



Identity 2.0 | The Xpragmatic View



The Xpragmatic View #97
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Together with the increasing success of social websites, an increasing quantity of personal information becomes visible on the web. In general, this is non-confidential information that people have provided while creating their profile on these social websites. So, not a big issue? Unfortunately, such information is not locked within these profiles, but grows into your new identity on the web. Who are you, according to the Internet?

Eggs

Yesterday, we received an e-mail message from an unknown sender. The subject was "eggs".

Of course, in these times of spam pollution, we often receive rather weird e-mail messages. However, this message was different.

First, the message was in Dutch and in general, we do receive very little spam messages written in Dutch. Also, the e-mail address of the sender was "normal". It was not a computer-generated spam address, but just a plain `john.doe@some-real-company` address.

Moreover, this some-real-company reference made that we were quite sure that this was simply a mistake and not some malicious attempt. Indeed, we know that a more notorious namesake of us works at that company.

Marc
Don't forget my eggs
<first name>

That was the complete message. Undoubtedly, a message that carries a lot of human drama. However, it wasn't very clear to us what our notorious namesake had to do with eggs.

We know, it is nearly Easter, a holiday whereby, over here in Belgium, the kids receive chocolate eggs in some mysterious way. However, as far as we know, our notorious namesake is not yet a *chocolatier*.

Anyway, this was an intriguing message and a good starting point for some reflections about our identity on the Internet.

Your identity, according to the Internet

Of course, sending an e-mail to the wrong person is not exceptional. We assume, all of us already made the same mistake.

However, there are more important identity related issues on the Internet.

These days, nearly everyone is member of one or more social networks. This means that you have a "profile" on each of these sites containing some personal information. Most of this is non-confidential information that you are willing to share with the rest of the world.

Unfortunately, most of us are unaware of the fact that such information is not contained within such social network, but starts living its own life on the Internet.

Indeed, a new generation of social websites has emerged that are nothing less than search engines for personal information on the web.

Examples of such sites include [Spock](#) and [Zoominfo](#), but there are many more. On such sites, you can simply enter the name of a person and they will search the Internet for information regarding this individual.

Most of this information is found in the personal profiles on the well-known social websites such as [LinkedIn](#), [Xing](#), etc. However, there are many more places on the web where you leave certain traces, most often without knowing that they will pop up later on in the search results of such sites.

Now, should this be a big concern?

Not really. As said, most of this information is non-confidential and user-provided, so this should be OK. Nevertheless, there are some side effects.

As an example: when you search our name via Zoominfo, you will find our name in relation to Xpragma, which is of course OK, but also in relation to two other companies, Peer Publishing and Enterprise Application Integration (the latter is not a company but a website on that theme). We never had any relationship with these companies, so we assume that they listed some of our old publications on their website.

Overall, this is not too bad a result. It is not perfect, a bit outdated, but still reasonably accurate. Apparently, our notorious *chocolatier* is not a member of social websites, so there was no mixture of profiles, It was all about "just us".

However, when you will do the test for yourself, you might be surprised about some of the results and some of the traces you have left on the web.

Now, in reality, the fact that such information can be found is not the biggest concern. The real issue is that ***you cannot really control it.***

You don't have control

Very likely, you will want to remove some of these references. In our case, EAI is no longer a focus area, so we would prefer removing such references. Unfortunately, you will find that it is an uphill battle doing so.

Most of these websites allow you adjusting and correcting your own profile. However, the web has a long-lasting memory and the same old results will pop up somewhere else. It simply is impossible to correct or remove all the erroneous information or the data you do not want to be seen in your web profile.

Moreover, most of these websites allow for peers to "complement" the available information in your profile by adding tags, voting about the relevancy of certain things, etc.

In theory, this should result in the most accurate and most honest profile, a kind of Wikipedia for CV's. However, in reality, you do not want to think about the mess this might create for you.

Without your involvement, often without you knowing that this is happening, your new identity is emerging on the Internet. You can only watch and hope that it will be a look-alike, but you do not have control. This new "me" lives its own life on the web and is nearly indestructible. Who's the real "me"?

Years after you have passed away, your new identity will continue living on the Internet.

We will always remember you, Marc.

Somehow, a frightening idea.

About the author





Marc Buyens is analyst, management consultant and owner of Xpragma. Marc started Xpragma in 1999 after a 20+ years career in the IT sector. Today, he provides advice, training and mentoring services focusing on the intersection of technological evolution, organisational change and business strategy: a messy world of unfulfilled promises.

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