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## “Identity” in Publishing: The New Currency

*[Modern forms of publishing include writing blogs and posting diverse content on social media. In this context, how do library and/or information services relate to questions of identity in the 21st century?]*

The fall of 2001 was a time of crisis in the analogue world. Society witnessed the World Trade Center attacks, the spectre of cultural collision, and a rapid economic downturn. The digital world was not spared. With the storied dot-com stock market peaking in March 2000 (Lowenstein, 2004), the following couple of years saw the dot-com disappearance. This era ushered in a whole new way of using the web; users began connecting more closely with services and with one another. (O’Reilly, 2005) Once a plaything, the internet steadily transformed into a utility. *Hyperhistorical* is how Luciano Floridi, Philosopher of Information at the University of Oxford, describes our current era which had its seeds in these years. Its definition: humans would not be able to function without the daily use of ICT’s (information and communication technologies). (Floridi, 2012) The numbers are clear: a solid 70% of the GDP in the markets of the G7 countries are information-related, depending on intangible goods. (Kilduff, 2020) A Pew Research Survey in 2016 found that 72% of Americans own a smartphone. (Elhai, et al., 2017) *Hyperhistorical* is our physical/mental/financial and logistical reality. Within this infosphere, the new currency is not money nor content, reputation or character, but the idea of “identity”.

The emergence of “identity” has deep repercussions for publishing and library science. What started with Gutenberg and Luther in the second millenium is coming into fruition now in the third millennium with blogs, vlogs, tweets, posts, podcasts, on-line manifestos, and self-published books. Web publishing keeps on pushing past its saturation point. The internet is Marshall McLullahan writ large: “that in the long run a medium’s content matters less than the medium itself in influencing how we think and act. As our window onto the world, and onto ourselves, a popular medium molds what we see and how we see it— and eventually, if we use it enough, it changes who we are, as individuals and as a society.” (Carr, 2010, page 11)

In this paper I will extend the metaphor of how “identity” in publishing is treated as a financial currency. The irony is that extreme behaviours at each end of the spectrum, either hoarding this currency or spending it lavishly, often results in the most individual success. Out of the two, the hoarding or being wise with one’s identity has the bigger pay-off. It is the underexposure or concealment of one’s true identity, I argue, that arouses the most curiosity.

With vastly more people spending time online, there has been an increase in audience size. When the world was smaller, having and showing character would entail “showing up” for the divine or one’s family. Not too long ago, reputation was the currency that mattered: how one “showed up” for his town, community, or career networks. In 2020, revealing identity is how one “shows up” for the world, and its currency is rising. The danger, however, is that self-identity becomes fragile and dependent on feedback in this crowded ecosystem. (Gupta, Kim, Zheng, 2011)

Attribute	Definition	Era	Audience
Character	What one is made of; goodness and wickedness can be seen through one’s actions, efforts and personal decisions.	Popularity: Ancient Greeks through the Victorian Age.	Pleases family, pleases the divine.
Reputation	How others see one; an outgrowth of displays of character or lack thereof.	Still present today but started in the Pre-Victorian era and peaked in the 1990s.	Pleases town, social circles, and career networks..
Identity	"Identity" is multifaceted. It first starts with self-presentation in the infosphere but also encompasses such areas as security, travel, and banking.	The catch word since late 1990s through today. The salience around identity has only grown since the technological revolution, rise in terrorism, and explosion of international travel.	Pleases the infosphere, the authorities, and the world at large.

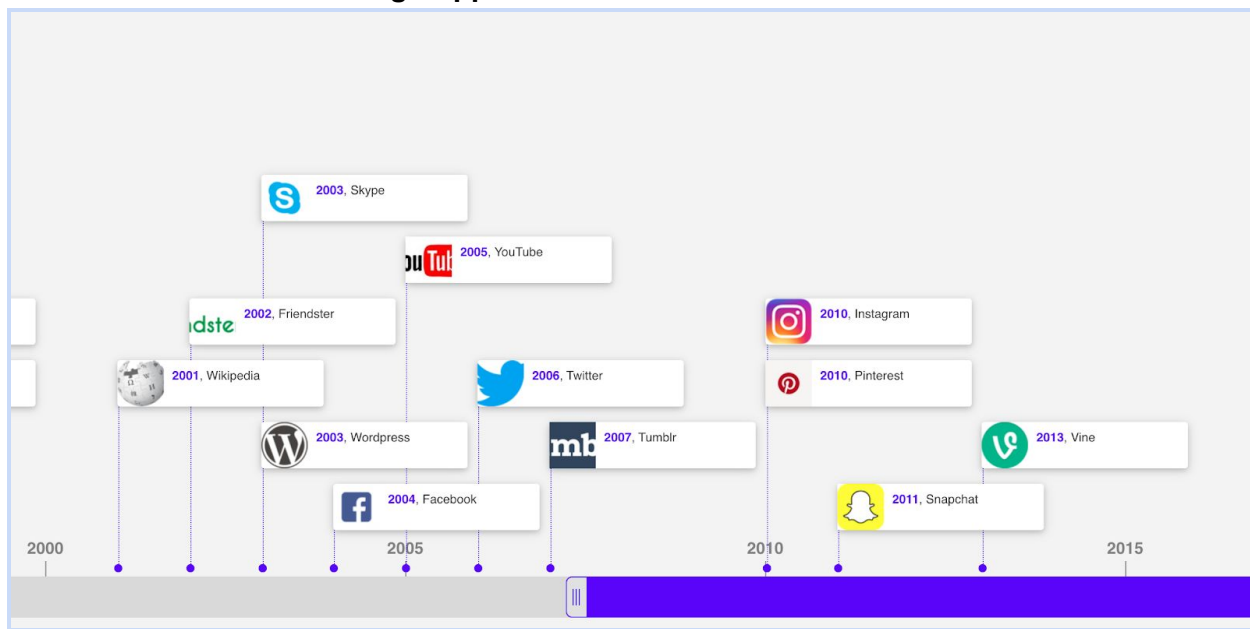
The secret to the rising currency of identity in the 21st century: identity seems to pay itself interest (think of all the celebrity cookbooks). Identity is the new face of a creator in a world of 7 billion potential readers or internet users. Dishonour can stick to one’s identity but one remedy is to just create another on-line identity. There are also clean-up services now when somebody pens something foolish or inflammatory and is publicly shamed. (Ronson, 2012) Unless of course, one has become rich and famous *based on* the inflammatory things one has published.

*Everybody’s a Curator (A Thousand Ways to Spend Your Currency): Instagram Influencers, YouTube Stars, Pinterest Princess and Patreon Success Stories*

Editors at *Time Magazine* stunned their readership in late December 2006 with their choice for Person of the Year. (Grossman, 2006) The selection that year was “You”, complete

with a thin vinyl mirror on its cover. Many of the comments on-line and in print the following week griped that America had lost its way and had become even more self-centered and myopic. In their defense, *Time* editors were just responding to market trends and the latest habits of the Information Age.

### A Timeline of Information Age Applications



<https://www.timetoast.com/timelines/1562037>

Created by Danielle Marb

*Time Magazine's* selection was not that unexpected when we look at the (no pun intended) timeline above. In quick succession, a number of online media applications entered the market and Americans set out on a voyage of self-documentation. Facebook was born in 2004; YouTube in 2005; Twitter in 2006. But it was the rise of Wordpress in 2003 preceded by the more important but less popular Blogger in 1999 that really got the hyperlinks-sharing economy off the ground. User-generated material via blogs was easier to create, share, and distribute (I should know: I had created four of them with varying degrees of engagement). Blogs became so commonplace that many journalists who spent thousands of dollars on a postgraduate education feared that these media usurpers would destroy their livelihoods by essentially writing for free. The fight was over the future of journalistic business models. (O'Reilly, 2005) Overnight, anyone with a spirited opinion, it seemed, was able to broadcast it from her self-curated cubbyhole without ever changing from her pajamas. Web 2.0 required a whole new idea of learned behaviour along with a jargon that has grown around it.

There is still, in some quarters, an allegiance "to more traditional professional norms of objectivity, neutrality and civic-mindedness" and many journalists have a way of concealing their personal hobbies and authentic opinions on social media. (Bossio and Sacco, 2016) This is known as a *transitional identity*, one that separates "work" publishing sites (like LinkedIn,

Twitter, and Blogger) from social media sites meant for family and friends (Facebook and Instagram for instance). (Bossio and Sacco, 2016) Journalists who take a more casual approach show many more inner thoughts and domestic routines, blending the personal with the professional. This tack is known as having a *social identity* (Bossio and Sacco, 2016) and seems to be the preferred option as trends in publishing become less formal, at least in the U.S.

Entertainment media is how some critics might describe blogging's offspring. It is true that in just a few short years, blogs gave way to vlogs (essentially video logs), YouTube Channels, Instagram stories, and other upgraded formats of self-expression. Influence via a *celebrity identity* seemed to rule supreme.

There has been one happy development: the stupendous growth of audio books and podcasts. Podcasts are web radio shows that fill the whole spectrum of human interest: sports, hobbies, history, how-to-guides, astrology, and lots of true crime. For more hard-hitting news, there is no shortage of journalists and political commentators who are making highly intelligent, entertaining, and addictive podcast episodes. These journalists include individuals who employ either a *transitional identity* or a *social identity*. (Bossio and Sacco, 2016) The success of these podcasts may get a boost if someone is famous in the first place but success is much more likely if the host has fun ideas, good guests, and solid topics. A euphonic voice often helps. The next wave of identity's role in publishing won't be found in publishing at all but in broadcasting.

### *Co-operative Ventures and Corporate Brands (Credit Unions): Wikipedia, Blogging Communities, The Economist, Reddit*

Not all authors or even journalists are in it for the glory. A few companies produce works in which the individual contributors are never revealed. In fact anonymity is *the* editorial policy in one of the Anglosphere's most prestigious weekly publications.

*The Economist* magazine has retained the idea of one editorial voice since its inception in 1843. That voice is clear: no discernible author by-lines. (The Economist, 2013) This policy and tradition refutes the contemporary zeitgeist of the superstar author or journalist taking precedence over the writing or information. (Arrese, 2020) Anonymity or not, *The Economist* has a legacy of solid reporting and maintains a measured tone and a fair, smart, editorial voice. Doing away with by-lines rids the paper of vices and platforms for self-praise. (Arrese, 2020) The central reason for the continued tradition of anonymity was (and is) editorial consistency. (Arrese, 2020) Readers take comfort in the familiar formula.

There are not many literary ventures remaining like *The Economist* that have an esprit de corps. The magazine has certainly attracted a fair amount of writing from outside contributors: from business people in London who want to pitch progressive fiscal ideas to freelancers in Communist regimes who are prohibited from publishing in their home countries. (Arrese, 2020) The incentive for staff journalists, aside from a regular paycheck, is to be part of a strong, intelligent brand. "Accordingly, articles are often the work of *The Economist's* hive mind, rather than of a single author. The main reason for anonymity, however, is a belief that what is written is more important than who writes it." (The Economist, 2013)

*Reddit*, a much younger and less formal forum in the infosphere, differs greatly from *The Economist*. One trait they do share is a vigorous defense of their respective anonymity policies. But while *The Economist* erases individual authors for the sake of one particular editorial voice, *Reddit* disguises users and authors in a much more anarchic environment. Officially, *Reddit* users are pseudonymous as they are free to create edgy nicknames. In essence though, users are anonymous as there are no restrictions on the number of accounts one can create.

Because of this veil of safety, *Reddit* gained notoriety for the number of hate groups posting graffiti and hate speech. With enough pressure from the “free-speech” counter-movements along the likes of #MeToo, leaders at *Reddit*, in 2015, had to make some tough decisions. That year, *Reddit* executives shut down several unsavory subreddits that violated their new anti-harassment policy. (Chandrasekharan, 2017) Users were not happy and started behaving extremely in other corners of the site. Redditors can ban any members who run afoul of community guidelines but it is quick and easy for a member to create a new user account and escape punishment. Troll-like behaviour still proliferates though on the many subreddits that remain unrestricted. (Kligo, et al., 2018)

Researchers found that harassment *had been* curbed on *Reddit* with their new 2015 anti-harassment policy. (Chandrasekharan, 2017) Exiled members of *Reddit* or those aggrieved with the site for losing its “free speech” gravitas began to flock to *Vote*, an even more radical website that is part of “bizarro networks which brand themselves as strongholds for free speech and in practice are often used for hate speech”. (Marantz, 2018, 4:40)

Looking at both *Reddit* and *The Economist*, we can also attribute these news outfits as having “identities” of their own. The marketing term, brand, does not do either one justice.

*Reddit*, as an identity, wears many hats. It is the third most visited website in the United States and is a.) a social networking site, b.) a social news site, and c.) a social news aggregator. (Kligo, et al., 2018) Although extremely successful, *Reddit* still retains its punk-rock ethos of radical democracy and anarchy. In 2018, *The New Yorker* stated, “To its devotees, *Reddit* feels proudly untamed, one of the last Internet giants to resist homogeneity.” (Marantz, 2018, 1:05)

The identity of *The Economist*, meanwhile, is capitalist-friendly but also fair-minded. New media mores, however, are nudging *The Economist* to rethink some of its practices. The anonymity principle has loosened somewhat as *The Economist* is first to admit; the magazine started using a journalist’s initials in bylines on the magazine’s blog posts. Journalists of *The Economist* are also *fully* identified on video and audio episodes.

*Keeping the Mystery (Pseudonymous Donors): Elena Ferrante, Silence DoGood, Zine Authors, Banksy, JK Rowling*

If identity is the new currency, then there are some groups and individuals who try to conceal how much they are worth.

One of the earliest employers of a pseudonym was none other than Benjamin Franklin, the savant credited with many inventions and diplomatic feats in early American history and who is considered one of the country’s founding fathers. *Silence DoGood* became one of Benjamin

Franklin's first pen names. It was "her" name that Franklin wrote under after he had tried multiple times to submit work to the *The New-England Courant*, a newspaper that his brother ran and which young Franklin served as a poorly-treated apprentice. (Waldstreicher, 2011)

Franklin wrote more than a dozen pieces for his brother's journal, the first blossoming of his literary gift in print. Even though other contributors' flamboyance and antiestablishment stance stimulated him, he surpassed many of them in boldness, irony, humor, and theatrical effect, a remarkable feat for a lad at sixteen. His Silence Dogood essays, totaling fourteen in number published between April 2 and October 8, 1722, were compelling illustrations of his mind and literary imagination during this period. (Waldstreicher, 2011, page 15)

Constantly on the violent end of his older brother's mood swings, Franklin did have one solace: he fell in love with publishing, the industry he was learning to master. Ben was also eager to see his own writings in print but his brother proved unwilling. So contrary to the tradition of the times, Franklin performed a counter-gender switch to pose as a wise, older widow named Silence DoGood. She would frequently submit letters to the *New-England Courant*, airing her opinions on society, religion, and respectability all in a witty hand. DoGood's identity was so convincing that a few male readers grew smitten; some sent the *Courant* letters asking for her hand in marriage.

Western literary history is dotted with writers taking on pseudonyms. In the 18th and 19th history, these were often talented female writers posing as men. The gendered power dynamics in publishing at that time relegated women writers to fiction that was considered frivolous. British female writers like the Bronte sisters and Mary Ann Evans (whose pen name was George Eliot) all tried to pass as men in order to get their manuscripts published. In the 21st century, this ploy has disappeared with the exception of JK Rowling. The best-selling author took a male pseudonym, Robert Galbraith, in order to delineate her late adult crime fiction genre writing from her popular young adult fantasy fiction genre writing. (Galbraith, 2020)

The most noteworthy pseudonymous donor to literary fiction of the 21st century has had a slow burn success. The question around her identity became somewhat of a literary scandal. Even after being outed (supposedly), the author is still writing under her pseudonym and her growing fanclub would not have it any other way.

Elena Ferrante is best known for her four-book series, *The Neapolitan Novels*, about two young girls who grow up in post-war Naples trying to survive a misogynistic culture. Ferrante's writing is a deep psychological dive into the mind of an intelligent Italian woman, light years ahead of the traditional Madonna-whore dichotomy.

An investigative reporter, a fellow Italian writer who is male, shocked the literary world by printing an expose into the supposedly true identity of Ferrante. Claudio Gatti did so by looking through her financial and real estate records. It was investigative reporting without a moral compass. Defenders of Ferrante called Gatti's actions snooping, even stalking, and that it was similar to stripping a woman of all her clothes in public. The maneuvers seemed all the more public in that it happened in Italy and bore hints of what Ferrante wrote reflectively about; the

patriarchal, chauvinist, and violent reality of Neapolitan, and by extension, Italian culture. “Gatti’s story landed a month before Donald Trump defeated Hillary Clinton, when the righteous anger of women was very much in the air,” a writer in *The Atlantic* asserted, “and some Anglophone readers saw the attempted unmasking as a violation; a few even compared it to an act of sexual violence.” (Donadio, 2018)

The violation around Ferrante’s chosen name and identity felt deplorable and her fans were apoplectic and rushed to her defense. Other writers, including Jeannette Winterson, stood fiercely by Ferrante, calling out Gatti for being offended at the success of a writer who became successful on her own terms. (Winterson, 2016) Ferrante, of course, has and had male literary admirers but none were so vehemently insulted by “the unmasking” as much as her female fans.

The whole debacle, giving it thought, showed the power and sheer numbers of female fiction fans and how identity politics has real-world repercussions. Several studies and surveys have shown that women are more avid readers than men overall and more likely to read fiction. One study found that women are up to 2.3 times more likely to have read a novel in the past year. (Tepper, 2000)<sup>1</sup>. Women are also nearly *four times* more likely to be heavy readers, which is defined as reading more than fifty titles a year. (Ballard, 2018)<sup>2</sup>] The last laugh may be Ferrante herself as “My Brilliant Friend” has recently been adapted into a beautifully-filmed HBO series. Her acclaim sees no sign of abating.

To keep with our metaphor, not only is Ferrante a pseudonymous donor to the pool of publishing and literature in the 21st century but she is at the center of the argument over how much the currency of identity is worth.

### *Conclusion: More Performative than Ever (Conspicuous Consumption)*

Journalism and media-making continues to be an empowering way of literary expression with Web 2.0 and in the 21st century. Millions of people around the world are putting their brands and their faces onto the pages of history. As discussed, our society has seen blogging give way to even more performative reporting and infotainment via vlogs, YouTube, Instagram stories, podcasts, and Twitter posts. The content is the marketing and the marketing is the content. Identity, whether one celebrates it unclothed or conceals it like a hermit in the woods, is a hot currency. Journalists, freelancers and novelists are finding that maintaining identity is a way of social purchase which will not fade anytime soon.

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<sup>1</sup> The latest findings show that men, at least in the US, do read newspapers more regularly along with nonfiction titles such as history and biography.

<sup>2</sup> Literacy surveys and research was surprisingly thin and out-of-date. This is one of my only current and comprehensive ones; nearly 9,000 US adults were questioned on these literacy measures on Aug 10, 2018.

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