

## FROM IDENTITY TO IDENTIFICATION: FIXATING THE FRAGMENTED SELF.

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Cultural and social theories of identity have in common that they assume both individual and collective identities to be multiple rather than single, to be dynamic rather than static, and to be volatile rather than consistent. In addition, they propose that identity is something that we *do*, rather than something that we *are*. Most research in this area has been informed by these axioms, and as a result we know quite a bit about how different groups and individuals, in varying contexts, use different cultural means to perform their identities, both for themselves and for others. Recent innovations in these theories, particularly those coming from queer studies and addressing the notion of intersectionality, have further intensified the understanding of identity as a relatively flexible outcome of specific social and cultural acts. All of this work has been articulated with a wider acknowledgement of 'diversity' as a desirable goal for social and cultural policy, not only to improve the quality of public services like education, broadcasting or health care, but also as a necessary element of commercial innovation and organisational value.

While most identity theories have acknowledged the structural and discursive constraints that enclose diversity, there has been less attention for recent forces that actively work against multiplicity and towards the fixation of single identities. The current volume is meant to bring these forces out in the open, and make them part of our theories and research about identity.<sup>i</sup> I will first present three widely different examples to clarify tendencies

towards such univocality. Then I will show how these cases are part of a new 'field' of *identity management*, which is usually understood as emerging from post 9/11 challenges, and from the growing economic weight of online transactions. However, identity management as it is currently evolving, guided, in first instance, by clear state and corporate interests, also needs to be seen as inevitably producing *cultural* tensions and conflicts around identity.

### **Three examples**

In 1993 *The New Yorker* published a cartoon by Peter Steiner showing two friendly dogs in front of a computer, with the one saying to the other: 'On the internet nobody knows you are a dog'. The cartoon captured the then current hopes about the internet as a space where the confines of individual and social identities could be left behind, and where new and creative modes of anonymous interaction would transgress off-line gender, ethnic and other divisions between people. Such sentiment was also expressed by serious academics, like Sherry Turkle of the MIT. Her book *Life on the Screen* (1995) offered an in-depth analysis of how (then still textual) online experiences enabled people to experiment and play with identities, and helped them 'to develop models of psychological well-being that are in a meaningful sense postmodern: they admit multiplicity and flexibility' (p.263). Nowadays, however, the anonymity of the internet and the construction of online personas that do not reflect offline identities have been reconstructed as 'risk factors' of internet use (cf. Van Zoonen, 2011). Governments, schools, parents and other concerned parties now standardly warn against online imposters, bullying and identity theft, and social network sites like Facebook or Google+ have policies requiring users to register with their real names and data, and prevent them from having more than one account. A version of The New Yorker cartoon

that covers the 2013 situation, could still have the same caption, but would likely show more dangerous, even deadly dogs, evoking the meaning of 'dog' as the bad guy.

It is not only in the context of internet use that once celebrated discourses of multiplicity have been annihilated by constructions of duplicity. In the post 9/11 mindset that pervades Europe and the United States, the multiple identities of migrants, and of Muslims in particular have been reconstructed as possibly suspect. In the US this has taken the form of a revival of American patriotism, in Europe it has expressed itself in the proclamation of the death of multiculturalism. Governments across Europe are now exerting considerable pressure on their old and new citizens to identify more clearly with their 'own' nation's history and values. The French, for instance, launched a controversial national debate in 2009 asking 'what does it mean to be French' resulting often in discussions about the possible 'Frenchness' of Muslims, and in proposals to fly the flag in French schools and to stage official rituals for the acknowledgement of French citizens. An Italian parliamentary committee proposed in early 2012 to make the national anthem compulsory in primary schools, therewith upsetting both the separatist North- and South Italians and the German-speaking inhabitants of Trentino. The previous Dutch government has proposed legislation that enforces singular Dutch citizenship: migrants to the Netherlands will no longer be allowed to keep the passport of their country of origin, Dutch expats requesting foreign citizenship will lose their Dutch passport.

Another example, this one of a more 'popular' (as in 'by the people') desire to fixate identities, can be found in the many genres of reality television. Audience research about the 'mother' of all reality TV, *Big Brother*, has shown that a key appeal of the program was to discuss whether candidates were 'themselves' or 'fake'. In addition, BB-candidates across

the globe would talk among each other about how they felt they could or could not 'be themselves' in the house (cf. Van Zoonen and Aslama, 2006), therewith assuming the existence of one real self that *is* rather than a constructed multiple self that *does*, as identity theory would say. The notion of such a real self that needs to be found and shown, is exaggerated, paradoxically, in make-over reality programs. In these programs, participants and their hosts invariably engage in conversations about doing the make-over for oneself and not for others, or as Heyes (2007: 21) says about the standard narrative in cosmetic surgery reality: 'An authentic personality of great moral beauty must be brought out of the body that fails adequately to reflect it. Thus, in this context, cosmetic surgery is less about becoming beautiful, and more about *becoming oneself*' (italics added-LvZ). The appearance of 'authenticity' as a key asset and value in contemporary western societies has been noted in other fields as well, for instance in tourism, commerce, politics and celebrity culture. A critical perspective on authenticity will include that it is an ascribed rather than an innate or essential quality. Authenticity is in the eye of the beholder and as the discussions among reality TV audiences testify, it is part of a negotiation and not an easily and objectively observable 'fact'. The more important point in this context, however, is that the importance of the concept of authenticity points to a wider popular desire to identify 'real selves' that are true, single and consistent (see also Dubrofsky, 2007).

### **Univocality and control**

The three examples show how commercial, governmental and cultural forces actively work against multiple and performative experiences and practices of identity. The current requirements for passport pictures may be seen as the metonymical expression of such forces. The normal everyday expressive face, with its smiles, nods, and tilts, with its glasses,

colouring and covering has to be brought back to its bare features: no smiles, mouth closed, head uncovered, eyes visible, head not tilted, shoulders straight. These are all presented primarily as technical requirements to enable the officers of border control and - more importantly - facial recognition software to authenticate the person carrying the passport. Yet, the implicit cultural message of such stripped faces is unmistakable: there is one true original self that can be recognized and objectively authenticated.

Most other forms of 'identity management', the *en vogue* term for a diversity of mechanisms to authenticate individuals in specific contexts, demonstrate a similar tendency towards single and stable identities. Magnet and Rodgers (2011), for instance, have shown how the full body scans used for border and other forms of security screening are rather insensitive to bodies not conforming to standard abilities, sizes and gender. Such technologies actively construct disabled, oversized or transgender bodies as deviant and suspect. In practical terms this leads to these individuals being selected more often for further screening, in cultural terms it implies a return to a discourse of normalized dichotomous identities, female *or* male, able *or* disabled and nothing in between. To paraphrase Magnet and Rodgers (2012: 111), full body scans mercilessly turn bodies inside out in a search to discover 'the truth' of an individual identity. Further evidence of how identity management technologies tend to undermine the gains of understanding identities as multiple, comes from other forms of authentication. A recent documentary series by UK Channel Four, about technological advances in the House of the Future, shows how the father in the family has difficulty using the computer-controlled thumb-print door entry system, because his thumb is worn by decades of manual labour. More generally, academic research has shown that the fingerprint recognition does not perform equally for, for instance rural and urban populations (Puri et al., 2010). Likewise, various research in the US

has shown how the particular state requirements of voter-ID laws negatively affect the turnout of African-Americans and other minorities (Sobel and Smith, 2009).

Many of these issues have been heavily debated within a civil liberties and privacy framework, with George Orwell's 1984 and Bentham's Panopticon as the regularly evoked popular and metaphoric short cuts to the risks and problems of identity management. In these discussions, the classic concern is with governments violating their citizens' privacy and human rights, through surveillance, registration or data base linking. However, as Lyon (2007) has covered extensively, the everyday life worlds of, among others, work, consumption, leisure and health are also pervaded by surveillance technologies and the infringement of privacy. As a result, the civil liberties agenda has expanded to these sectors but also to the increasing relations between these spheres of surveillance and the threats of 'federated identity management', i.e. the interlinkage of databases and authentication procedures across and within domains. Google's recent change in privacy policy is a case in point: under the new regime Google says it will collect information from all its services (a.o. Gmail, YouTube, Google+) into a single account profile, in order 'to provide better services to all of our users – from figuring out basic stuff like which language you speak, to more complex things like which ads you'll find most useful or the people who matter most to you online'. Among the many people and groups raising privacy concerns, were – paradoxically – some 40 US state Attorneys General, representatives of a government that itself is regularly accused of breaching privacy and civil liberties.

### **Social sorting and consumption**

Yet, while privacy and civil liberties issues dominate these controversies, there are authors who claim that such discourse offers a limited understanding of the risks of identity

management. Lyon (2007: 115), for instance, argues that 'the kinds of issues that are raised by urban data profiling, CRM [customer relationship management – LvZ] and security operations go far beyond the narrow confines of 'privacy' and 'data protection'.' He analyses in detail how various technologies and processes of identity management place people in social categories that are decisive for their everyday choices and opportunities: self-evident is the categorization of certain young men as likely offenders, but customer profiling may lead to price and perk advantages and disadvantages for specific customers, geographical profiling is of direct relevance to the maintenance or abolition of local stores and services, and health screening unevenly affects access to health services. Lyon concludes, therefore, that *social sorting* is as big a risk of identity management as the breach of privacy and the erosion of civil liberties is. It is in this context, in particular, that identity management also undermines the understanding of identity as multiple, not only because it puts people in certain fixed categories, but also because, of necessity, it needs to identify people as belonging either in one, or in the other category, but definitely not in more than one. It is telling that Google under its new privacy regime not only requests the usage of real names for registration but also allows itself to 'replace past names associated with your Google Account so that you are represented consistently across all our services'.<sup>ii</sup>

The Google case is only the most brutal expression of a wider movement towards *customer experience marketing* (CEM). In a converged online/offline commercial environment such a process entails the ability to engage with a customer across a plethora of channels and 'touch points', and thus requires a continuous tracking of a uniquely defined consuming entity. If successful, this does deliver all kinds of consumer pleasures: Amazon is usually mentioned as the company that has indeed managed to offer its customers an enhanced positive experience because of its continuous registration of personal data and preferences.

On the other hand, there are many examples of the rapidly increasing cross-channel advertising going wrong. Avid Facebook users are continuously baffled by the bespoke advertising showing up in the sponsored frame of their profile page, leading mostly to one of two reactions: 'how do they know I like this' versus 'why do they think I like this'? Both, however, cause consumer irritation and – predictably – Facebook users themselves have developed apps to remove such ads. Regardless of the success or failure of CEM procedures, and regardless of the fact that they become ever more detailed and reflective of our personal buying histories and preferences, as customers we are put into the all pervasive, but univocal identity of 'consumer'. Our multiplicity is recognized only as far as we have bought products or services expressing it.

### **Counterforces**

The field of identity management then, as it is currently emerging, is pervaded by structural tendencies towards control and single identities. However, as a 'field' in the sense that Bourdieu developed, as a set of social positions and actors sharing specific actions and activities, tensions and contradictions are inherent and inevitable. Bourdieu's field theory connects, in that sense, to Giddens' proposition about a 'dialectic of control', whereby all rules and regulations produce their own opposition. Control and univocality as dominant features of identity management thus will construct their own political and cultural resistance, as was already clear in the anti-ad Facebook apps mentioned above. Privacy and civil liberties activists have successfully built a political agenda and achieved considerable success, for instance, with the abolition of a UK identity card scheme and the rejection of a Dutch national electronic patient data, but also with mobilizing a support base that makes them a respected stakeholder for national and pan-national governmental consultations.

Such activism against the control dimension of identity management also has cultural counterparts. Urban surveillance systems across the world, for instance, have witnessed artists performing in front of their CCTV cameras, and facial recognition systems have been countered with makeup and hairstyles that prevent facial detection. The award winning design project *CV Dazzle*, in particular, was set up out of concern about surveillance and privacy, and a desire 'to show how we could adapt to occularcentric, surveillance-societies without retreating into anonymity, and, in doing so, celebrate style and augment privacy.'<sup>iii</sup>

There has been much less visible discussion of and opposition to the *single* identity that is assumed in most current technologies and practices of identity management. This may be because univocality is considered less of a problem in a cultural climate that prioritizes 'authenticity' and is obsessed with being *oneself*, which – indeed – assumes one instead of multiple selves. Apart from the cosmetic surgery make-over television programs mentioned earlier, there are many other popular trends that further suggest a hegemony of a single identity. The search for the inner self, for instance, has created an industry of spirituality that produces a wide variety of commodities and services to help this still growing group of seekers. Political, social and corporate elites are nowadays judged as much on their authenticity as on their competence: 'authentic leadership' is the latest buzzword in a host of management manuals, in which it is proclaimed that 'knowing your authentic self' is a prerequisite to good leadership. Parenting guides are full of good advice to parents to 'be true to themselves', but also to allow their children to be themselves. In the (popular) arts and culture domains, 'authenticity' is a key concept to mark artists that have remained 'true to themselves' or 'sincere' as opposed to those who have sold out to commercial interests and have become dupes of the culture industry. In his diverse writings about authenticity, the Italian philosopher Ferrara (1998) has analysed extensively how contemporary

obsessions with authenticity are a response to the postmodern fragmentation of identities.

While he suggests that philosophically it is entirely possible to articulate authenticity with fluid and multiple identities, he also acknowledges that the more popular deployment of the concept presupposes an essentialist understanding of the self as unified and stable.

In such a cultural climate, it may be unlikely that there will be strong forces opposing the construction of a single identity that is typical for the emerging technologies and practices of identity management. Yet, as Lyon (2007: 177) argues, 'when there is pressure towards finding single unique identifiers (...), the existence of multiple identities (...) is a constant challenge to the would-be hegemonic system'. Indeed, there are some occurrences of such opposition, most notably the successful mobilization of support for a change in the Australian passport. Since 2011 Australian citizens can choose male, female or X as their gender on their passport, with X the option for intersex people, and allowing transgender people to identify as male or female. The changes came about as a result of pressure from an Australian group advocating gender and human rights, claiming that the dichotomous male/female registration discriminates against transgender and intersex people.<sup>iv</sup> While the acknowledgement by the Australian government of a third sex seems a relatively straightforward change of policy, on a cultural level it also fundamentally undermines dichotomous gender discourse and works, therewith, in close alliance with the project of feminists and other progressive forces to undermine stable notions of gender and other essentialist categories (notwithstanding the inevitable follow-up question of why having to register gender on a passport at all).

The Australian case shows that - like privacy -, univocality needs to be recognized and constructed as a risk in current regimes of identity management, in order to develop more

desirable alternatives. Such a recognition forms the main legitimation for the particular angle of this special issue of Media, Culture and Society. The articles invited all critically address the tendency towards univocality in different systems and contexts of identity management. **Aaron Martin and Edgar Whitley** deconstruct the popular belief that biometric technologies enable the unique identification and authentication of individuals. **Miriam Lips** looks at current e-government policies fixate identities in ways that are contradictory to traditional notions of citizenship. Moving the discussion to the body as a location of identity and identity management, both **Shoshana Magnet** and **Katina Michael and MG Michael** explore whether and how medical technologies function as quartermasters, as it were, for future rigid developments in identity management.

With this collection of articles we feel we have contributed to constructing the single identity assumed in identity management as a social and cultural problem that needs to be solved. A further necessary step would be to search and select cases in which the multiplicity of identity is not only allowed at a discursive level, but also flexibly managed through technological institutional practices. The new Australian passport is one rare example thereof, and a further identification of other such 'good practices' would certainly help to break up the automatic univocality in current identity management. At present, the most likely sector where proposals and prototypes of such good practice will be found, is in the triangle of Technology, Entertainment and Design. The similarly called TED global network and the European PICNIC platform both offer talks, conferences, events and performances about innovations that are typified by user-centeredness, collaboration and openness. In fact, both bring together a wider movement of creative experimentation in which identity management issues also occur. At the PICNIC 2011 festival, for instance, UK hacktivist and artist Heath Bunting presented his 'identity bureau' in which he develops procedures for

people to construct a new legal identity based on legal documents, that can be passed on to someone else after it is no longer of use.<sup>v</sup> To illustrate with a not so arbitrary example: an academic commuting from Amsterdam to Loughborough to teach and do research would not have to go through the almost insurmountable hassle of acquiring a national insurance number, tax code, health care, pension rights and a bank account for non-residents, but could simply buy the identity that allows for all of that off the shelf of an identity bureau. Needless to say that Buntings 'expert system for identity mutation'<sup>vi</sup> could make him the object of UK and US governmental scrutiny because of the potential criminal and terrorist abuse they envision if Bunting's multiple identities would catch on. Such a security reflex, while understandable, prevents a more extensive exploration of safe and trustworthy multiple identity management systems that would satisfy the practical quandaries of some people's everyday lives, but – more importantly – acknowledge the cultural diversity and multiplicity that typify us.

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<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.google.com/policies/privacy/>, Last accessed March 15, 2012

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[http://www.core77.com/blog/core77\\_design\\_awards/core77\\_design\\_award\\_2011\\_cv\\_dazzle\\_student\\_winner\\_for\\_speculative\\_objectsconcepts\\_20115.asp](http://www.core77.com/blog/core77_design_awards/core77_design_award_2011_cv_dazzle_student_winner_for_speculative_objectsconcepts_20115.asp), last accessed August 28, 2012.

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.passports.gov.au/web/sexgenderapplicants.aspx>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.picnicnetwork.org/heath-bunting-1>, last accessed March 14, 2012.

<sup>vi</sup> <http://irational.org/cgi-bin/cv2/temp.pl>, last accessed March 16, 2012.