
Between the Lines: Reevaluating the Online/Offline Binary

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Abstract

Scholarly debate within the HCI community has acknowledged that the concepts of "online" and "offline" are merely handy descriptors for different environments and contexts. However, when it comes to designing technologies, this binary is still frequently invoked. In this workshop, our goal is to address what issues arise when we invoke this binary uncritically, and how we can better understand people's everyday experiences of their on- and offline self-representations and interactions. When, how and why do people invoke or exploit notions of online versus offline? When does this notional 'seam' dissolve? We will articulate a broadened agenda for understanding behavior across contexts. We aim to continue and update discussions of on- and offline with a deeper focus on people's practices and experiences around the creation and maintenance of a sense of 'self' and identity and discuss designers' and developers' roles and responsibilities in enabling and supporting those practices.

Author Keywords

Identity; online; offline.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m: Miscellaneous.

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Introduction

Since the inception of the Internet, scholars have discussed and debated how people conduct themselves in “online” and “offline” contexts. A rich history, and a large body of work, tacitly or explicitly critiques this binary [3,7,9,20]. For some, these contexts blur significantly in terms of social connections and behaviors [18], while for others, online and offline worlds are kept conceptually and behaviorally distinct [2]. Central to the discussion are issues of social connection, identity formation and management, identity play and performance, privacy, anonymity, and safety [6,13].

Identity work in online contexts

Identity formation and management in online environments has been well studied. Turkle undertook early explorations of life being played out in digital worlds in *Life on the Screen* [18]. Building on her work, Subrahmanyam et al. looked at adolescents in online contexts and how they formulated identity, adjusted to sexuality, and established relationships [17]. In their survey of literature on social network sites, boyd and Ellison covered a variety of research on online identity, and described how technologies are often designed to encourage particular types of identity shaping [1]. Similarly, Marwick described the ways that social networking sites often do not account for contextualized identities, and instead privilege “authenticity” in online profiles [12].

Bullingham and Vasconcelos performed a study of bloggers and users of Second Life, incorporating Erving Goffman’s framework of front and back stage to explain how participants edit and present their identities. The authors note that study participants “...were keen to re-create their offline self on-line.” [2]. This stands in contrast to Turkle’s findings that young adults were

thrilled to be “someone else” entirely in online worlds, and to escape the troubles of their “real world” identities. While both of these findings ring true in their own way, more recent research has attempted to reconcile their differences. Farnham and Churchill [5] studied how people manage personal boundaries across various social technologies. The authors made a critical point when they highlighted the notion of “faceted identity.” Faceted identity is described as the way in which “people maintain social boundaries and show different facets or sides of their character according to the demands of the current social situation.” However, this does not necessarily lead to a split between online and offline personas. Instead, behavior and self-presentation is highly contextual, negotiated, and fluid as people move among different settings. The current workshop builds on this perspective.

We will begin to interrogate the different versions of self that manifest in different contexts, without reinforcing the online/offline binary. We approach this question in both a theoretical sense, and in a practical sense regarding our role as technology researchers, designers, and practitioners who care about identity formation and presentation.

Workshop Goals

This workshop convenes researchers and designers interested in discussing theories of “self,” with the goal of identifying and comparing various disciplinary modes of thought on the topic. We intend to:

- Identify commonalities across studies that juxtapose on- and offline environments, and think about how these serve as a resource for theory-building and design. Critical to this endeavor is establishing a set of terms and frameworks.

- Identify theories that help build our understanding of the self within HCI paradigms. Butler's concept of *performativity* and queer theory have been previously explored [10,19]. Additional theories to consider are Lorde's theory of difference [11], Crenshaw's theory of *intersectionality* [4], and Ingold's notion of *dwelling* [8].
- Develop a framework for researching practices of self-making and maintaining that acknowledge technology-mediated and non-mediated contexts, and the limitations of data gathered from each.
- Formulate an outline and plan for how to further develop this topic through a publication.

Issues to be Addressed

Interrogating the notion of identity. People are always managing identities, their experience and projection of self or selves, through a variety of means. However, conceptualizing identity—something that is amorphous, constantly changing, and complex—is a difficult task, particularly when we approach the issue from the perspective of researchers and designers of technology. As members of the CHI community, it behooves us to think about wide-ranging aspects of identity. For example, knowing how some actively and intentionally use social media and social networks during significant identity changes [13,14,15,16] such as gender transition [6] is a starting point to investigating how identity and social processes around expression of self shape and are shaped by people's actions with and through digital technologies and services. Recent outrage and the ensuing resolution regarding Facebook's temporary insistence of the use of "real names" (enforced in a policy that blocked users from using preferred names)

provides one starting point for discussion of identity and socio-technical systems.¹

Business Implications. Following on from the Facebook example, we will discuss why it is often easier to rely on the online/offline binary in business settings, and why it is challenging to design for effective identity management. Further, in this era of cloud computing and big data, in what ways and for what legal, profit-related and/or technical reasons are people enabled, constrained or restrained from managing digital representations of themselves?

Representation of Self. Another distinction that is often used in describing and theorizing identity is that of the physical self versus the mental, emotional, or social self. In conventional terms, the body is that aspect of the self that is represented offline, while the mind can be represented in both offline and online realms. Using the body as a subject, we will probe the relationship between physical representation in the "real world" and representation of the body online.

Methods. We will address what existing methods within HCI, Pervasive and Ubiquitous Computing, Data Sciences, and Anthropology can be drawn on to expressly avoid the online/offline binary, while still studying peoples' technology use in various contexts and for various purposes. What new methods are needed to more deeply investigate people's experiences of and management strategies around the expression and projection of self and selves?

¹<http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/09/22/dear-facebook-this-is-why-your-new-real-name-policy-hurts-queers-like-me/>

Design. We will expound upon how crossing between “the lines” should or can affect design. How can we tangibly apply what we learn in this workshop?

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