither of these alternatives seems to me to serve the contemporary needs of analysis of identity, primarily because the reference points for them are the intellectual concerns emerging from a time before the Internet. Scholars of the Internet in earlier times, when the Internet was a relatively new and unexplored social phenomenon, were particularly curious

about its capacity to sustain or permit very different experiences of identity than were then thought to be possible in a world of physical bodies and co-present interactions. This interest in identity was well placed, for clearly the experience of the Internet in its earlier, more textual and less publicly visible, incarnation was about identity play; identity formation; and indeed the quest for identity difference. The affordances of the medium were relatively thin in terms of expectations of creating and maintaining a consistent and clear identity - for most users; for those who did seek out this act of self-creation, the medium required rather more time than it does now and no little skill. But, on balance, I look back on the scholarship of Internet identity in the 1990s and wonder about the motivations for this work, and the presumptions that generated the critical readings (for, in truth, there was only limited empirical work on these questions). They seem to me to reflect the coming together of important intellectual projects and concerns which tell us more about the state of humanities scholarship at that time, and are perhaps less revealing about the Internet as it was being experienced.

At this time, for most scholars of human social behaviour and cultural meaning, identity was the fetish object – it had, to a large extent, replaced work as the most important element of critical human inquiry, reflecting the growing disillusion of scholars with an overemphasis on economic foundations, the widespread impact of the linguistic turn in philosophy, and perhaps too the changing nature of society in which the real political battles in Western society and elsewhere concerned the struggle for autonomy in the production of an authentic, socially accepted and equal self, rather than the struggle for the ownership of the means of material production. Within this general state of scholarship, there was particular emphasis emerging on the question of the body, and its dual role as the material pre-condition of identity work and discursive outcome of that work; there was growing interest in virtual reality and simulation (in the 1980s) because of the radical alterity between the made, invented and plastic worlds of virtuality and the fixed reality which they appeared to mimic (Benedikt); and of course, from scholar such as Turkle, there was a growing curiosity about what happens when humans interact with computers from a social and psychological standpoint.

As I move towards some new ways of theorising identity, using the idea of web presence, I want to draw on two ideas which I think reframe the Internet and our experiences of it within the current sensibilities of participatory media culture.

First, let us consider the notion of surveillance as a component of identity formation. Foucault's work on identity, particularly as it relates to how people come to be 'subjects' – to have subjectivity – is very conscious of the relationship between identity and visibility. Surveillance is, for Foucault, a regime that forcefully produces the subject through surveillance both by others and the growing expectation, or even presumption, of self-monitoring to achieve the same ends: the subject emerging for a person in their consciousness of how to behave under the reproving and controlling social gaze. This social gaze is built into the environment – from Bentham's model prison to its contemporary workday equivalent, the open-plan office (Jensen, p.58 – identity in the age of new economy; it is brought to life through a cultural sensibility – from Orwell's all-seeing telescreen in 1984 to its contemporary equivalent, the CCTV cameras which cluster in our cities; and it is most surreptitiously looking at us through computing use, as our work and social life leaves data trails which create the new data-surveilled subjects of contemporary life (Poster reference).

Obviously, in contemporary web culture, surveillance is profoundly important. Such ideas do, however, need to be updated. For the most significant act relating to identity through web presence is not the self-checking of one's behaviour and its moderation or regulation towards norms of what proper identity might be. Rather the primary, originating act is the making visible of the self in the first place, the willing embrace of the glare of publicity. This is not new – artists and writers have long constituted themselves in this way; but what is new – amid a welter of user-generated content – is the capacity for more and more people, more and more insistently, to publicise themselves and their affairs.

This is not identity play of the kind common to us through reporting and analysis of the 1990s. It is not pretending to be a different gender in chat; nor creating alternative identities in fancy-themed MUDS (though such activities are still very common). It is far too bound up in the living of life – there is no alterity to negotiate, no stepping between online and offline (even which stitching those two domains together, earlier Internet use still culturally required us to think in this dichotomy). Contemporary identity work online is not a deliberate act, but a consequence of inhabiting a world mediated by the Internet, and characterised by the dominance in media culture of the quest for publicity. If, in former times, we might have looked to the fact that most people were members of an audience, or various audiences, and sought to discern the effects for their sense of self from that condition, now I think we need to understand how people's identities are bound up in the search for an

audience: surveillance is not something that happens to make us who we are, so much as the condition we seek out so as to enable us to be who we are. The Internet is no longer a place in which to play with identity, but a field of view, like those cast by the surveillance cameras in our cities, imposed on our lives by the fact that living the life now involves traversing the net, just as we cannot help but walk in the city streets under the lens of the camera. We willingly do this, for the rewards which being seen provide.

The second point I would like to make draws on Bolter and Grusovin's work from 1999 on remediation. In one of the most important sections of this sophisticated work, they discuss "the presence of the self" and how remediation occurs for the self. Drawing on philosophy Cavell, they argue that a key component in self-expression is the desire for presentness - what Cavell described as "not exactly a conviction of the world's presence to us, but of our presence to it" B & G ask "why is this ... hypermediated self [networked self] necessary at all?" The desire for immediacy would appear to be fulfilled by the transparent technologies of straight photography, live television and ...immersive computer graphics. Such transparent technologies, however, cannot satisfy that desire because they do not succeed in fully denying mediation." Thus, as B&G conclude, if we cannot deny mediation - which we can't "when media are as much a part of our world as any other natural and technical objects" - then the sense of 'presence' in the world, of being "immediately present to oneself" can be obtained by being in the presence of media - of becoming and inhabiting the processes of mediation which stand between objects and our reception of them.

So, linking these two points together, not only is the audience that is sought through online activity and self-promotion other people, whose surveillance of our lives we require for them to be identifiable, but also, we are our own audience. Web presence is a state of being seen, in diverse and remote places, and also a state of seeing that we are seen. The particular affordance of networked computing is the capacity to see ourselves and be ourselves at the same time.