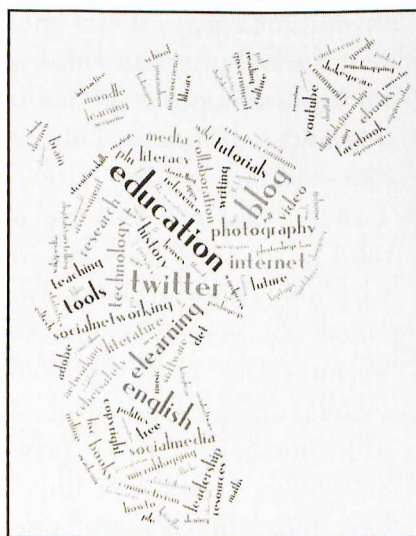# (E)DENTITY

EDITED BY: STEPHANIE VIE

INTRODUCTION
YOUR (E)DENTITY

By Stephanie Vie

Who are you? What are you like? How do you define yourself? How might others label you? These questions and more assist us in forming our personal identities; these identities differentiate us from others and help carve out our own niches. But today, as we live more and more of our lives in online spaces, we also carry with us an "(e)dentity", an electronic identity composed of the digital traces left behind as we participate in virtual worlds. Every time you upload a picture to a social networking site, create an avatar in an online game, blog or tweet about your life, or buy something online, you generate digital traces that, when examined, form your (e)dentity.

Many of these digital traces are created unconsciously; when you reply to an e-mail or request a movie from Netflix, you probably do not consider that part of your (e)dentity, yet those actions leave digital footprints that can be mined for data by various companies and corporate entities. For example, if you have a Gmail account, next time you open an e-mail, take a look at the advertisements on the right-hand side of the screen; they will change based on keywords in the e-mail you are reading. The ads are derived from portions of your (e)dentity and targeted to what the system believes you might be interested in. As a result, our digital traces can leave us vulnerable to data mining, identity theft, and privacy loss. Yet our (e)dentities also help us search for friends and be searched for by others, allowing us to form relationships

and reconnect with people from our pasts. Even after our deaths, our online identities may still be visible in our social networking profiles that remain online.

It is easy to see that living a life online requires us to balance carefully our need for privacy with our desire to connect with others. The formation of our (e) dentities through the digital traces we leave has become such a natural part of our lives that it is hard to remember a time before social networking, before e-mail, and before instant messaging. Just think about the fact that Facebook has only been around since 2004 (and only open to the general public since 2006), yet it has become firmly entrenched in millions of peoples' lives—over five hundred million as of July 2010 according to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. The ease with which we can look up and chat with friends, remember birthdays, and maintain a growing list of social connections is something we may take for granted, forgetting that it was not always this way. Also, our collective memory of how privacy and identity has been shaped by online sites like Facebook can sometimes be shaky; when the "News Feed" feature was introduced in September 2006, thousands of users were outraged, concerned that changes in their relationship status, conversations with other users, and so on were now immediately visible to everyone else in their network. Now imagine Facebook without that feature today. Difficult, isn't it? We have grown comfortable with the changes and learned to adjust—yet the underlying issues of privacy and (e) dentity never went away. We have simply adjusted to those, too.

It is not only social networking sites that have fundamentally altered our understandings of identity, (e)dentity, privacy, and relationships; virtual spaces like online gaming sites, blogs, wikis, Twitter, and others have also had major roles in shaping the ways we communicate with and about others both online and off. Since the first blogs in the late nineties, we have seen blogging affect our world at societal and personal levels. Blogs have played a part in the decline of traditional print journalism; some have been banned in totalitarian regimes; some bloggers have been fired, even imprisoned, for what they have written. Social media have also played major parts in world revolutions. In 2009, Twitter users in
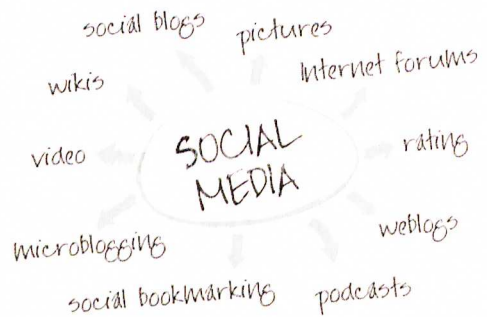
Iran objected to the reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; similarly, Egyptian protesters in early 2011 ousted President Hosni Mubarak after his nearly thirty-year reign. Closer to home, an event that clearly illustrated both the power and the limitations of social media was the flood of rapid reactions to the shooting of U. S. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords on January 8, 2011. While the dissemination of information was nearly instantaneous, Twitter coverage of this event shows how the usual filters that ensure the veracity of news reports are not always in use in online spaces. Today, as we navigate the sea of information surrounding us, it is even more important that we stop to consider contextual clues and not rush to conclusions.

Despite the complexities that social media have introduced to our communication styles, social media have offered many benefits as well; they have helped connect individuals with similar interests and offered a more rapid, grassroots-level way to circulate news. It is no wonder that in 2006, *Time* magazine chose as its "Person of the Year" simply "you." The cover featured a reflective panel that mirrored the reader's face. *Time* noted that "2006 gave us some ideas. This is an opportunity to build a new kind of international understanding, not politician to politician, great man to great man, but citizen to citizen, person to person." We can see the results of such a person-to-person form of communication in sites like Wikipedia, the go-to source for many to look up information quickly. Its creation challenged many of our views about the reliability and validity of collaboratively written materials that have not gone through traditional peer review (where information is vetted and evaluated by a group of individuals qualified, based on their scholarly achievements, to assess the work). The wiki software itself has brought into question the differences between single-authored, multiple-authored, and anonymous writing. Much like blogs, social networking sites, and Twitter, wikis continue to play a role in our understandings of what it means to communicate in the twenty-first century.

As you can imagine, there are no easy answers to the questions raised by our lives online; like our personal identities and our (e)dentities, virtual spaces are constantly changing and are both shaping us and being shaped by us. While this is happening, though, we are continuously in conversation with each other, and this book, *(E)dentity*, reflects that ongoing conversation. The readings featured here do not attempt to present definitive answers on questions of privacy, identity, and connectivity that have emerged from our lives online; instead, these readings form a conversation that invites you to join in and consider how your voice might connect to those already speaking. Rather than focusing on scholarly

narratives, *(E)dentity* draws from multiple sources: newspapers, magazines, blog posts, online comics, and even Twitter feeds. Some are humorous, some serious, some playful, and some thought-provoking; all are meant to illustrate the multiplicity of voices participating in the ongoing conversation about online life and identity.

Along the way you will find research, invention, and composing prompts to help you join the conversation. Much like the readings provided in this book, the kinds of composing you will be prompted to do will move in many ways beyond what you might think of as traditional academic writing. You might be asked to write a blog post, analyze a series of Twitter "tweets," create an avatar, examine a webcomic, or reflect on playing video games. Communication in a digital age has adapted in many ways to the new forms of media we encounter daily and the prompts throughout *(E)dentity* reflect a more contemporary understanding of what writing might look like today.

One way to get started in this book and consider how writing has changed today is to explore how we sort information and content on the web through visualization tools such as tag clouds. (A tag cloud is a visual depiction of the words used in a piece of writing; the greater the frequency with which a word is used, the larger it appears in the cloud.) The first exercise below asks you to choose your own writing or a written piece found online and explore a new way to focus on writing. Similarly, the second exercise below asks you to begin your journey through this book by reflecting on your own (e)dentity. As you continue through *(E)dentity* and read further, you will add additional layers of understanding and meaning to your initial conception of your (e)dentity, just as each time you participate in online spaces you add more layers to your online identity.

Explore

Choose a brief piece of writing that you have composed or, alternatively, find one online. Visit http://www.wordle.net and paste in the text that you have chosen, then analyze the visual results—the "tag cloud" created from your text. The most common words will appear in a larger font size to indicate that they occur more often. What are your most common words? Your least common words will appear in a smaller font. What are they? Does the word frequency seem to match up with the overall theme or argument of the piece? How does your understanding of the text change when you visualize it differently like this? How could you use tag clouds to think through different steps of the writing process— from brainstorming to prewriting to revision?

Compose

Begin by listing ten words that define you. Weave those words into a short response that describes who you are, what you believe in, what you stand for, what you are like, and so on. Next, make a second list of ten words that describe your online presence—your (e)dentity. Keep in mind that your (e)dentity is formed through the traces left behind from your online activities and interactions. Thus you might list words that relate to your communication activities through e-mail, Twitter, blogging, and social networking; you might also list words that reflect how you've crafted a digital persona that can be seen in your social networking profiles, pictures of you online, and so on. Compose a second short response that weaves in the words from your second list about your (e)dentity.

Now, examine your two responses and reflect on the following questions in a brief essay: Is there significant overlap between how you have described yourself in your two responses? What words appear twice? What words are new? Write a brief reflection exploring to what extent your online identity seems to differ from your offline identity and why.