

REFLECTIONS

By Robert W. Lucky

Who Are You?

In July 1993, a cartoon by Peter Steiner appeared in *The New Yorker* magazine that has since become familiar to almost every technologist in the world. Two dogs are sitting at a computer, and one is saying, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.”

When this cartoon first appeared, the Internet was relatively unknown to the public, and any mention of it in the popular media was cause for some small celebration. This cartoon, however, transcended mere publicity; it was almost immediately recognized as being deeply insightful and prescient. We might even ask in retrospect: Why was it considered funny?

I don’t know if there are any dogs on the Internet today. I have no way of telling, which is a story in itself. I do know, though, that there is certainly a menagerie of creatures, sentient and otherwise, that inhabit this vast virtual universe of cyberspace. There are people pretending to be someone else, people pretending to be you, machines pretending to be people, Web sites pretending to be other Web sites, and artificial creations that stalk online games. There may even be a dog or two.

I was recently moderating a panel of Internet pioneers, discussing what was needed for the “next Internet.” The need for strong authentication came up, as did the difficulty of overlaying this capability on the existing and future networks. Some of the pioneers expressed regret that they had not built it into the original design. Nevertheless, someone offered the thought that if the original Internet had had strong authentication, perhaps it never would have grown to be the universal network it is today. Aye, there’s the rub. Maybe we can’t have it both ways.

I may be the only person in the world who feels this way, but when I click on a Web site that asks me to register—even though it says it’s free—I leave immediately and go somewhere else. I’m not sure if this is because of the simple inconvenience or because I don’t want to reveal who I am. Maybe I just want to be nobody.

Then there are people who accept e-mail only from senders on an authorized list. They reject the first e-mail message you send to them, but they give you the chance to get on their acceptance list by answering some simple question proving you’re not a machine or a spammer. But again, I can’t be bothered. I find someone else to correspond with.



In all this confusion and obfuscation about identity, the question arises: On the Internet, who are you? As one of my friends recently commented, you leave an electronic slime trail behind you as you creep through cyberspace. Who does Google think you are? How about Flickr, YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, and so forth? Whether you like it or not, you are creating a résumé on the Net—one that will stay with you for a long time.

In the old days, people carefully crafted résumés that would help them with prospective employers. There were courses you could take

or consultants you could hire to craft one that would accentuate all the positives and minimize any negatives. In the technical world, we sometimes had the feeling that we were our résumés. Any new responsibility would be gauged on the basis of how it would look on paper.

Today a prospective employer may ignore your résumé and simply Google you. Now you’re at the mercy of what other people and what various computer algorithms think of you. All those carefully prepared exaggerations on your résumé are put in a certain perspective. Which version of your life, after all, is the truth?

No one I know seems to like what the Internet thinks of them. It seems that there is a haphazard collection of vignettes that lack any coherence or soul. “But that’s not me!” you protest. Too bad, but that may be how the world sees you.

There are some sites that monitor your appearance on the Net and allow you to comment on and rebut what has been written about you. Of course, this depends on someone going to this particular site to see your rebuttal. Then there is your own home page, which like your paper résumé, can present your own picture to the world—if, of course, anyone ever goes there.

The problem with the Internet is that it doesn’t forget. So while the whole question of identity is still evolving, we’re already creating our identities and our résumés for the future. And the question is: Who are you? ■

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