

Reading C

Identities under construction

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What is a personal home page?

In this account of personal home pages I will describe some of the key features of this genre and some of the functions that it seems to serve, in particular in relation to authorial identity practices. I will be referring both to my own online research and to pertinent observations by other researchers

Personal home pages can be regarded as those that are primarily about the person who produced them. Such pages address the question, 'Who Am I?' (which, as the central question of adolescence, lends the genre a particular— though not exclusive – potency for youthful authors). While the fundamental technical difference between the medium of speech and that of writing is that writing is *automatically recorded*, web pages introduce another key feature: what is written on a web page (and stored on a web-server) is *automatically published* on a global scale. Web pages that are 'personal' are simultaneously public. It has been contended by media theorists such as Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) that the adoption of new media seems to involve a shifting or blurring of the boundaries of *public* and *private*. Without adopting a stance of hard technological determinism, we may perceive such a shift in the new genre of the personal home page on the World Wide Web. The very name '*home page*' is revealing in this context. John Seabrook comments that 'a home in the real world is, among other things, a way of keeping the world out ... An on-line home, on the other hand, is a little hole you drill in the wall of your real home to let the world in' (Seabrook, 1995; 1997).

Asynchronous mass communication

Websites are frequently labelled as 'under construction'. However, the construction involved is more than the construction of the sites : personal home pages can also be seen as reflecting the construction of their makers' identities. The Web is a medium with some marked differences from other modes for the 'presentation of self in everyday life' (Goffman, 1969). It is 'one of the first venues where individuals can construct portrayals of themselves using information rather than consumer goods as their palette' (Erickson, 1996). The semiotic possibilities are unconstrained by material considerations – though they remain constrained by the user's access to and competence in the use of the relevant connotative stylistic and communicational codes (Chandler, 2001).. Before the advent of Web in 1993, 'one-to-many' communication as a mode of self-presentation has been a tool of the privileged few. Web pages offer the potential for mass communication in a medium which, despite far from universal access, is incalculably more widely-accessible for self-presentation ('24/7') than conventional print publishing and the traditional mass media.

Like mass media texts and printed books, web pages are a form of *asynchronous* communication, unlike *synchronous* modes of communication such as the telephone, internet chatrooms and face-to-face interaction, which involve 'real-time' interaction. And yet it is interesting that critics often compare web pages (unfavourably) to face-

to-face (and typically one-to-one) interaction. Steven Rubio complains: ‘When you visit my home page, you don’t get to meet me, but only my presentation of myself’ (Rubio, 1996; cf. Sandbothe, 1996). There is, however, nothing new about this feeling of textual autonomy in print (Chandler, 1995). ‘Virtual selves’ have existed ever since people have been publishing their writing. Plato noted this feature of the technology of books in the *Phaedrus* and *Seventh Letter*: people can encounter your ideas in the form of your ‘textual self’ (your article or book) without meeting you (a notion that alarmed Plato, since he privileged face-to-face dialogue). What is new about such virtual selves is that they have never before been available to so many people.

Comparisons of home pages with face-to-face interaction are misleading. Home pages offer readers none of the fleeting and situated particularity of face-to-face interactions, such as facial expressions, vocal cues, body language – posture, gestures and non-verbal mannerisms in general. The asynchronous nature of home page presentations of self makes them more comparable to textual forms (such as letters – and indeed more private forms such as diaries) than to speech interaction (such as face-to-face or telephone conversations). Also unlike interpersonal communication, the potential mass audience of home pages makes them distinctively different from traditional forms of self-presentation, making them more comparable to mass media (such as published books, which for the purposes of self-presentation are available only to a privileged few). The personal home page is a *self-publishing* medium in both senses of the term: being able to produce webpages is like owning your own printing press, and what some might call ‘self-advertisement’ seems to be a key function. A male seventeen-year-old candidly admitted that in the case of his home page, ‘the purpose of the site is to advertise me’ (Chandler and Roberts-Young, 2000, p. 81).

Personal home pages may be more like texts on paper than face-to-face interaction but a comparison with paper-bound forms can be carried too far. Firstly, unlike printed media, web pages are *audio-visual* media (although, at least at present, web pages tend to feature *text* more than conventional audio-visual media have done - much as any new medium seems initially to imitate earlier forms). More fundamentally, however, web pages are at least potentially much more *dynamic* than print – although not all home page authors exploit these possibilities. An oft-mentioned feature of this is that they can be linked to each other in complex ways using *hypertext*, in contrast to what some have seen as the linear nature of print. But perhaps most dramatically personal home pages have none of the *fixity* of print (I came across one British home page entitled ‘He changes his webpages more often than his underpants’!). An eight-year-old homepage author reported that she ‘kept adding things when I think of them’. The Web is a medium ideally adapted to the dynamic purposes of identity maintenance. Home pages can be continually revised, making them closer in this sense to the provisional, informal and personal status of notes and drafts rather than to the formal and public status of published text. The weblog may be updated more regularly (*Jung 2003*), but whereas blogs involve revision by accretion, personal home pages are potentially more radically revisionist (obscuring their own evolution).

Bricolage

While personal home pages make public the personal, they also make personal the public, since home page authors engage in *bricolage* (Lévi-Strauss, 1974, p. 21), adopting and adapting borrowed material from the public domain of the Web in the process of fashioning personal and public identities. Graphics, sounds, text and the code used to generate a particular format are often copied or adapted from other

people's pages. Indeed, the virtual and digital nature of the Web as a medium supports the re-use in *bricolage* of existing materials since the model may be abstracted limitlessly while remaining untouched in the site where the *bricoleur* found it.

Bricolage involves more than simply the appropriation of materials: it also involves the construction of the *bricoleur's* identity (Lévi-Strauss *ibid.*; Jenkins, 1992). The values of the *bricoleur* are reflected in the assumptions underlying specific inclusions, allusions, omissions, adaptations and arrangements. Eclectic borrowing may sometimes seem to generate a postmodern mixture of styles rather than a distinctively 'personal' style, but individuality may nevertheless 'leak' through the ways authors conform with or diverge from dominant stylistic conventions (Miller, 1995; Miller and Arnold, 2001, p. 77).

This brief account may seem to suggest that *bricolage* is a rational, conscious and deliberate practice. But it is seldom like this. Indeed, *bricolage* lends itself to what may be experienced by the *bricoleur* as 'discovery'. One teenage author reported that she got her ideas 'by playing around with pictures etc.' (Chandler and Roberts-Young 2000 p84). This is very much a 'dialogue with materials'. Especially in a virtual medium one may reselect and rearrange elements until a pattern emerges which seems to satisfy the constraints of the task and the current purposes of the user. Indeed, no version of the resulting text need be regarded as final – completion may be endlessly deferred in the medium in which everything is always 'under construction'. Nor should *bricolage* be regarded as a practice of unconstrained individual creativity. The notion of the author's re-use of existing materials should indeed go some way to undermine romantic notions of creativity and originality. The *bricoleur's* strategies are constrained not only by pragmatic considerations such as suitability-to-purpose and readiness-to-hand but by the experience and competence of the individual in selecting and using 'appropriate' materials. While the social shaping of such practices may not often be visible to the user, subcultures generate conventions about materials and uses which are deemed appropriate for their members. The habitual use of certain signifying practices is indeed a mark of membership of particular subcultural groups. When an academic friend showed me his web pages for the first time some years ago he drew my attention to the pinkish-purple background and asked me what significance I attached to this. I confessed that it signified nothing in particular to me, and he then announced that it signified his gay identity (to which the *content* of the pages did not allude at all).

Figure 1: The Bricoleur's Web Kit

Types of activity

Inclusion. What different ideas and topics are included?

Allusion. What ideas and topics are being referred to?

Omission. What's left unsaid or is noticeable by its absence?

Adaptation. How are materials and ideas added to or altered?

Arrangement. How is everything organized on the page?

Types of content

personal statistics and biographical details;

interests, likes and dislikes;
ideas, values, beliefs and causes;
friends, acquaintances and personal icons (e.g. celebrities).

Types of structure

written text;
graphics – whether still or moving – and other artwork;
sound and/or video (e.g. associated webcams);
short screenfuls to long scrolls of text;
single page or many interconnected pages;
separate windows or frames;
an access counter (i.e. number of people who've visited);
a guestbook;
links for other pages (e.g. a 'cool links' section);
an email button or chat button.

(adapted from my own list by Thurlow *et al.*, 2004, p. 194)

The building blocks of webpage identity

The *content* of personal home pages can be recognised as drawing on a palette of conventional paradigmatic elements, most notably: personal statistics or biographical details; interests, likes and dislikes; ideas, values, beliefs and causes; and friends, acquaintances and personal 'icons' (see Figure 1). Creating a personal home page can be seen as building a virtual identity insofar as it flags topics, stances and people regarded by the author as significant (as well as what may sometimes either be 'notable by its absence' or 'go without saying'). Sherry Turkle notes that in a home page, 'One's identity emerges from whom one knows, one's associations and connections' (Turkle, 1996a, p. 258). There's a well-known web aphorism: 'show me your links and I'll tell you who you are'. Where such links are to the pages of friends or to those who share one's interests this can be seen as involving the construction of a kind of 'virtual community' by home page authors (Rheingold, 1995).

Although home pages authors choose what to reveal about themselves in the formal *content* of their pages, the *form* in which they do so may involve both intentional and unintentional disclosures (as well as sometimes leading to misinterpretation). In an on-line interview I conducted (19/9/96), Iain, a British home page author, wrote: 'The way I code my page is very reflective of the way I work and live – sort of ordered and trying to keep structure to it. Some pages I have seen obviously reflect arty-type personalities. I look at mine and think yep, this says science-type person.' The *process* of composition is not visible to the reader, of course, but in a study by other researchers, Angela (30) noted her acute awareness of issues of impact: 'I made an outline of what I wanted to convey on the site and the possible content...Then I thought about the connotations associated with each piece.....I was meticulous, I'm an accountant, you know' (Schau and Gilly 2003 p395). On the most mundane level, a self-authored page may show that the author used a standard authoring package or

wrote the code directly. Spelling, punctuation and grammatical idiosyncrasies tend to glare at the literate reader in beautifully-displayed and illuminated text on the screen.

Constructing identities

At least as much as in writing on paper (Chandler, 1995, chapter 4), constructing a personal home page can be seen as shaping not only the materials but also (in part through manipulating the various materials) one's thoughts and feelings. In an on-line interview, Tristan, a British home page author, commented regarding his pages: 'It helps to define who I am. Before I start to look at/write about something then I'm often not sure what my feelings are, but after having done so, I can at least have more of an idea'. David, another Briton, told me that 'despite being a private person, I decided to publish what I wrote on my Home Page. I was the intended audience, as strange as it sounds. Somehow, publishing my feelings helped validate them for myself' (e-mail 27/2/98). While this may be a familiar function for writing with conventional media, the Web makes this process very public indeed. Where home pages perform such functions for their authors, the Web seems to be leading to what might formerly have been private writing (such as in a personal diary) being laid before the eyes of the world. Some home page authors are extraordinarily frank and revealing about themselves compared to what might ordinarily expect in face-to-face interaction with strangers. However, we should not exaggerate the post-modernity of such a phenomenon. As long ago as 1580, as another experimental genre and identity tool (the personal essay) was being forged, Montaigne had remarked wryly that 'many things that I would not confess to any one in particular, I deliver to the publick; and send my best friends to a bookseller's shop, there to inform themselves concerning my most secret thoughts' (Montaigne, 1580, Bk. III, 9, in Cotton's translation).

Some critics have expressed an anxiety that Web pages may lead people to manipulate their public identities more than has been possible with traditional media. Howard Rheingold has argued that 'the authenticity of relationships [and identities] is always in question in cyberspace, because of the masking and distancing of the medium, in a way that it is not in question in real life' (Rheingold n.d.). Clearly, different media and modes of communication facilitate and inhibit different patterns of behaviour. We do not present ourselves in any kind of writing in the same way as we do in face-to-face interaction. Even related online genres such as the personal home page and the weblog offer different affordances and constraints for self-presentation: for instance, blogs do not erase earlier standpoints as personal home pages do—a feature that led one commentator to claim that weblogs enable 'a more "truthful" presentation of self' (Jung, 2003, p. 5

For some, personal home pages may offer a 'rehearsal' area. In his on-line interview with me Iain wrote: 'You can get things right and project a different "you" to the world— sort of, "Hey, this is who I am!"... I think the important thing is you can only show the bits of you want and hide the bad bits you would get rid of if you could' (19/9/96). A British home page author denied this in his own case: 'Mine is confessional. Try to show warts and all' (David, e-mail 27/2/98). I have encountered a number of examples of the use of unconnected web pages (often on different websites) to present oneself in different ways, notably amongst home page authors who are gay but not 'out'. Not having to reveal some facets of oneself has particular advantages for those from marginalised groups. James, a gay British Internet user, told me in an on-line interview that having a home page meant that he was out in cyberspace long before being out in daily life, and found it useful to say to people,

‘Oh, didn’t you know?’, feeling able to treat the issue as old news. Similarly, for Rob in London, his web page provided ‘a very easy way for me to come out. I could say, “check out my web site” and knew they’d come across the gay part. More importantly, they could find out in my own positive terms and think about it before reacting’ (e-mail 1/6/97). Home pages evidently enable some people ‘to present the selves that may not otherwise be displayed in “real life”’ (Cheung, 2000, p. 50).

Adopting a notion from Sherry Turkle (p. 96a, 260; 1996c, p. 173), I would suggest that home pages are objects which enable their authors to think about their identity. They can be seen as one of Foucault’s ‘technologies of the self’ which allow us to reflect on and transform the way we think of and present ourselves. Some people clearly feel ‘more themselves’ on the Internet than they do in RL. We may acknowledge this phenomenological perspective even if we question the unitary notion of the self to which it alludes. Some people feel better able to articulate their thoughts, feelings and personalities in writing than in face-to-face interaction (Chandler, 1995, p. 46).

Many of the criticisms of presence on the Internet seem to have advanced little beyond Plato’s fears about the technology of writing. Critics who suggest that someone’s on-line persona may not represent what the author is ‘really’ like could be seen as phonocentric, privileging, in the romantic tradition, spoken, face-to-face interaction as somehow more ‘real’. Without surrendering to the excesses of postmodernist rhetoric or hard technological determinism, we may acknowledge that for some authors at least, personal home pages offer a sense of empowerment that could help us both to question romantic assumptions about ‘authenticity’ and to reassess the sociality of writing.

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Author's Note

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<http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/webident.html>. Note that some of the online documents listed are no longer available.