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Information  
Security Technical  
Report

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## Fool's gold

Karen Lawrence Öqvist

If someone were to ask you the value of your identity on a scale of 1–10, you would probably respond with something like 9 or 10. Then if they were to subsequently ask you what your reputation was worth, you may look confused for a moment before responding with some similar value.

Identity = Reputation?

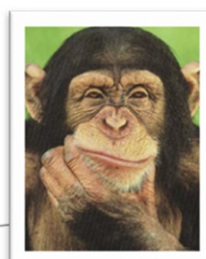
So does identity equal reputation? After all this is the claim made by some identity practitioners such as Dick Hardt (Hardt, 2006). The simple answer is no. Does it matter? And the answer is yes, it matters a lot and this article explains why.

### 1. I think therefore I am

Let us first get clear definition just for the purpose of this article on what is an identity. Let us keep it simple and not get dragged too much into the social sciences and philosophical

meanings behind identity, although from these disciplines what we could probably agree on without too much debate is that it is your identity (Wikipedia, 2010): which makes you definable and recognisable; that is your comprehension of yourself as a discrete, separate unit.

This is where we will stop, because today in our digitised society your identity is quite simply an object in duplicate, triplicate and much more, copied over numerous disparate directories scattered across the globe. Quite simply your identity is made up of *mandatory* and *optional* attributes. A mandatory attribute could be your name, date of birth, education, employment history, and criminal record (Yes/No) for example. Your optional attributes could be where you were educated, work experience, details on any convictions. Hence your identity's attributes are objective, one cannot dispute your date of birth, the colour of your eyes or which school you attended. These are facts and cannot be swayed by subjective opinion. The same can be said about your optional attributes, although some of these could be more easily falsified than the mandatory attributes, they are still nonetheless facts about who you are.



identity (philosophy), also called sameness, is whatever makes an entity definable and recognizable  
 identity (social science), umbrella term used to describe an individual's comprehension of him or herself as a discrete, separate entity  
 Cultural identity, person's self-affiliation (or categorization by others) as a member of a cultural group  
 Gender identity, person's self-identification with the gender(s) or lack thereof, that a person self-identifies with oneself  
 Identity formation, also known as core gender identity, the distinct personality of an individual  
 Identity politics, the process of the development of the distinct personality of an individual  
 Identity politics, refers to political arguments that focus upon the self interest and perspectives of self-identified social interest groups or minorities  
 Law of identity, principle of logic stating that an object is the same as itself

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## 2. Be what you desire to appear

“The way to gain a good reputation is to endeavour to be what you desire to appear.”

*Socrates 470 BC-399 BC*

Socrates must have had foresight of the information society that we are all a part of today because this is truer now than what has ever been possible before. For example we can create a digital presence in professional network spaces such as LinkedIn. Here we can build our reputation online in a structured way. Build a picture of the persona that we would like to be seen as, after all, this is where the head-hunters are prospecting.

Our reputation is something that others can influence too; either positively or negatively. Hence your reputation, if we were to map to the directory language is constituted of subjective attributes. It is what you say about yourself and what others say about you. We could add to this by saying that online your reputation is what can be found on you online, and then arguably your reputation is impacted by what cannot be found on you. For example if you are invisible online the head-hunters will not find you!

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## 3. Identity vs. reputation

Another distinction between the two, i.e. your identity and your reputation, can be the value to you and to others. Your identity has nominal value to you, in affect your identity was originally created to provide enough data to government authorities in order to empower them to make decisions concerning the welfare of the state. Today in addition, your identity has significant value to others motivated to make money from who you are and what you do, e.g. loyalty card schemes. And then of course there are the identity thieves that can steal (or one could argue borrow as purported by Jim Harper author of Identity Crisis) your identity attributes and use them to purchase articles on your credit cards, take out credit and draw money against your bank account and even create bank accounts for your identity destroying any reputation that you may have built up with the bank.

But hang on a minute, this is a reputation built on fact, objective attributes and in contrary to the argument presented above? So does this mean that a part of your reputation is constituted of objective as opposed to subjective attributes?

The answer is no, although in the old days this was not the case. Today, you will have a history of normal behaviour that is registered in their systems (that could have been referred to as your reputation with the bank before everything was digitised), however the moment you go over the limits set on your account you will receive extra charges irrelevant of how good you have been at keeping to the rules for the last ten or twenty years. The days of sitting down and chatting to your bank manager and them revoking those charges are over; it is the computer system that assigns charges if you do not abide by the rules. It has nothing to do with your so called reputation. Your identity is digital, and everything that you do is a history of transactions tied to your identity.

Conversely your reputation is worth significant value to you but to others nothing, unless they use your reputation to add value to their own. To all intents and purposes your identity is worth a piece of gold to those motivated to collect, use and abuse identities, and this is when get round to the title of this article.

Your reputation could be compared with fools' gold; very beautiful, but deceptive in its value. Fools' gold because your reputation has value to only you and only in a way that you can understand. You are deceiving yourself in thinking that your reputation has a value to anyone else apart from you, it does not. Hence its value is overrated because the attributes are subjective, they can deceive. Accordingly your reputation can be your success or failure. This is even truer today in our digitised society. Everything you publish online has most likely been copied and replicated to another server or indexed and cached by some search engine. For this reason your reputation has a persistence value that it did not have before.

Take a look at LinkedIn and ask yourself, how many of the visible attributes are objective (mandatory and optional), and how many are subjective (reputation attributes)? You will be surprised. Then Google yourself to get a picture of what others find on you, what has become a part of your reputation, in effect engraved into what others would perceive as you.

Returning to the start of this article, does it matter? Now you can answer this question. Your identity is worth more to others than what it is to you, and your reputation is priceless to you but of no value to others. Your identity is made up of facts, whereas your reputation is subjective. Hence it is very important to understand that your identity is not the same as your reputation, because the two need to be managed very differently.

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## 4. Protecting your identity

Your identity and anything that links to you, including the digital residue you leave in your wake, is a gold mine for gold diggers. Gold diggers can come in many forms; there are those that you share your personal information with because:

- You have to, i.e. you have no choice with government authorities including law enforcement, health authorities, those you want to borrow money from, etc.,
- You choose to, i.e. you are a participant in one or more loyalty card schemes where you allow them to track your purchasing habits;
- You are unaware that a cookie has been downloaded onto your PC that tracks your activities;
- You are aware that a cookie has been downloaded onto your PC that provides your favourites, shopping basket, etc., when shopping online, e.g. [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)
- Identity thieves steal/borrow and use your identity for fraudulent purposes.

There are loads of resources online, and books published on how to protect your identity, such as: keep a paper shredder handy at home, don't take out loyalty cards, avoid

accepting cookies (that is if you know they are being downloaded), install the most stringent privacy settings on your browser, use strong passwords and change them often, etc.; a diverse compilation of security procedures aimed to protect your identity, but at the same time, collectively are not altogether practical.

It is impossible to protect your identity in its entirety, and most people do not even try. One could roughly categorise the efforts that people take at three levels:

- 1) Those that are not aware, or concerned about threats to their personal privacy and do not see identity theft as something that can happen to them;
- 2) Those that are aware but feel that the benefits received from those interested in their identity, i.e. loyalty card schemes, outweigh any supposed costs to their privacy, however this group does appreciate the threat of identity theft;
- 3) Those that are very concerned about the threat of personal privacy: they avoid loyalty card schemes, have software installed on their PC to inform them of any threats (i.e. cookies at the lowest level), and have a paper shredder at home.

You can do yourself a service by identifying yourself within one of these three categories, and then be conscious about what you are, or are not doing to protect your identity. Search online for “protecting identity”, you will be offered a rich collection of advice in the form of: tips, articles, videos, etc., then you can make a choice on what works for you.

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## 5. Nurturing your reputation

As already mentioned earlier in this article, your reputation is not worth stealing. Yet it is worth nurturing. It has been referred to as “fools’ gold” in this article only because in essence your online reputation can attain a value that may not reflect accurately the person sitting behind. The attributes are in spite of everything ‘subjective’. It is by using your reputation that you can online create a type of personal branding. Once you have separated your reputation from your identity it becomes quite straightforward to take it and manage it. Your reputation could possibly, be divided into three phases: (1) what you did before, (2) what you are doing now and in your lifetime, and finally (3) what happens after you die. It takes skill to manage your reputation effectively.

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## 6. Taking control of your past reputation

The consequences of *what you have done before* today, can be positive or negative. It is positive if it reaffirms what you have stated about yourself. If it does not, for example, there are photos of you half naked and drunk on your MySpace profile, then this information has the potential to be damaging to what you want to achieve today or tomorrow and doubtless in your professional life, both online and offline. As already stated, digital information has a persistence value i.e. it never goes away.

There are companies around that are providing services to help us manage digital residue linked to reputation:

- There is Reputation Defender that offers to clean up any digital residue that has the potential to negatively impact your (and your children’s) reputation. They offer a one-off cleaning service, and continuous, e.g. checking what your children have been doing online on a monthly basis and sending reports, cleaning up, etc.;
- And then there are services such as ZoomInfo, which empowers you to have some control on what you want people to find on you first, and if you are lucky, maybe they will not look any further. These types of services deliver unstructured information in a structured way. For instance it searches the Internet for occurrences of your name in newspapers published around the world. If instances are returned you are given the option to claim them as linked to your identity. To prove your identity you need to provide your credit-card details. Once you have claimed your identity, any person that Googles you will be returned with your ZoomInfo profile near the top of the search ranking (Lawrence Öqvist, 2009).

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## 7. Taking control of your reputation - today and in the future

LinkedIn, Spoke, and similar online professional networking tools are a perfect median for creating a personal online brand that reflects *who you are today and the vision of what you want to be in the future*. The only objective attributes are your name and work experience, education, etc., from here you can be as subjective as is ethically acceptable. For example your online brand is enhanced by requesting personal recommendations for your work from existing, or ex-colleagues. Be aware that everything in your profile is searchable, so encourage those recommending you to use words that will return as key word searches that persons such as head-hunters will use when looking for candidates, e.g. visionary, a leader. The most powerful statements about your capabilities come from others, not you. These will make you into a powerful online brand.

Other ways to strengthen your brand is: to show active participation in online forums; host or partake in a professional blog; twitter; volunteer for work in charities that give you an opportunity to practice skills that are not possible in your present role; take part in sporting events; publish, or think about becoming a speaker. All of these activities will be recorded somewhere online and will return in a search against your name.

Finally to maintain a clean online reputation you need to be wary of cross-feeding, i.e. contaminating your professional reputation with your social activities, possible by allowing feeds between your social and professional profiles and accepting friend requests in Facebook from your professional network. Google yourself and see what it returns. It is also advisable to make your privacy settings on Facebook or whatever social median you use as stringent as is possible. Beware that your friends may not do the same. They can tag you, link you and describe activities that include you that could be public domain.

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## 8. Rest in virtual peace (RIVP)

Do you really care about what happens to the virtual you after you die? Well it seems that many do. In fact this space is becoming so important that a new and growing business has appeared on the landscape in the shape of the 'virtual mortuary'. Just as a mortuary takes care of your physical remains after your death, the virtual mortuary takes care of your virtual self.

A virtual mortuary is in effect a third-party assigned to take care of a person's online identity and reputation after they have died. There is a new start-up for example in Sweden called "My Webwill". Even though clearly this type of effort could be done by some person near and dear to the deceased, by using an objective third-party, you can in effect leave a 'will' on how you would like to be seen by your children, grandchildren etc., in your online persona after you have moved on to the other not so physical or virtual world (Lawrence Öqvist, 2010). A virtual mortuary could offer services that can keep some communications active after death, so you are twittering in the afterlife, and they could theoretically even organise your virtual funeral in Second Life or in some other virtual world where you virtually existed in life.

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## 9. I am what I want to be...

Your identity needs to be protected and your reputation needs nurturing. These are the two key takeaways from this article, once you have absorbed and acknowledged that they are in fact not the same.

What's more is that your identity can make money for "gold diggers", whereas your reputation is of no value except for what you make of it; and then its subjective value is of worth only to yourself.

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