PART I

Identity

"You've got my resume, but it's impossible to know the real me without reading my blog."

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The I's have it: multiple selves in virtual worlds

The assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 shocked the world. The exiled Pakistani leader was widely considered to embody the only hope for democratic renewal in a volatile Moslem country ruled by generals and fraught with Islamic terrorism.

The Bhutto family, like the Kennedys in America, was a cursed political dynasty. Benazir's father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, also a former Pakistani prime minister, had been put to death by the country's military regime. Now Benazir too was dead, her cortege blown up by a terrorist bomb.

The tragedy of assassination, when it afflicts political dynasties, instantly raises the question of succession. Immediately after Benazir's death, the hot glare of global media attention frantically fixed on the person who was the Bhutto clan's most likely political heir: her 19-year-old son, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari.

Until his mother's murder, not much was known about young Bilawal. He was an undergraduate at Oxford University, where his mother had once been president of the famed Oxford Union. Bilawal, however, was a decidedly more discreet figure at the ancient university. Enrolled at Christ Church college, the unlikely Bhutto heir was living under the name "Bilawal Lawalib" (the last name a backward spelling of his first name) to protect his privacy. When the press began poking around and asking questions, Bilawal was definitely not a Big Man on Campus. Nobody was expecting this obscure teenager to be suddenly thrust into the international spotlight. Including Bilawal himself.

Then the media got lucky. An enterprising journalist discovered that Bilawal, like many undergraduates his age, kept a Facebook profile. Even better, it was filled with surprisingly juicy bits about his personal predilections. Bilawal seemed to be having a roaring good time at Oxford while his mother was bravely returning to Pakistan to face the daunting challenge of destiny. On his Facebook profile, Bilawal listed his only interest as "women". He also confessed to a culinary taste for "junk food" and declared that he was a huge fan of TV shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *West Wing*. There was more. Bilawal's Facebook page featured a photo of him dressed up in a red devil's costume, his face plastered in make-up with evil horns popping out of his forehead. The photo was accompanied by Bilawal's ghoulish menace: "We're ready to bring hell on earth . . . *waaahahahahahah.*"

This was very intriguing indeed. What the media really wanted to know, however, was whether Bilawal Bhutto Zardari was ready to assume the political mantle of his martyred mother. On that subject, the young Bhutto used his Facebook profile to put out a message that was oddly equivocal: "I am not a born leader. I'm not a politician or a great thinker. I'm merely a student." On his religion, Bilawal's comments were puzzling to say the least, describing Islamic extremism as "strict adherence to a particular interpretation of seventh century Islamic law as practised by the prophet Mohammed, and when I say 'strict adherence', I'm not kidding around. Men are forced to pray, wear their beards a certain length." Another of Bilawal's Facebook declarations was that "well-behaved women rarely make history."

For the heir of a political dynasty in a country armed with nuclear bombs, Bilawal's Facebook page was decidedly out-of-character, if not utterly ill-advised. The press, needless to say, jumped on it. The French news agency, Agence France Presse, rushed out a solemn dispatch that reported: "The 19-year-old, whose mother and grandfather were famed for their rhetorical skills during their terms in power, chose the social networking site Facebook on Monday to make his biggest public statement yet since her killing. In a message on Facebook – where he has attracted more than 1200 'friends' – he admitted that he was 'not a born leader' despite having taken on the leadership of Bhutto's party just three days after her death." Britain's *Daily Telegraph, Guardian* and *Daily Mail* reported the story's Facebook angle. So did Canada's national daily, *Globe and Mail* and Australia's ABC television network. In the United States, the *Los Angeles Times* sourced Facebook in a column about the Bhutto destiny. *Time* magazine also

covered the story. So did MTV News and the influential Democratic website, HuffingtonPost.

There was one big problem, however. The Facebook profile was bogus. It was a hoax. The world's major media outlets had been "punked" by an Internet prankster.[1]

When the magnitude of this blunder became apparent, it was a bad day for journalism – a profession already suffering major erosion of audiences and readership and plagued by ethical scandals about fabricated stories. Now this. Suckered by a prankster who'd concocted a phoney Facebook profile. The *Los Angeles Times* took the high road and published an embarrassed correction. At Agence France Presse, management issued an abject *mea culpa* and, internally, banned its journalists from consulting Facebook, Wikipedia and all other "virtual sources".[2]

Facebook, for its part, quickly issued a statement saying the company had "disabled" two Bilawal Bhutto Zardari profiles deemed "not authentic." Facebook spokesperson Clare Gayner added: "Anyone violating Facebook's terms of use is removed from the site."

That's precisely what British politician Steve Webb had already discovered to his immense bewilderment. Like many elected officials, the Member of Parliament had been using Facebook to connect with his local constituency voters. Webb, a Liberal Democrat, counted some 2500 "friends" on his Facebook page. He'd been one of the first British politicians to use online social networking as a campaigning tool. Then one day in December 2007 – only a couple of weeks before the assassination of Benazir Bhutto – Webb tried to log onto his Facebook profile. But it had been disabled. The MP was flummoxed. When he contacted Facebook for an answer, the company informed him that it had received reliable information that Steve Webb did not, in fact, exist. Webb was dumbfounded. He was a ten-year veteran of the House of Commons, an outspoken proponent of online social networking, and what's more was frequently quoted in the press on the issue. Hadn't anybody noticed?

"They had concluded that my profile was a fake, that I wasn't really Steve Webb," the MP told the press. "I was essentially accused of impersonating a Member of Parliament. You realize the power these organizations really have. If they'd been really determined, they could have deactivated me completely and then you kind of don't know where you stand. It's actually hard for a genuine person to prove they exist." The MP's friends quickly came to the rescue of his misplaced identity by setting up a parallel Facebook group called "Steve Webb is real!"[3]

It turns out that Bilawal Bhutto Zardari was real too: the young Bhutto actually had a Facebook profile. But it wasn't the one quoted by media outlets around the world. The authentic profile was part of a group Facebook site called Christ Church Freshers 2007. The real Bilawal, it turned out, was more interested in equestrian sports than in womanizing, gorging himself on Big Macs and flopping out in front of his television set to watch endless reruns of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's clever Facebook impostor, it seems, pulled off his hoax with impunity. The Facebook prankster was never tracked down. But manipulating false identities on the Internet can sometimes have deeply troubling consequences. Consider what happened to a 26-year-old Moroccan computer engineer called Fouad Mourtada. In January 2008, he posted a fake Facebook page claiming to be the profile of 37-year-old Prince Moulay Rachid, brother of Morocco's King Mohammed VI. Shortly after he put up the phoney Facebook page, Mourtada mysteriously disappeared. His family had no idea what had happened to him until they learned he was languishing in prison. On February 5, 2008, he'd been forced into a vehicle by two Moroccan secret servicemen, blindfolded and driven to a police station. In jail, he recounted later, he was beaten to the point of losing consciousness.

When his family finally saw Mourtada again, he was locked up in Casablanca's Oukacha jail awaiting trial for "villainous practices". His crime: identity fraud – punishable in Morocco by five years' incarceration. His real crime, of course, was *lèse majesté*.

Pleading for clemency, Mourtada – a graduate of the prestigious Mohammedia Engineers School in Rabat – told Moroccan police that his Facebook profile had been an innocuous hoax. "I created this account on January 15, 2008," he said in a statement. "It remained online a few days before somebody closed it. There are so many profiles of celebrities on Facebook. I never thought that by creating a profile of His Highness Prince Moulay Rachid I was harming him in any way. As a matter of fact, I did not send any message from that account to anyone. It was just a joke, a gag."

Mourtada's lawyer, Ali Ammar, sought his client's release on bail on the grounds that no fraud had been committed against anyone. "This is a cultural problem, this is the first time that a Moroccan poses as a very important personality on the Internet," he said. "This is already a common practice in Europe and USA." The Moroccan authorities, implacable, were unmoved. The request for bail was denied. In late February 2008, Mourtada received a three-year prison

term. Facebook, meanwhile, denied giving the Moroccan authorities information leading them to Mourtada.[4]

As Mourtada began serving hard time in a Moroccan prison, he could console himself with the fact that, paradoxically, his true identity was receiving more international attention than the Moroccan prince he'd imitated on Facebook. Mourtada's predicament had made CNN's newscast and was published in newspapers around the world including *The New York Times*. A sudden *cause célèbre* on many human rights Websites and blogs, Mourtada even earned his own Wikipedia biography. A "Help Fouad" site was created to rally support for his legal appeal. The international pressure worked. After groups like Amnesty International got involved, Mourtada received a royal pardon.[5]

In Britain, meanwhile, a 23-year-old woman called Kerry Harvey discovered to her horror that scam artists had stolen her online details – including her date of birth and mobile phone number – and reconstructed her identity on Facebook as a prostitute soliciting clients online. Kerry, an advertising executive from Glousestershire, was at first baffled when she started getting calls from "punters" looking for sex. Then she learned that she had a parallel life on Facebook, where malicious fraudsters had stolen her photo from another website and, combining it with accurate details like her phone number, transformed her into a Facebook hooker.

Harvey says the Facebook scam severely undermined her self-esteem. "These sites are too open to abuse and should be closed down or made safer," she said. "Since it happened I've become really self conscious. I can't just go up to people and talk to them because my confidence has gone. The person who created [the phoney profile] is sick and should be banned from websites like this."[6]

Let's step back and consider the implications of these Facebook identity conundrums.

Many of us worry about having our identities stolen by Internet hackers seeking to drain our bank accounts. These anxieties are well-founded. Cyber-fraud is now a billion-dollar criminal racket. For fraud to be perpetrated successfully, however, nobody can know about it. A fraudster furtively *borrows* your identity in order to steal your money in a criminal act that initially goes unnoticed. On social networking sites like Facebook, however, your identity can be *created* or *deleted*. What's more, the entire world may quickly know about it. In cyberspace, as Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and Steve Webb discovered, your virtual self can be brought to life, and killed off, like characters in a play. And you have no control over it.

It's even more complicated. We can now play an active role, like a playwright, in the creation and manipulation of our own online identities. Since the explosion of social networking websites circa 2005, millions of people have been constructing *multiple* identities as they socially interact, build networks and collect "friends". Virtual reality has given a new meaning to the term "facelift". Online self-representation is disembodied and exempt from the immediate consequences of direct eye-to-eye contact. Millions of online social networkers thus have become masters of self-fabrication, distortion, misrepresentation and outright imposture.

On sites like MySpace and Facebook, anyone can hide behind a self-constructed virtual identity. Plain girls become hot babes. Shy nerds become sociable extraverts. Fatties become thin, pipsqueaks become towering, weaklings become buff. In the virtual social universe where status is conferred by the accumulation of "friends", self-presentation has been transformed into a ritual of self-fabrication. It's called putting your best cyberface forward.

We call this identity *disaggregation*. The construction, and maintenance, of multiple identities on social networking sites is rapidly becoming the expected norm. In the online world, the *unitary* self has morphed into the *multiple* self. Identities in cyberspace are multifaceted, splintered, concocted, fluid, negotiated, unexpected and sometimes deceptive.

Multiple cyber-identities can have a perverse dark side. Men can play women; and women can play men. The bad play good; and the vicious play virtuous. On sites like MySpace, dangerous paedophiles can pretend to be children in order to prey on innocent victims. For many parents, understandably, this online danger is a source of tremendous anxiety. Cyber identity construction can also destroy marriages. It's difficult to keep a marriage interesting when one partner spends all night on Facebook, especially when the lure of pornography and virtual adultery is only a click away. In 2007, *Time* magazine announced: "Facebook More Popular than Porn". Many adults who navigate virtual sites like Second Life are, in fact, looking for sexual adventure.[7] Facebook is also being used to reconnect with old sweethearts and flings. In marriages, suspicious minds are now cyber-stalking their own spouses by snooping on their online profiles. Checking a list of "friends" sometimes comes across an inadvertent slip that reveals a fatal crack in the marriage. The snooper may also be stalking from outside the marriage. Adulterers beware: the Bunny Boiler is prying into your Facebook profile.

Social networking sites have also been blamed for serving as online catalysts for shocking tragedies. In the quiet Welsh town of Bridgend, residents were horrified in early 2008 to discover a rash of suicides among local teenagers whose morbid pact had apparently been conceived on the Bebo site. When Bridgend's local tragedy hit the national media, the whole of Britain was stunned and perplexed. What was it about socially interacting on a website that pushed these Welsh teenagers to end their lives?[8]

This all-too-common phenomenon is called the "Werther Effect", after Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*. In Goethe's 18th century *sturm und drang* novel, the melancholic hero Werther shoots himself in the head over his unrequited love for a girl called Lotte. When the book first appeared in 1774, it triggered an epidemic of similar acts of despair – the first-known examples of "copycat suicides" in modern history. *Sorrows of Young Werther*, which Napoleon counted among the greatest works of literature, was banned in several countries. Today, the "Werther Effect" is plaguing the MySpace generation as adolescents struggle with identity construction between real and virtual worlds.

Identity formation is a complex process. Some might argue that, fundamentally, we are all unknowable mysteries. The psychoanalytical tradition from Freud to Lacan posits that our identities are essentially illusory. There is little disagreement, however, about one powerful fact: our identities are *socially* constructed. The social construction of identities is based on institutionalized values – family, community, church, profession, nation and so on. For most of us, our identities have been assembled and shaped by dominant values given social expression by institutions.[9]

During the Roman Empire, identity construction was simple: you were either a Roman or a Barbarian. True, within the empire there was a distinction between *citizens* and *slaves*, but the most significant identity distinction was a sharp us-and-them dichotomy between Roman citizens and the uncivilized hordes beyond the limits of empire – Germans, Celts, Britons, Huns, Vandals and Visigoths. When Rome finally collapsed in the 5th century after a Barbarian invasion, Christianity emerged from its imperial ruins. The Catholic Church's administrative system was grafted directly onto old Roman dioceses. The new religion, fittingly, was called Roman Catholicism.

In Christendom, identities were no longer constructed according to notions of *citizenship*. They were fashioned by the spiritual values of

a *religious* community. If you asked someone in medieval Europe the question, "who are you?", they would not have replied French, German, British, Spanish or Italian. Those concepts did not even exist. Identities in the Middle Ages were complex and multilayered, integrating sacred and profane. Most people considered themselves, above everything else, to be "Christian". It was in this historical context that monastic orders like the Knights Templar emerged as powerful social networks. The young French noblemen who joined the Templars were, to be sure, attracted to the order by the prospect of influence and power. But more fundamentally, they were sorting out their own identities. It must have been deeply reassuring in 13th century Christendom to be regarded, and revered, as a benighted Defender of the Faith.

After modern nation-states overthrew the medieval order, states based their authority on *legal-rational* forms of domination exercised through strong, centralized bureaucracies. When modern states first emerged in the 17th century, with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, what we today call "national identities" did not exist. Identities were based on a fusion of feudal loyalties and religious devotion. Nationalism as we know it today would not finally emerge until the end of the 18th century with the French Revolution. While modern states imposed their authority through centralized institutions and strong armies, they needed something else to forge social cohesiveness among their disparate populations who frequently spoke different languages. Thus was born *national identity*.

In his classic work, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson observed that modern nations are essentially *mythological* constructs. They are "imagined" because their members do not know most of their fellow citizens; they never come into contact with one another. And yet, thanks to a strange psychosocial alchemy called national identity, nations are forged by a common *image* that joins people in feelings of common loyalty and purpose. The word frequently used to describe this phenomenon is *patriotism*. In the 18th century, Dr Johnson famously remarked that patriotism is the "last refuge of the scoundrel". For modern states, however, patriotism had a function. It ensured social cohesion and legitimized the state's authority.[10]

States proved remarkably successful at identity construction. All manner of rituals and symbols – including flags, anthems and folk heroes – were cobbled together, and sometimes fabricated, in the cause of nation-building. It was an extraordinary achievement, especially since some nations – like Belgium – were in fact artificially invented and held together by national symbols that were either con-

cocted or borrowed. Yet it worked. For the past two or three centuries, most people have maintained a primary self-concept fused with an essentially *national* sense of belonging. The Olympic Games are organized according to these national identity constructions. So is World Cup soccer. When you land at a foreign airport and present yourself at customs, you are asked for a passport – a document attesting to your national identity. Warfare is the most violent, and tragic, expression of national identity. Think of how many millions have laid down their lives for their country. During the 19th and 20th centuries, patriotism had real consequences on many battlefields.

Today, states no longer exercise the same degree of symbolic power capable of structuring identities and commanding loyalties. After three centuries of unchallenged authority, and countless millions killed in wars, nationalism has a blemished reputation. The monopoly of centralized states on identity construction and social mobilization is now being challenged by competing loyalties. New forms of identity construction are being organized not by vertical institutions, but rather by *networks*. And many of these networks operate on the Internet. Identity construction is shifting to the virtual world.

That challenge to state power was laid down, perhaps overdramatically, in 1996 when self-styled cyberguru John Perry Barlow flew to Davos to make his unilateral Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace. "Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone," he announced. "You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather . . . Our world is different. Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live. We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity. Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement and context do not apply to us. They are all based on matter, and there is no matter here."

Is this just bombastic, over-the-top, neo-hippie, cyber-Utopian lunacy? Or should we accredit John Perry Barlow's taunting Declaration of Independence as a bona fide draft constitution for hundreds of millions of members of MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, Orkut, Cyworld and other social networking sites?

So long as we are holding passports while travelling in real space and time, it might reasonably be argued, national identities are here to stay. It cannot be doubted, however, that the line between real-world and virtual identities is becoming increasingly blurred and ambiguous.

A useful way to conceptualize this tension is by contrasting *social* and *personal* identity construction. Traditional theories, as noted, posit that identities are fundamentally *social* constructs. Social identities connect us to communities based on feelings of *sameness* with other members. Personal identities, on the other hand, are constructed not to reinforce our similarity to others, but rather to assert our *uniqueness*.[11]

Virtual reality is an ideal sphere for *personal* identities. The quest for uniqueness on online social networks, as we have seen, can sometimes inspire highly imaginative forms of self-presentation, including fabrication and invention. Virtual identities are multifaceted and chameleon-like. For some, it must feel liberating and rebellious in a way that reconnects with the hippie culture of the 1960s when John Perry Barlow was writing lyrics for the Grateful Dead. No longer dependent on socially defined values of established institutions, young people on MySpace and Bebo are free to cultivate, albeit narcissistically, highly personalized notions of self.

There is, however, an unavoidable caveat: the blurred line between "true" and "false" identities can be disturbingly deceptive.[12]

The fate of the Friendster social networking site provides a fascinating case study that illustrates this troubling ambiguity. Launched in 2002, Friendster was one of the first American social networking sites. Like other sites that came later, its main function was connecting people – in fact, it started off as a "dating" site. Friendster's social architecture, however, quickly produced a series of unintended consequences. The site's original design limited any member's circle of "friends" to only those less than *four degrees* away (defined as friends of friends of friends of friends). This was an even more restrictive version of the famous "six degrees of separation" which, apparently, links us all. The owners of Friendster were, in effect, regulating the site in order to create some semblance of social cohesion – or "close ties".

The two-degree difference turned out, unexpectedly, to be a significant factor in the way Friendster members began to behave on the site. Most "Friendsters" – as the site's members were called – had joined the site, in keeping with its name, to validate themselves socially by collecting a maximum number of "friends". They were not

bothered by having hundreds of "friends" who were, in truth, vague acquaintances or total strangers. Yet the site's owners had arbitrarily erected a social barrier around the fourth degree. Reacting against this restriction, some Friendsters began padding out their "friend" lists with fake profiles in order to cut through the two-degree filter. These persona fabricators quickly became known as "Fakesters". A great deal of creativity and inventiveness was often invested in the fabrication of these fake profiles. Indeed, Fakesters soon became immensely popular on the site. Collecting Fakester friends became cool. For many, paradoxically, their most fascinating "friends" were people who, in fact, did not actually exist.

The owners of Friendster, failing to understand the appeal of this paradox, reacted by cracking down on the "Fakester" epidemic. They began frantically deleting all phoney profiles. Punishing your own customers is never a good idea. Then the owners of Friendster made another serious management blunder. They began deleting profiles of *suspected* Fakesters who, in fact, turned out to be real members and not fakes at all.[13] Authentic Friendsters – like the British MP Steven Webb – were waking up to discover that their online identities had been deleted. Zap, you don't exist.

This ill-advised meddling produced disastrous consequences for Friendster. The snooping and heavy-handed regulation triggered a mass defection from the site. Fed up with the site's uncool owners, many founding Friendster members checked out. In the United States, Friendster never fully recovered from the exodus. In America, the site was quickly overtaken by MySpace, which shrewdly offered a user-friendly alternative to Friendster. If Friendster's owners had shown more flexibility and openness towards multiple identities popping up on the site, it might today be the most popular social networking site in the world. After the disgruntled exodus of its American membership, however, Friendster was forced to shift its membership focus to Asia.

The lesson? In virtual reality, the coexistence of *real* and *false* identities has been instinctively integrated into online social interaction. People actively want to construct and manipulate *multiple* identities in the virtual world. Any attempt to ban it, or meddle with it, will alienate and trigger mass defections.

There's now a new twist to the online identity conundrum. People are actually stealing virtual identities to make themselves appear more attractive. It's call "cut-and-paste-personality" theft.

One victim is New York-based humorist Hugh Gallagher, who tracked down more than 50 online profiles using bits and pieces of

his famous college entrance essay published in *Harper's* magazine. Gallagher's essay, composed as a string of funny one-liners, featured self-descriptions such as: "I am a dynamic figure, often seen scaling walls and crushing ice. . . . I write award-winning operas. . . . I woo women with my sensuous and godlike trombone playing. . . . I cook Thirty-Minute Brownies in twenty minutes. . . . I am an expert in stucco, a veteran in love, and an outlaw in Peru." Gallagher discovered to his stupefaction that other men, clearly less endowed with natural charm, had shamelessly purloined these lines and fraudulently used them for their own online mating rituals. One of these cyber-identity thieves was Jim Carey, a 38-year-old pharmaceutical salesman from Washington State. Carey, cynically believing that ends justify means, confessed to the *Wall Street Journal* that he'd stolen Gallagher's personality because he wanted women to think he was funny but was too lazy to make things up himself. Another cut-and-paste-personality thief confessed to luring 20 women out on dates thanks to pickup lines stolen on the Web, including: "You will soon learn that I'm a raging egomaniac."[14]

Cut-and-paste-personality theft may be distasteful, but it's growing. A MySpace search in early 2008 discovered more than 700 recent comments accusing others of stealing from their online personalities – avatars, favourite songs, witty remarks, background designs, even entire profiles. Among women, a favourite cut-and-pasted line is: "If you love mushroom ravioli, romantic nights by a fire and spring camping trips, please reply!" A popular line for dull men looking to steroid-inject their boring online personas is: "I guarantee I can change the oil in your car in 10 minutes flat." When Engage.com surveyed more than 400 online daters, 9% confessed to copying from someone else's profile. In the high-stakes ritual of online mating, people feel so much competitive pressure to stand out in the crowd that they will go to any length – including identity theft – to sell "themselves" as an attractive prospect. For the unscrupulous, putting your best cyberface forward entails using someone else's face. It gives new meaning to the term "two-faced".

What is astonishing is how casual opportunistic online behaviour has become. The *Online Dating for Dummies* guide, while not inciting readers to steal from other profiles, nonetheless advises them not to worry too much about copying. The cut-and-paste personality game has even become a business. At TheProfileCoach.com, you can buy a dozen "proven" profiles for just four dollars. Yahoo Personals, for its part, at least has some pretence to ethical probity. It attaches a proviso

to its samples: "Don't copy these profiles exactly." Note the last word in that caveat.

A site called FriendFlood will, for a fee, post messages from attractive "friends" on your profile to create the impression that you, like your friends, are attractive and fascinating. Another service popped up with a brand name, FakeYourSpace, that at least has the virtue of being brazenly honest about the service it offers. No false advertising here. With a promise to "turn cyberlosers into social magnets", Fake-YourSpace offered to fill your wall with an eye-popping collection of hot-looking, hard-bodied friends. The site ran into legal problems in early 2007, however, after complaints that it was using photographs of fashion models from iStockPhoto.com without permission. iStock-Photo.com issued a cease and desist order.[15] Meanwhile, cyberlosers who rip off profiles are increasingly being upbraided with angry messages like the following complaint from an aggrieved identity-theft victim: "Dude, u like copied my whole MySpace post." A 34-year-old New Jersey woman posted the following outburst on her Plentyoffish. com profile: "To the girl who copied my profile and denies it . . . You shit!"

In the real world, the false personality phenomenon is not new. In fact, we are all guilty of identity fabricating, albeit innocently, at some point in our lives. On a highly formalized level, the tradition of fancy-dress parties and masquerade balls taps into the same desire to present oneself socially in a disguise. But while masquerade balls are elaborate rituals, Facebook and MySpace profiles are spontaneous and constantly updated forms of social interaction. Online identity fabrication is a daily habit, not a once-a-season social event.

In the real world, social roles are constricted by an abiding awareness of institutionalized norms and values. We are supposed to know our "cues". In the virtual world of MySpace and Facebook, on the other hand, role-playing is less constrained by social codes. Self-regulated by its own "netiquette", online social interaction doesn't defer to conventional norms. On Facebook you might tag a photo, provide an update or share a confidence with hundreds of "friends" who you scarcely know; yet you would never think of making the same gestures to mere acquaintances in the real world.

Another difference involves *control*. In the real world, we have less control over our own identities because, as noted, they are *socially* constructed. Social norms tell us who we are supposed to be. The *personal* fabrication of identities in cyberspace, on the other hand, affords more control on who we wish to be and how we present our-

selves. Cyber-sociologists describe the fabrication of self on social networking sites as "writing yourself into being". As the authors of our own personal identities, we have control over the construction of the cyber-personality we fabricate and display in the virtual world. On MySpace or Facebook, people make up who they are, possibly in multiple personas, with a keen eye on what kind of impression they wish to create. In the real world the self is *presented*; in the virtual world it is *invented*.[16]

The fabrication of false identities was first theorized by Erving Goffman in his classic 1959 microsociological study, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.[17] Goffman examined "symbolic interaction" between people in everyday circumstances. Expanding on "role" theories about human interaction, Goffman concluded that, for most people, the presentation of self is akin to a dramatic stage "performance" whose function vis-à-vis others is a ritualized form of "impression management". In a later essay called "Face Work" – whose title sounds strangely similar to Facebook – Goffman elaborated on his theory by introducing notions of "stigma" and "prestige". As social actors, he observed, we seek to create impressions that reflect well on ourselves. The primary goals of self-presentation are *stigma avoidance* and *prestige enhancement*.

Goffman was writing long before the advent of the Web, of course, but his theories contain many fascinating insights. In cyberspace, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, stigma avoidance and prestige enhancement are prime motivators in online social interaction. In cyberspace, however, rewards for *fame* and punishments for *shame* are sometimes distributed in unexpected ways. Online personal identities are constructed, and presented, as a *social performance*. In cyberspace, the old adage "know thyself" becomes "show thyself".[18]

In sum, online social networking is a virtual catwalk. Impression management involves constantly changing identities, much like fashion models switch outfits. Except that, in the virtual world, the curtain never comes down on the ritual of identity fabrication and self-exhibition. The popularity contest is a moveable feast where all "friends" are invited. And when it's time to vote for your "Top Friend", the Is definitely have it.