Information technology and the institution of identity

Reflections since *Understanding Computers and Cognition*

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Ever since the late 1970s, I have believed that Martin Heidegger's thinking was crucial for coming to grips with the way information technology is changing our cultural situation. In my work of the 1980s, the thinking of the Speech Act theorists – interpreted according to my Heideggerian concerns with totalities of equipment – grounded my claim that computer users would come to understand that computers were about communication, not computation, and that communication was primarily about the coordination of commitments to act. In the first part of this paper, I will argue, as a review of the thinking in *Understanding Computers and Cognition,* that we still have much to learn about how speech acts work to structure commitments and how the interlinked structure of multiple commitments determines the kind of actions possible in any institution.

In the second and third sections of this essay, I turn to those philosophic concerns that best help us understand the Web. I believe that we are now making a mistake similar to the one we made in the 1970s and 1980s with computers. Then, we spoke of computers as data processors and tried to understand language as the transmission of data. By examining the way language constitutes new obligations, rights, affects, and identities, it became apparent that it could not be reduced to data, that data depended on language's basic constitutive power, and that computers could serve not just data but also genuine communication, which determined, among other things, which data were relevant for coordinating our actions. Likewise, in the 1990s, we speak of the Web as establishing sites, virtual communities, virtual malls, and so forth. Now, we are beginning to try to make sense of corporate and personal identity in terms of what can be established in commercial and personal sites, chat-rooms, and Web interactions generally. As before, I believe that we are getting things backwards. In order to understand the importance of sites and communities, virtual or otherwise, we need to understand what kind of

practices we have such that they produce personal and corporate identities that matter to us[1]. Surely we have no such identities without communities. But human communities are special because they build such identities, ones that we make sacrifices for, even sometimes sacrifice our lives for.

In what follows I shall review how the work of Heidegger enables us to have an account of personal and corporate identity that draws on the intuitions captured in the two great philosophical understandings of human identity – Hegel's and Kierkegaard's – that both drive our thinking about and describe our experience of identity today. Kierkegaard and Hegel and their successors drive our thinking about identity in two opposite directions, only one of which Web enthusiasts tend to follow. Heidegger shows us how to combine the intuitions that ground both accounts, by showing how identities that matter to us lead us to open a new shared world in which the concerns of our identity can matter to everyone. My colleagues and I have called this form of identity, which we still experience when we find that we are living our lives at their best, history-making or entrepreneurial identity (Spinosa, *et al.,* 1997). (Although I tend to focus on corporate identities in my work as a consultant, I shall weigh this paper towards personal identities.) History-making or entrepreneurial identities are maintained by carrying out two interrelated activities: interpreting which actions are appropriate given our intense concern and positioning our actions so that we are interpreted in ways that attract favorable public attention.

In the fourth section, I shall show how the construction of and participation in sites on the Web is already enhancing both of these identity-forming practices and is, for that reason, about identity-building just as computer use is about communication. It will be fairly apparent how the Web enhances our abilities to position ourselves by enabling us to establish virtual versions of ourselves with which others can interact and to which interaction we can easily respond by reshaping our virtual selves. This tendency in the Web, we may think of as extending synchrony. We can be present in multiple places at once. But in order to develop our public identity we must interpret our intense personal commitments so as to see what way of expressing them is appropriate in each situation that confronts us. The tendency of the Web that guides interpretation, however, gets overlooked. Interpretation lives in asynchronous practice, most famously in sending letters. Asynchronous practice in general requires that we deal with ourselves as obscure both to others and ourselves and that we attempt to bring clarity to whatever grips us intensely. Personal letters used to do that until they were eclipsed by the telephone. Now, so far as e-mail is reviving such communication, we can see the asynchronous Web tendency in its infancy, and there are strong reasons to believe that this tendency will increase in importance. By following Heidegger's emphasis on opening new shared public spaces, we can see how, by enhancing both synchronous positioning and asynchronous interpretation, the Web solicits both personal and corporate identity-building thereby making possible life at its best.

Speech acts, constitutive action, and *Understanding Computers and Cognition*

In the mid 1980s when Terry Winograd and I wrote *Understanding Computers and Cognition* (Winograd and Flores, 1987), we claimed that computers were essentially for communication, not computation. On that basis, we also predicted that computers would come to be used for coordinating action and, in that way, help us to see that the heart of commercial activity was the use of language to coordinate action. Since then the growth in groupware, LANs, and the Internet have made our claims about computers as communications devices a commonplace. With the advent of direct marketing, customized offers, and virtual businesses that make offers over the Net (and then subcontract out the production and logistics required to execute the offer), it is becoming clear that the heart of business is in coordinating action by making offers, promises, and so forth.

Behind *Understanding Computers and Cognition* lies a distinctive account of human action that was initiated by Speech Act theorists John Austin and John Searle. We, who are laying the groundwork for the twenty-first century, have not yet assimilated the power of this account of action, which can help us better understand and respond to the way our culture is shifting and consequently the ways in which we are being expected to act. On my interpretation, until we feel comfortable in this form of thinking, we will not understand very well the effects of our own actions. Although it is not my intent to focus on Speech Act theory in this essay, I shall review its core intuitions because they establish a difficulty for constituting personal and corporate identities, and responding to this problem will form the new business frontier of tomorrow just as communication forms it today.

We still have a tendency to follow the Cartesian tradition in thinking of communication as the transfer and processing of information. Philosophers had always realized that language did other things than transfer information. Speech acts like promises that changed the state of affairs in the world by creating new rights and obligations and others like declarations that created new identities and possibilities for action (by creating, for instance, wars and marriages) were well known but considered a secondary phenomenon. John Austin showed that they were in fact primary (Austin, 1962). Indeed, he argued that every sentence we speak, even lowly assertions such as "The sky is blue" change the state of affairs in the world by creating duties and expectations. Declarations such as "I pronounce you married" create new duties and expectations but also new identities, affects, and social arrangements. Austin shows us that human beings do not normally act in the world by simply transferring, disassembling, and reassembling basic things (or simples as philosophers would call them). They do not normally use language for the transfer and processing of information about the location and assembly of things. We can transfer, assemble, and disassemble – and we have achieved much by it – but we almost always do that by also changing the status of things within the community, and we have been remiss in observing and responding to

the way we constitute new statuses. Speech acts are the means by which we normally change statuses by creating new identities, duties, rights, affects, and values[2].

The Cartesian misunderstanding of language and consequently of communication has given us enormous gains in science and in the institution of various material process management techniques of which factories are full. But it has also cost us dearly. First, our productive capacities are damaged, because much modern management and the design of business processes has taken its cue from the transferring and assembling of things. The change in status through commitments and formations of new identities, which are constitutive of any business action, are overlooked. The quality and continuous improvement movements, for instance, increase the number of effective options for action without making the nature of action any clearer to us. The consequences are enormous amounts of waste flowing from miscoordination, unnecessary difficulty developing management support systems, the establishment of businesses where the basic relation to the customer is lost or misunderstood, and the growing disorientation of employees, which we call hyperflexibility.

Second, our ability to recognize ourselves inside a changing community – that is to recognize our solidarity with each other – is compromised. We try to understand the constitution of new social facts and changing social facts in terms of increasingly more sophisticated versions of the disassembly and reassembly of simples. Consider, for instance, how we talk about the changes in the family by noting a redistribution of its component parts. This is how we tend to describe the rise in single-parent families. Again, consider how we seek to understand sexual harassment as the assembly of certain acts. In consequence, we see new institutions – as in some new kinds of families – where many of the commitment structures remain the same as in the old families, and therefore where we do not really have new institutions. Or we remain blind to or surprised by the new social institutions and identities when they arise such as networking or the working together of teams in which the components look the same as in old-fashioned friendships or in old-fashioned camaraderie, but where new commitments implicitly rule. And unless people are clear about the commitments underlying the activity, unintended betrayals arise. Failure to advance a career in a networking relationship and a sexual liberty taken in a team-working relationship can even lead to litigation. In business, new alliances are arising regularly. One moment partnerships with customers are championed as the new competitive advantage. The next moment, we read about the sad shape of companies that went too far in their partnership arrangements and had their profit margins crushed. Next partnerships are back so long as no one calls them partnerships. We can anticipate that the same problems will arise so long as commitment structures are worked out by lawyers alone while managers think of connecting component parts.

To make matters worse, globalization of business and culture gives rise to new social institutions like virtual communities and identities, whose precise

nature we fail to credit because we examine components and declare the communities and identities either genuine or not. The arguments for and against virtual romances, communities, and identities are compelling. But by a trick of using old names, the arguments all miss the point. What commitments are arising in these relationships, and how are they structured? Not that these questions are easy to answer even when we recognize what is at stake. Our questions about the commitments and identities that arise in chat-rooms are as difficult to answer as questions about what commitments arise and what their structure is when I start advertising more and more of my products on your homepage or in your virtual catalogue. But to understand virtual romances, communities, and new business arrangements over use of virtual space, the structure of commitments will tell us whether we have a new social institution or some variant of an old one.

Because we tend to look at components of things and not commitments and how they are structured with each other, we increasingly find that our domestic and commercial lives are transforming themselves beyond our control. Neither our legal nor our employment practices are stable enough for us to have a useful understanding of when, for instance, are innovative and entrepreneurial employees working for us and when for themselves. The experience of employees trying to sell their most innovative work to the highest bidder is no longer rare. What expectations can we now have for our spouse's care for our future? Our standard agreements no longer speak to the kind of actions people undertake. To make matters worse, not only do we find ourselves unable to understand what others will do in their relations with us, we can no longer claim to understand with any confidence the categories in terms of which we will be judged by others. Sexual harassment along with numerous torts count as one large example; standards of confidentiality and privacy are on the move, as are anti-trust violations, and these are just legal matters. When we look at our global markets, what can we say with any assurance counts as fair dealing, coercion, and so forth as we engage in cross-cultural business?

Third, we are failing to cultivate our political capacities. In most Western democracies, we are witnessing the transformation of political leadership into economic management. Even though most engaged citizens deplore this transformation, most feel helpless to stop it, and no one who benefits by it wants to give up the gains. Our political parties run on two tracks. On the first track, political parties are able to act effectively on behalf of fundamental rights, whether they are the progressive's individual and economic rights or the conservative's cultural and free-market rights. But in focusing on fundamental rights, we seek rights as found objects that were already there and fail to engage in the constitution of rights. On the second track, political parties manage the economy to benefit certain lifestyles. Within this political settlement, special interest groups and political advocacy groups, whose concern is the constitution of new rights, new duties, and new institutions, are seen as troubling factions. But it is in such groups that the constitutive power of language is preserved. The work of politics is the creation and maintenance

of new networks, new values and affects, of new forms of status, and of new rights and duties (Spinosa *et al.,* 1997). Very few of these actions feel like second nature to us, yet such work is precisely what Austin and Searle saw as belonging to the fundamental capacity of language (Searle, 1995). Without taking charge of such work, we will not be able to develop a sensible place for ourselves amid the ever-increasing hybrid social institutions and disorientation of increasing options for action.

Understanding Computers and Cognition (Winograd and Flores, 1987) opened the discipline of tracking, mapping, and combining commitments based on the constituting power of human speech. Terry Winograd and I saw that there was a general structure for forming commitments for recurrent actions to satisfy concerns. Concerns are ongoing generalizations of needs. So while tonight we might need a home, a hotel room, a camper, or a tent, most of us have an ongoing concern for shelter. Likewise, tonight I might desire Italian food, tomorrow grilled fish at home, but I also have a general concern for nourishing and tasty food served in pleasing surroundings. Next, basic roles have to be established in which one person (whom, as a matter of convention, we call the customer) has the concern and the other (whom we call the performer) satisfies it. The basic commitment structure in which a request by a customer is fulfilled by the performer to the customer's satisfaction, then consists of four basic speech acts which can be carried out by groups of actors with their own commitments among them. The customer makes a request to a potential performer. After negotiation, the performer makes a promise to do certain things and leave others to the customer. The performer then takes a series of actions each of which is a declaration of how the performer interprets the actual promise, the general concern, and the future possibilities of his/her relationship with the customer. Finally, the performer declares the promise satisfied, and the customer assesses the results. Most concerns will require the iteration of this basic commitment structure between various customers and performers. We need only take a restaurant as a simple example, where the waiter conveys the customers' concerns to the chef (in the role of cook). But the chef also conveys certain of his own concerns and those of the waiter to the sous-chef, and so on.

Focusing on concerns and their related commitments makes possible three new domains of assessment necessary for getting our bearings in today's world. These new domains have to do with:

(1) the miscoordination we sense in the way we are dealing with one another (tiresome meetings, ongoing breakdowns, missed engagements, proliferating authorities whose approval we must gain, and so forth);

(2) the identification of the new institutions that are arising alongside old ones; and

(3) the active development of new institutions.

Concerning miscoordination and its waste, common business practice offers a simple case, which most of us can find in our personal lives as well. Businesses

are commonly organized around a number of hand-off processes. I do a piece of work, and then I hand it off to the next person who hands it off again and so on. At certain points, someone whose concern is quality, checks the work in the process and in more sophisticated companies, I can stop the whole work process if I see something wrong with what has been handed off to me. This process, which seems enormously efficient, is in fact rife with miscoordination and quite wasteful, especially when the hand-offs are from one team to another. The waste arises in that the person who receives the hand-off does not know what promise has been made to the customer and makes assessments of the work handed off to her from that standpoint. Instead, members of each team assume that the work they receive from the other teams satisfies the concerns of that team and that is that. Consequently, each team has to make its own *ad hoc* alterations. By examining business and life processes in terms of the basic acts of the commitment structure, we see that waste appears whenever one of the basic acts (request, promise, declaration, assessment) is left out or performed weakly. Waste also increases the farther the process moves from supervision by someone who takes responsibility for the promise to the external customer.

Second, we can also use the structure of commitments to determine whether we are witnessing new institutions or just different versions of old ones. The single-parent household and other new family structures can serve as examples. Sociologists have declared that the patriarchal family is in crisis and adduce divorce rates, rates at which women work, non-marital birth rates, numbers of households headed by women, single-parent households in general, and so forth to give powerful justification to their claims[3]. But what determines whether we are faced with new institutions is the commitment structure. Are the new family structures serving new concerns? Are they refusing to serve older concerns? Is there so much waste in the service of one set of concerns that commitments systematically fail? A single-parent household that seeks to serve all the old commitments need not betoken the end of the patriarchal family. And a heterosexual couple having children with non-patriarchal concerns driving their commitments could betoken the end of the patriarchal family. Mapping social institutions in terms of their concern and commitment structure tells us what is genuinely new and what is a new way to accomplish old goals.

Third, once we become familiar with the way commitments drive action, we no longer believe that we have to understand in advance all the component parts of whatever social action we seek. Rather, we see that we must identify concerns and begin forming commitments to address them. The basic organizing skill is forming and managing a commitment to deal with a concern. On the basis of one commitment, many others can be grown. Frequently people who do not see this basic fact about commitments end up paralyzing themselves by thinking that they need a great deal of money or a large social network to start a new organization. Consequently, we tend to depend upon established parties and organizations to take political action and overlook our own organizational powers.

Although the concerns that motivated *Understanding Computers and Cognition* are, as I have indicated, still live matters, my focus today is on an area in which understanding the constitutive power of language and its servant information technology confuses and thwarts us in our lives and businesses. Indeed, understanding information technology and the constitutive nature of language can exacerbate this problem. People and businesses who manage their commitments effectively build enormous reserves of trust. For example, because Federal Express makes promises to us about the arrival of our packages, we trust it more than the Post Office even if its on-time delivery record is virtually indistinguishable from the Post Office's. When this happens trust is developed, people ask more and more of such companies and individuals. We all ask more of employees we trust. Federal Express has been asked to handle all the logistics of companies. Under such circumstances, businesses and individuals have to get focused or face becoming overwhelmed. How should a company or an individual know which requests to accept and which to reject? If one tries to be purely calculative about it, one gets dispirited very quickly. Everything stays up for grabs to the highest bidder. One starts thinking in economic terms about the present value of all future anticipated earnings. With this, the focus of one's business and life gets lost, and it is hard to replace that focus with the mere accumulation of power or money.

Companies and individuals need identities that matter. And that is what we are losing today both by virtue of our ability to manage commitments well and by new social practices which are proliferating new institutions, especially those developed in the World Wide Web. I want to look at the Web the way I looked at the computer in the 1980s. Terry and I were right, in the 1980s, to think that the computer was about information. But information as well as its storage, transfer, aggregation, and disaggregation was not an autonomous activity. Information depended for its sense on communication, and just as communication was about coordinating action, that is what computers would come to be about. Likewise, it is generally right to see that the World Wide Web is about producing networks of individuals (virtual communities) but I want to stress that such networks are not autonomous. They depend for their sense on individual and corporate identities, which require maintaining identity-defining commitments or, as the philosophic tradition following Kierkegaard calls them, existential stands. Consequently, just as computers are coming more and more to be involved in communication, the Web will come to be more and more the medium for building identities.

In making these claims, I am not describing logical or historical necessities. I am simply saying that, given our current practices, information processing depends on a core of communication and our network-building depends on identity-building. Equipment, like computers and the Net, brings us into contact with what does the fundamental work in our lives. In doing so, data will be organized by speech acts and the construction of virtual spaces will depend on the construction of identities. But since this equipment is so powerful it could warp our practices too.

Identity: the current understanding
In the domain of personal identity, we see writers like Sherry Turkle claiming that cyberspace allows individuals the option of repeatedly taking up and shedding personal identities (Turkle, 1995). Others, like Edgar Whitley, show how hard such morphing is, at least, when a new identity crosses gender and health boundaries (Whitley, 1997). But apparently no one disputes that cyberspace beckons us to deal with our identities in this way. Such wholesale morphing is only the most glamorous form of identity play opened by the Net. As marketing becomes more and more direct, marketing gurus such as Jim Taylor and Watts Wacker advise us to set up different payer identities (different credit cards with our names listed differently) in order to manage and organize the offers we receive. Those of us who use automated agents have already expressed concern over the limitations they impose on our exposure to the world, and the answer may well be additional automated agents, ones designed to imitate our competitors and friends.

The new focus on strategy in both business review articles and in boardrooms reveals the confusions and difficulties corporations are having over determining their identities[4]. Corporations are asking about their core competencies, sustainable competitive advantage, and most dramatically what business they are really in. In his business best seller *Only the Paranoid Survive,* Andrew Grove (1996) raises this last question when he describes how he and Gordon Moore came to see that Intel was not really in the memory chip business but in the processor chip business. In my business consulting practice, we find that we provide our greatest value in helping businesses to redescribe the nature of their business and then to implement these identity changes.

Just as understanding the role of computers in our work required a better understanding of language than that given us by our common sense, so understanding the phenomena of the World Wide Web, e-commerce, and the logistics revolution will require a better understanding of personal and corporate identity than common sense provides. Getting the precise contours of the current common-sense understanding of personal and corporate identity right has stimulated much academic debate. Even the term "personal identity" is ambiguous in a number of ways (see Rorty, 1976, introduction). People use "identity":

- to distinguish human beings from animals and computers;
- to pick out the collection of features, like fingerprints, that enable the re-identification of people;
- to indicate the ego as source of our intentions;
- to describe a person's public reputation, i.e. what the public recognizes as important about a person's life; and
- to describe the result of an individual's commitment to whatever person or cause gives meaning and direction to that person's life so that without it he or she would find life desperate, disoriented, in short, not worth living.

Hegel, Kierkegaard and Heidegger on identity

Given the concerns with gaining focus, I will attend to the fourth and fifth senses of identity listed above. Of these two, the recognition-based form of identity is most closely associated with Hegel and the tradition following Hegel. The commitment-based identity is most closely associated with the tradition initiated by Kierkegaard, Hegel's greatest antagonist.

Let us start by going over the recognition-based form of identity. On its account, it makes no sense to think that we start with a private, inexpressible personal identity. Our relation to ourselves depends first and foremost on communal practices in general and on the view of others as they are directed towards us in particular. Our sense of our identity so far as it relates to something important beyond mere coping with our environment requires that we be recognized by others in that we receive names, that our affects are identified and responded to as both shared and recurrent, and that we are socialized into norms for right behavior according to which our actions receive positive and negative sanctions by our communities. If we had no names, if our affects were regarded with incomprehension or with only a scientific classificatory interest, and if we were not treated as able to commit worthy and unworthy acts, we simply would not have any more sense of personal identity than the famed cases of so-called wolf children or of very sophisticated animals.

We do not have a personal identity simply by allowing ourselves to be recognized as such-and-such which brings evaluations of our behavior in such-and-such a set of terms. We have to accept the way we are recognized or manifest a socially recognizable alternative self-evaluation. In short, we have to identify ourselves with the roles, affects, sense of worthiness, and so forth that we are recognized as having or demonstrate that these assessments are erroneous and propose another.

Of course, acceptance may amount to a gradual growing into this or that identity. Moreover, with acceptance comes a practical sense that our identity is always vexed because it is always at risk[5]. This sense is practical because people act on the risk's danger by taking care not only of their identity but also of the terms in which their identity is valued, and they do this without the risk ever being formulated as such. We feel this imperative to care for our identities in the impossible number of demands on our time that come from family members, colleagues, *ad hoc* committee or project obligations, clients or students, professional associations, political associations, friends, clubs, and so forth. We know that vexing pressure of the demands does not arise from any direct injury to our identity that would result from not satisfying them. Indeed, in times of extreme urgency, we find that we can simply reject an enormous number of these claims on us. But we also sense that our identities are nevertheless at stake. They are at stake because these groups can and might change the terms of discourse and practice regarding the evaluative terms associated with our identities. Hence, our identities are vexed because all the terms with which they are given to us are in the control of the community though its various agencies. Whether cost efficiency or customer satisfaction is

esteemed, whether negotiating skill or fierce resolve is rewarded, whether we esteem romantic love or revile it as a form of oppressive patriarchy, whether medicine is a high calling or a technical one, whether fathers are esteemed for strength and resolve or for sensitivity and flexibility, whether our offices look like those of artists or securities brokers – all of these choices affect how our personal identities are evaluated. We are compelled to influence as many as we can, and we can never keep up. We are always cut off from ourselves in that in large part we live in the as-yet-unknown assessments of others – clients, bosses, market analysts, friends, spouses, students, colleagues, anonymous professional evaluators – whose effects we will only come to know later. These judgments themselves live within changing general understandings of the meanings of evaluative terms. Our sense of being over-committed is precisely how we today experience the risk of living in the recognition of others. Much strategic planning in business understands the firm in terms of this Hegelian tradition whether the point is to achieve a sustainably dominant position over our suppliers, distributors, and so forth, or to manage brands strategically (Kierkegaard, 1985).

A Kierkegaardian, in opposition to Hegel, claims that the recognition-based account mischaracterizes the nature of having an identity. He thinks of personal identity as the result of total commitment (Gergen, 1991). The clearest examples of such commitments are those of famous martyrs and lovers. The crucial point is that when we make a total commitment we do not simply take over some already existing role we have been given or exercise some pre-existing talent; rather, we open up a new personal world in which whatever contingent cause or person we commit ourselves to has a personal meaning just for us, and this meaning pervades all aspects of our lives. Since the commitment is one that absorbs all of us, we call it an unconditional commitment. Even if we make an unconditional commitment to some cause, some person, or some role that comes to us through the shared language, shared practices, and certain agencies in the community who are constantly reinterpreting it, the intensity of our commitment to the cause, person, or role and its consequent meaning for us can never be understood by shared language, practices, or social agents.

In Kierkegaard's time there were two classical examples of this form of committed identity. The commitment to a religious or political cause was one example of such an all-consuming passion and the commitment to a beloved in a romantic love relationship was the other. Today's new spirituality and new companionate love relationships make such examples seem rather quaint. But we can nevertheless see what the understanding of personal identity as unconditional commitment gets at. Notice that if we are asked to give conditions under which we would give up being who we are, we tend to fight rather than switch. We should note that we are indirectly asked for those conditions day in and day out whenever we have to determine with whom we will spend our time. For we almost always do so against the wishes of others who would like to create the conditions under which we would switch. Indeed, we would not say that we were saturated – to use Kenneth Gergen's term – with conflicting

requests if we did not hear them as asking us this fundamental question about our identity (Gergen, 1991). The question – On what conditions would you change your identity to be more amenable to our concerns? – insinuates itself into the requests of our families, clients, friends, and colleagues. What makes the question overwhelming is that we do not have any clear answers. We do not know. In this sense our commitment to whatever it is that defines the person we are is distinctive, compelling, and yet incomprehensible even to us.

Nonetheless, we do change such commitments. We become born-again Christians. We change careers and spouses. On the corporate side, we go from memory chip companies to processor chip companies, from computer companies to software companies. But until the breaking point has come, we experience in our day-to-day actions our commitment to who we are as total. Our commitment determines what counts as valuable and meaningful in our world. We would not change our identity on the basis of what others think. We judge public standards by the private values created by our commitment. It defines our world, our frame of reference.

It might seem as though such a conception of identity applies only to people. But one of the most important business review articles of the last decade calls companies to identify and focus resources on the core competencies that for various contingent reasons they have come to possess (Hamel and Prahalad, 1994). The point is to develop the companies' uniqueness.

I have brought out these two philosophical accounts of identity because I believe they gather together most of our honest intuitions (as opposed to our confused common sense) about our corporate and personal identities. Those who have given thought to the personal and corporate identity have probably found themselves crossing back and forth between these two accounts. For, as I have said, we already know that there is neither within us or our companies some single core or core collection of talents, dispositions, competencies, experiences, or whatnot that define us or our companies in one and only one right way. We are who we are because of the response we have made to the way we have been recognized. And we are the way we are because circumstances have led us to make a commitment to some cause, person, or role with an intensity that we cannot justify in any shared terms. These two different accounts of identity seem radically opposed. One says that our sense of identity depends on others and the other says that it depends solely on the intensity of our individual commitment.

Moreover, each of these accounts thrives on showing the inadequacy of the other. Kierkegaard pointed out that the Hegelians had completely missed the phenomenon of such intense commitment and so did not understand identities. If one accepts and positions oneself among the values and roles that are already available and esteemed in the current public world, one does not have a true identity but only a reputation. Kierkegaard argued that an identity rather than just a public persona required making some particular commitment with such intensity that one would be willing to sacrifice and, if need be, die for it rather than give it up[6]. Such a total commitment is not just to something in the public

world that one takes to be the most important thing in that world. A total commitment creates new values and a new world. The person one loves is not just highest on the scale of publicly recognized virtues such as wit, intelligence, grace, charm, and physical attractiveness, but becomes the paradigm that defines what such terms mean and, in general, what is valuable in another person. Kierkegaard concluded that the Hegelians, with their account of public recognition in an already shared world, had simply missed the phenomenon of identity altogether.

The Hegelians replied that, if a person's commitment creates a new world that is not understandable in terms of the shared language and values of the community, no one will be able to understand what such a person is doing. Indeed, such committed people will not be able to make sense of their own commitments and so will not know what to do to express them. Hegelians were happy to point out that Kierkegaard, himself, in honestly thinking through his account of the phenomenon of unconditional commitment came to the conclusion that each response a committed individual felt called on to make to his or her situation could not be understood as appropriate either before or after it was made. Seemingly appropriate actions could neither be done for an explicable reason nor justified after the fact. In short, since one had to make sense of oneself in the public language, to be an individual with an identity based on an inexplicable commitment was to be seen as absurd by others and even by oneself. So the Hegelians concluded that the Kierkegaardian idea of identity was incoherent.

As I read Heidegger's account of selfhood and identity in *Being and Time,* I see it as achieving a union of these two opposing sets of intuitions in a way that fits with the experience of identity (Heidegger, 1962 [1937], pp. 352-8; 434-44). Once we see how Heidegger does this, we can begin to examine how the practices Heidegger claims are constitutive for our identity are also crucially drawn on in our relationship to the World Wide Web.

The Hegelian account enables us to see how much our personal and corporate identities are given to us by the way we are dealt with by others and by the shared practices into which we are socialized. We ceaselessly rediscover who we are by finding out how we are assessed by others and what resources are therefore available to us. The Kierkegaardian account enables us to see that a total commitment with its intensity and finality individuates us more than accepting any public role given to us could ever do. Indeed, when we commit ourselves totally to some person or cause we become what Kierkegaard calls "a new being".

Heidegger is able to incorporate the insights of both the Hegelian and Kierkegaardian tradition by seeing us as more profoundly historical (or, in business terms, entrepreneurial) than either tradition sees us. For Heidegger, we do not simply take over a social identity that we have been recognized as possessing. None of us is simply a CEO, an entrepreneur, a professor, a techie, mother, father, or so forth. More complexly, none of us is either a recognizable style, disposition, or way of being that ties together or unifies how we are in our

various roles. Rather, for Heidegger, when we are authentically ourselves, we are trying to bring some new interpretation of the possibilities given us by our shared social background into the public world so as to change that world into a new one.

The point, for Heidegger, is that it is not enough to have a personal commitment that gives us our own world as when we are unrequited lovers. Such commitments would be absurd because they could not be expressed through shared public practices. Yet, we do not have a self without such an intense personal commitment. We then need to have a commitment to something or someone with such intensity that we are sensitive to possibilities for reconstituting the world in a way that does not make public sense, and then we need to find a way to bring others along to share the new world and new values to which we have been called to commit ourselves. Thus a lover needs to love so intensely as to find special unnoticed possibilities in the love which are then brought out in the reciprocated love relationship which will include not only the beloved but also the two families and others who matter to the lovers. To take a more public example, Martin Luther King, Jr was ready to give his life for a world in which people were dealt with in terms of their character not their color, but that commitment was merely a dream if he could not get others to share it; that is, to live in a new world in which old ways of acting ceased to make sense and new possibilities showed up as enticing. To take an example from business, King Gillette had developed an intense interest in making things disposable ever since he saw a disposable bottle cap. But unless he could share his fascination with this new way in which things could be used, he could not make sense to himself. It would seem as though he had a bizarre obsession. He, therefore, had to produce something that would get people to share his new understanding. Of course, King Gillette could not have said, before the fact of his success, that he was trying to bring an ethos of disposability into the world. He certainly could not have said before his success what people and things would look like once he had brought about this new shared world. But he could measure his achievement by the change he was bringing about in the concerns of the community.

Identity thus requires both an intense Kierkegaardian total commitment to some cause or person that discloses a new world for an individual and a Hegelian working out of that commitment so that others recognize that new world as making more sense than their former world, so that they see the individual who brought it about as a leader and that new world as their world.

Maintaining an identity requires two different actions. Whether we are intensely committed to another person, a way of using things, or a political cause, we have to interpret what to do to manifest the commitment truly. Since, however, we are always also trying to make our commitment make sense to ourselves and others, we must manage the way we position our actions. We must position ourselves in order to maintain credibility and authority. Although we have focused on personal identity, we can see that corporate identities work in the same way. Microsoft offers a good example. As I see matters, Microsoft is

a corporation founded on the premise that software is privately owned intellectual property like other private property, and consequently it requires the strictest protection. Out of that project, Bill Gates wrote the famous early letter to hackers and others claiming that they were stealing software whenever they copied and traded it. Out of the same commitment, Bill Gates came up with the idea of licensing, not selling, DOS to IBM. Since then the same commitment has Gates fighting tirelessly against all attempts to make software something less than the basic private property of the contemporary age. He fights against the notion that software could be the basis of a self-sustaining form of intelligence when others in the computer industry talk of Big Blue thinking. He fights against Netscape's and Oracle's free-range notion of software that one downloads off the Web for whatever purpose one has at hand. There the software takes on the characteristics of public property. One pays for it as one uses it. We can be sure that Bill Gates will honor his commitment to software as private property in whatever form a threat against it could take.

But it is not enough for Microsoft to fight for software as private property. Bill Gates and Microsoft must position themselves so that their fight can be effective. Microsoft's action for maintaining its strong position is both the stuff of lore and of infamy. Here is the reading I have formed. After declaring that the Net was small potatoes, Gates turned his company on a dime when he saw that he was wrong and is busy positioning Microsoft as a dominant Net player in taking on both Netscape and America Online. His more infamous acts of positioning have come out of this basic repositioning. It is alleged rather strongly that Microsoft uses its control over the operating system to discourage people from using Netscape. Whether this allegation and others like it are accurate, there is no doubt that by producing the standard product (and thereby facing the least competitive threat) in various value chains Microsoft is able to capture the largest margin in its value chain. Both interpreting and positioning are the core practices for Microsoft. Bill Gates has an unconditional commitment to establishing software as the paradigm private property and constantly repositions himself and his company to succeed at establishing this new paradigm in the public world.

How does this account of identity take up our intuition about identity issuing from an unconditional commitment to a project that makes sense of us totally and according to which we make sense of the world? On the Heideggerian account, the Kierkegaardian totality of commitment is too strong. It depends on the possibility of developing a private world in which actions can be sensed as either right or wrong even if they are absurd by shared public norms. Once one has such a world, then although one can lose the object of one's commitment, because a person or a cause can die, one could lose the fact that the person or cause is what crucially matters and that it calls you to act in a specific way at each moment. But for Heidegger, we always remain subject to the public norms of intelligibility. It is they that we are trying to change through our commitment. Consequently, they can change in such a way as to make our commitment irrelevant. And we are always sensitive to this possibility. It is that sensitivity

that enables us to position ourselves. Heidegger allows that there are moments when we seem to be wholly in harmony with what we are doing in bringing our commitment to the public, when, to recur to our earlier examples, we have just staged a deeply personal wedding that others find estimable, when the Montgomery bus boycott gains national credibility, or when people start buying disposable razor blades. But even at such moments we are aware of the fragility of the meaning for us of what we are doing. And this phenomenon shows us as well that what we call our identity is split into two different functions: we interpret which actions make the best sense of our commitment and, seeing ourselves through the eyes of others, we determine which actions position us in the way that gives us greatest credibility. We are thus never so totally bound or unconditionally committed as on Kierkegaard's account. Our positioning operates only on the basis of our commitment, so it can only cause us to give up our commitment if it has become entirely irrelevant or hopeless.

Identity and the Web

I have already pointed out that the core commitment structures of virtual communities and identities have not been well established, let alone compared to those of traditional identities and communities. As a preliminary step toward that project, I will show that much of what has been pointed to as core Web phenomena are the Web's enhancement of our positioning practices. If we are going to see the Web as about identity-building in the way the computer is about communication, then we shall have to find the Web enhancing interpretation as well.

The Web and positioning

Consider the many important activities the Web is making possible. We can see how various political movements are using the Web to make their cases known to people all over the globe. No longer can governments find an easy way to clamp down on the press. New advocacy groups are forming that would not have formed before because the people remained too isolated from each other. For instance, now people with rare diseases or who are being oppressed in unusual ways can announce themselves on the Web and others in similar positions can begin discussions with them. Since global logistics companies like Federal Express are expanding to meet the demands of the Web, small businesses can create specialized products for people in that market all over the world. Except for perishables like bread, location becomes less and less a competitive advantage. Not only can a business find customers from all over the world, a business can find suppliers, distributors, and allies who add value to its products from all over the world. As transactions over the Web grow and businesses are able to keep track of customer habits and preferences, businesses will market more and more directly to enhance customer convenience. No doubt, too, we have all recognized that the Web enhances our collection of assessments. Amazon.com includes with its book descriptions reviews of readers. Indeed, in general, word of our performances spreads quickly through the communities

comprised of our friends and colleagues, and our e-mail carries reviews from sundry groups. In the academic world, papers are easily sent about over e-mail – a form of pre-publication "publication", and responses from friends and critics all over the academic world can be collected and assimilated before a final draft goes into print.

All of these phenomena are best understood as taking place in the domain of positioning in three different ways. First, we are better able quickly to collect assessments of our products and performances. From this we can get a better picture of how we are understood, we can organize responses according to group, and we can begin responding before opinion jells. Second, we form connections with greater numbers of people who are likely to be receptive to our offers far more inexpensively than in the past where targeting offers required expensive market research. Third, and most important, the means of obtaining power through positioning become more open and more clearly connected to the formation of identities.

To see this third point, which has the most far-reaching consequences, we should quickly review how power was traditionally established through positioning: through establishing the most beneficial position on a value chain. A business traditionally seeks to situate itself among its suppliers, distributors, direct consumers, value-adding associated businesses, and so forth so that it had the least competitors. Doing that enables it to raise its prices or keep them steady at times when others in the value chain have to hold them steady or decrease them. In this context, such an ability to control prices translates to having one's self-interpretation respected.

When we take a cold look at social and political life, we see the same phenomenon. Friends, colleagues, and political allies who can easily be replaced will have to prevent replacement by working hard to increase their value. Of course, once we generalize this phenomenon to social and political life, we see that the power of positioning does not depend on a value chain strictly conceived so much as it does on an interlocking set of negotiated relationships in which everyone has at least his or her minimal conditions of satisfaction met.

The Web transforms positioning in two ways. First, as it enhances a company's ability to find suppliers, customers, and value-enhancing associates around the globe, it makes it harder to insert one's company into a situation where one has fewer competitive pressures than others in the same value chain. As markets become less mass markets and more boutique markets, as location matters less, and as more and more aspects of any business are outsourced through the Web, it follows that a company with fewer competitors is also likely to have fewer customers. (If there were more customers, then eventually someone will find a way to make a superior offer to some of them. What is true for commercial activities is also true for social activities. Cyber-companions are as available as cyber-commercial allies. Cyber-enemies are as easy to find as cyber-competitors.)

Second, on the Web, the best positioned person or company is the one who has a site through which the greatest number of people pass. Amazon.com will

not be so important because it is a bookstore. Indeed, bookstores, even cyber-bookstores may pass as finished texts pass. (People may well seek to be in on what authors are thinking before they have produced finished texts, and, as with Renaissance poems that were mailed around, such unfinished texts may be worked on by many other than the original authors before being published in a finished form.) But Amazon.com has a group of people that come to it, and that will make it interesting for authors, readers, and those such as marketers, movie producers, professors, and others who are interested in what is going on between authors and readers. Providing sites that people seek to visit will give one power-enhanced positions regardless of what the core content of the site was or has become. The site will count as a virtual community with a public image growing from the conversational interactions going on at the site as well as from the core interest with which it began. So we can easily imagine Amazon.com becoming a standard-bearing site where literature, music, artworks, and perhaps films are disseminated, discussed, taught, and so forth. (Indeed, as I write this, Amazon.com has opened its CD division.) We could go farther and imagine it also selling tickets to such events. But it is hard to imagine going to Amazon.com to have one's fresh produce selected and delivered or to purchase used motorcycle parts.

What should be clear, however, is that the Web enables us to see the concern of positioning more clearly than our social practices generally have, and the Web gives virtually everyone the chance to position themselves commercially. Anyone will be able to take a run, as Amazon.com is doing, as the standard site for one sort of media interaction. Assuming that as technology develops Amazon.com goes into offering films over the Net, a small site that starts out offering access to French films with particularly useful and entertaining reviews could start chipping away at even such a standard bearer as Amazon.com. With the advent of automated editors, such sites would have even greater opportunity to be brought to the attention of potential users. And standard sites will be far more open to attack. With the Web, the competition will never be completely hedged out for long.

Most of the hype promoting the Web has had to do with this sort of positioning. Changing one's identity, having multiple Web identities, finding one exciting cyber-utopia after another, giving access to the global markets to the smallest of businesses and sole proprietorships, and so forth are all cases of opening up possibilities for positioning. Indeed, the Web seems so predisposed to open these, that many like me worry that the Web will make the positioning function the only one we have for building identities. And instead of building identities as we now appreciate them, identities will turn into something more like today's brand identities or reputations. Indeed, if the Web moves us in this direction and also offers us freedom from traditional local communities, it will leave us without even Hegelian identities that were based on the recognition of people within communities. The Web will then transform us into beings with only Nietzschean brief lives, in which a single biological life is inhabited by a number of short identities (Nietzsche, 1974, pp. 236-37). Lives would be like a

collection of short stories instead of like a *Bildungsroman*. James Maxxmin, famous as the CEO of Laura Ashley that invented its partnership with Federal Express, is now developing businesses that are fashioned on such a post-modern basis (Loveman and Anthony, 1996). A single logistics platform enables the functioning of zero-working capital businesses that rise up like rock groups with great inspirations that produce huge sudden profits. When the inspiration dies, they disappear as suddenly as they arose. Here positioning has replaced interpretation altogether, and there is no place left for enduring identities at all.

I believe Heidegger saw a problem with Nietzsche's formulation of identity, and the Web is bringing that problem out. Nietzsche seems to think that something will anchor us in a personal or corporate identity for at least a little while. It is not clear what that anchor could be. It could be the time it takes to get an identity established in the recognition of others. It could be the time it takes to explore whatever insight or whim the identity is based on. It could be developing the skills necessary for the identity to do either of the above. But why should an identity last even that long? As we are positioning ourselves to even begin working out or learning the skills to work out a new whim, we are trying to gain credibility and power for this, and in the process other whims and insights will come along, as they do whenever we are spin doctoring. The hyperflexibility of the Web could, as I interpret matters, damage even Nietzschean brief lives and leave us in the state of what Heidegger calls flexible resources, responding flexibly to each call on us without any identity at all. If the Net leads us in this direction, what resources does it have to help us maintain the focus of an identity that allows us to separate relevant from irrelevant insights and actions.

The Web and interpretation
Although it is clear how the Web enhances our ability to collect, categorize, and make the best of responses to others' assessments, it is not at all clear that the Web enhances our ability to interpret our crucial concerns or projects. If we examine all the aspects of the Web that get glamorized in *Wired* and similar publications, we see that the most pervasive way in which we are all "wired" remains largely overlooked. Indeed, when we talk about the way in which we are all "wired", we normally talk about it as a problem. We are all facing an explosion of e-mail. We lament the hours that we spend answering it each day. We complain about the number of e-mail messages that are sent to us for the sake of form. No doubt spam degrades lives. But something else is returning that has been missing since the telephone displaced letter writing which a century ago was still in its great age. In order to recall what that age held for selfhood, we should remind ourselves of the expository abilities of ordinary people during that age. Consider the correspondence of soldiers during the Civil or First World Wars. How much of what we send to each other lives up to that standard? Among the short pragmatic messages we send are some few messages we write to those whom we respect and care about in which we try to say something about the project that concerns us most. We will write a long

letter to our spouses while we are away on business about why it is that they count so much to us. Or we will answer a brother's question with a long letter in which we try to figure out what we care about most. We also solicit help in difficult situations in reflecting on what it is appropriate to do, given the project that matters intensely to us. Our wired way of living is drawing us to become writers again[7].

We need to put this last claim into perspective. When we say that the aspects of the Web that are being glamorized have to do with positioning, we have in mind the positioning of our images. To think of this visually is exactly on the mark. The Web opens the possibility for more attractive images and for quicker responses of people to such images, whether the responses are the count of "hits" or a quick review or our persona in a chat-room. But with e-mail, the Web promotes not only the immediate response to images but the personal practice of asynchronicity, which underlies commitments to life projects and to interpretation. It is because our life project is not in us expressing itself through us but rather beyond us and unclear to us that we have to try to make it clear to ourselves and accept its distance from us and our lack of control over it. Ultimately, it is through the Web's ability to let us have both a synchronous existence in images that are directly present to others and reflected back to us and an asynchronous existence in writing in which neither we nor the receiver knows beforehand what we are saying that the Web solicits us to develop the practices that are constitutive of identities.

We are now witnessing a moment when Web entrepreneurs are unsure of the nature of asynchronous practice and its importance to us. They are seeking to find ways to present us as quickly as possible with precisely all that we need to see in all of its current relevance to us. In life, of course, relevance is something we work out in working through our commitments and since the measure of our commitment has to be reinterpreted for each new situation the goal of complete presence will always be illusory. As more and more information comes directed to us in its current relevance to us, it will incite the question about its future relevance. And when that question is opened, marketers, employers, suppliers, distributors, colleagues, friends, companions, in short, all who present themselves to us on the Web will seek to know what we will care about in the future. At that moment, Web tools might help and ask us to nose out what about our lives is unclear to us that we are committed to make clear. New kinds of focus groups could well supplement chat-rooms. As the Web pulls us more and more into the present with screens on our office walls enmeshing us in the present state of the world, its future state and ours will become our concern, not the future state we might predict, but the future state we will seek to make as people with small-scale or large-scale history-making identities. Only such identities will keep us from becoming mere flexible resources. On my interpretation, just as entrepreneurs in the 1990s have developed the tools to turn computers into instruments of communication, entrepreneurs in the coming decades will develop tools to turn the World Wide Web into instruments of identity.

Notes

1. For purposes of this paper, "practices" indicate shared skills for coping with things, institutions, other people, affects, social goods, and one's own self. They are neither habits nor processes because they are constantly adjusted in an improvisational way. To understand such improvisational social skills, consider Bourdieu's example of the gift-giving master who is able, in a situation full of unusual contingencies, to act, without calculative thinking and against his habitual training in a completely unusual way and yet be recognized by the community as having done exactly the right thing to preserve both his status and the traditional practice of gift-giving itself. (See Bourdieu (1990, pp. 98-111, esp. 107.)

2. John Austin, John Searle, and I have all developed different taxonomies of the basic kinds of speech acts or illocutionary points to be more precise (Austin, 1962, pp. 148-64; Searle, 1979, pp. 1-29). I adopt most of Searle's taxonomy with the exception of the expressive, which I believe is a form of declaration.

3. See, for example, Manuel Castells (1997, pp. 134-242). In addition to giving figures, Castells also justifies his claims by calling attention to the goals and effectiveness of feminism and various gay and lesbian movements.

4. The competing thinking on strategy by Michael Porter (1980) on the one hand and of Prahalad and Hamel (1990) on the other continue to draw attention.

5. I am roughly following a Lacanian formulation of this risk. See Lacan (1977, pp. 30-113.)

6. As a technical point, Hegel famously claims that it is constitutive of human beings that they are willing to die for their identities, not, however, because any particular identity is worth dying for. One risks dying for an identity simply as a matter of asserting one's humanity – that one risks dying over matters of identity – not because of the content of the identity. (See Hegel, 1979, pp. 111-19.)

7. One might imagine that asynchronistic e-mail will be replaced by something more like the telephone, perhaps a Net video phone. But the telephone was only successful in replacing the letter because the letter was too asynchronous. One could seldom wait for the responses from friends before one had to act. The telephone allows for immediate responses, but it is too synchronous. Increasingly, when we call our friends, they are caught up in other business and have to strain to give us their full attention. E-mail and other asynchronous practices to be developed by the Web should be designed to get interpretive asynchronicity just right.

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