

IDENTITY, VERACITY, AND OWNERSHIP ON THE INTERNET

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ABSTRACT

Since the inception of the Internet in the late 1960's, technological advances in the field of Information Communications Technology have created an ever expanding digital arena for the development of human innovation, expression, communication and interaction. However, the creation and use of this vast network of knowledge, whether it be for commercial, entertainment or creative purposes, has also produced it's own set of problems and challenges. This paper discusses the topics of veracity, identity and ownership and the impact of these fundamental issues in emerging digital technologies. A full copy of this paper together with a comprehensive list of references can be obtained via email by request from the authors.

INTRODUCTION

Privacy and security, in relation to both the digital or the more traditional physical worlds, are fundamental issues for physical and mental well being. But with increasing reports of identity theft, internet banking fraud, illegal pirating and a multitude of money making schemes, the questions of exactly who or what organization we are interacting with (identity), the truth and reliability of the information that is being provided (veracity) and who has the right to the ownership of that information are questions that each individual user has the right to have answered.

IDENTITY

Establishing An Internet Identity

Many philosophers and authors have long argued that the advances in digital technology can be an opportunity for mankind to avoid the inequalities and problems of the more traditional material world. Chat rooms for example can provide an ideal environment for research into online identity and are a focus of activity for a huge cross section of society who use ICT's. For instance, they can be perceived by teens as a safer environment for exploring emerging sexuality than the real world, where they can develop creative strategies to exchange identity information with their peers [11] and developing trust from mutual self-disclosure in online friendships [3].

Digital Predation

Given the ease with which any individual can assume any identity in the digital environment it is inevitable that many Internet users will fall victim to digital predators. There are many studies into childrens use of the internet which suggest areas for further research into the opportunities and dangers that the interaction presents to children and young people [6]. Children are not the only victims however and a study into the problems and dangers prevalent when female internet users accessed health and human service sites on the Internet showed that there were a number of reasons why such uncontrolled internet use could prove harmful [2] including the possibility of encountering cyberstalkers or receiving misinformation.

Digital Privacy

The question of stripping away a users online anonymity, is becoming much more of a legal issue and some courts are now establishing guidelines as to when that anonymity should be surrendered, which is of course of particular importance to Internet Service Providers (ISPs). At the commercial level VeriSign, indicated in their February 2004 report [12] that site hacks, online fraud and identity theft were rising dramatically. The company also reported that those countries which ranked highest in percentage of fraud per transaction were predominantly third world nations although it is believed that this may be just a reflection of poorly maintained software and systems.

Extremist Recruitment

The powers of mass communication through use of the internet makes online collective action an effective alternative to offline action, although it may also slightly alter the motives underlying such action [10]. The more sinister aspect of this online activity can be seen where extremist groups are using the Internet as an effective method for recruiting new members, but as conversion and indoctrination are present in most human societies perhaps it is only natural that we should also find them in the new digital society using this medium to achieve their ends.

Identity Theft

Ownership is a fundamental aspect of our established society structures and is one of the most powerful anchors in our mental understanding of self and our relation to the world around us. It is no surprise then that one of the most disturbing and popular crimes within the digital world is that of identity theft. Whether simply using a stolen credit card number or the more complex theft of an individuals total online identity, the problems associated with this crime are not just financial, the victims of identity theft also suffering damage to their reputations and emotional stress [5].

VERACITY

Truth Or Misinformation?

The World Wide Web is a rapidly evolving decentralized set of relationships or links with no established mechanism to establish the worth or authority for any idea or fact. A search for a set word or item on two different occasions is likely to produce different results and there is no accepted method to tell the valuable from the disposable, the true from the false. Various studies have been undertaken to investigate this problem of misinformation on the internet, for example in respect of health information for physical illnesses like cancer [7] and also for mental illness [8]. It is also possible for information to be faked and the user directed to a copy of the web page they are seeking (web spoofing) [13] [14] or be deceived into giving out personal information in response to a fraudulent email (phishing) [4].

OWNERSHIP

There is a less well recognized secondary effect to these rapid advances in digital communication, in that it is now much more complex to establish and maintain the ownership of intellectual ideas within the digital environment. Whenever a person uses the internet for actions of creativity or learning, for example students accessing web sites for educational materials or designers looking for inspiration, problems are increasingly emerging with regard to recognising and defining intellectual ownership.

CONCLUSIONS

The problems and challenges we have highlighted above are merely an overview of the issues relating to Identity, Veracity and Ownership in the digital age. Of the three, the most fundamental of these aspects is that of identity, our own and the identity of those we interact with in the digital arena. Without identity, we cannot build trust, we cannot develop meaningful online relationships and we become vulnerable and open to abuse by digital predators. Without identity, we cannot prove ownership of an intellectual idea, or without knowing the identity of its source, trust that a website is all that it seems. One solution might be to establish an identity management framework as suggested in recent studies [1] which would then also impact positively in the other areas we have discussed.

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