

March 19, 2012

Who Owns You Online

Your data is your digital replica but it may not be your own.



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March 19, 2012

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As dispassionate as it sounds, a person's data is their digital replica. Though there are thousands of traits that make someone unique, a binarily-coded identity is the only verifiable one, making it arguably the most lasting and meaningful. As the [singularity](#) gets nearer and nearer, technology could conceivably be responsible for the legal definition of

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personhood being extended, and therefore, the protection of our digital selves is of immediate concern.

Jotting down thoughts, speaking a few words, and just taking a drive are no longer ephemeral activities, they're defining ones.

"I think the format of [social media] makes sharing feel contagious and it normalizes a level of self-involvement and transmission of details that would previously have just been considered weird," says Ari Melber, [correspondent for The Nation](#).

How much control do we have over these pieces of ourselves, whether we've given them away freely or they've been snatched without our knowledge?

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No matter who is ultimately deemed the owner of data online, there's one thing that belongs to everyone and no one—reputation. It is completely in the eyes of the beholders and, perhaps no group knows this so much as over-scrutinized celebrities.

"Even with the greatest amount of control on one's profile, perception is still a variable no one can foresee," says Raphaël Aflalo, co-founder of celebrity brand reputation management company [My Love Affair](#). "In many cases and particularly for public figures of the entertainment world, there can be a great amount of distortion between the content provided by a celebrity on his own channels and his online identity as the public perceives it online."

Aflalo stresses that reputation extends beyond the boundaries of a celebrity's own brand. "A celebrity's online reputation is also widely connected to its possible partners," he says. "When it comes to picking the right partnering brands, whether for a sponsored post on Facebook or a 360-degree endorsement campaign, we have to make sure that the partnership makes sense and that the artist's online profile will not be harmed by a wrong choice of partner."

This blurring of the boundaries of online identity and its ownership has been extended to the not-so-famous by [employers](#) and university athletic departments. Teams and schools are nervous about putting the reputations of their multimillion dollar programs in the hands of college students. To head off hits they might take, some are hiring "defense" companies that monitor the social media use of their athletes, such as UDiligence, Varsity Monitor, and CentrixSocial.

Going beyond keeping track of what's already public, these companies have access to the students' accounts to assess what might harm a program's reputation if it got out. On UDiligence's [What We Find](#) page, a rotating banner displays NSFW images culled from the social networks of athletes identified by sport and conference at schools it says "are not yet" its clients. Adherence to a program's policy is often a requisite to play on the teams of schools that use the services. Players generally share basic information, "likes," photos, videos, events, check-ins (including those of friends), and details about family members and friends.

It might seem extreme, but consider that brands, which may have invested in how they're represented, also face the dilemma of a dual online identity.