

# Managing your Online Reputation: Issues of Ethics, Trust and Privacy in a Wired, “No Place to Hide” World

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**Abstract**—This paper examines the issues, the dangers and the saving graces of life in a transparent global community where there is truly “no place to hide”. In recent years, social networks and online groups have transformed issues of privacy and the ways in which we perceive and interact with others. The idea of reputation is critical to this dynamic. The discussion begins with a brief etymological history of the concept of reputation and moves to an exploration of how and why online communication changes our basic nature, our various selves and the Bakhtin idea of the polyphonic nature of truth. The discussion considers the damaging effects of bullying and gossip, both of which constitute an assault on reputation and the latter of which is not limited to the lifetime of the person. It concludes with guidelines and specific recommendations.

**Keywords**—online reputation, gossip, cyberbullying, privacy

## I. INTRODUCTION

REPUTATION, reputation, reputation! O! I have lost my reputation. I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial. My reputation, Iago, my reputation!” These are the words of Cassio in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Act II. Scene III, 242-244 [1]. Iago counters: “As I am an honest man, I thought you had received some bodily wound; there is more offence in that than in reputation. Reputation is an idle and most false imposition; oft got without merit, and lost without deserving: you have lost no reputation at all, unless you repute yourself such a loser. [2]

With whom should we agree? Today, in a wired world where news stories seem to appear first on Youtube or twitter before a whisper of the events are reported in the press, who is right: Cassio or Iago? Is a man’s “good name” something to be guarded, tended and lauded or—when a multitude of eyes seem to be on us at every moment and every tragedy gets washed away in the tide of others, banished to oblivion even before it can be properly absorbed, is the whole idea of what others think of us to be disregarded completely as we go about our daily business? Or is it important to our own self-esteem and development as fully actualized individuals?

The idea of reputation has a long history. According to the Oxford English Dictionary [3], the word’s origin is “Middle English and it is derived from the Latin *reputatio*(n-), from *reputare* ‘think over.’” The definition provided by the Oxford English Dictionary is as follows: “1. The condition, quality, or fact of being highly regarded or esteemed; credit, fame, distinction; respectability, good report 2. The honour, credit, good name, or fame of a particular person or thing. Honour 3.

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Opinion, supposition; (also) the opinion or view of a person about something. 4. The fame, credit, or notoriety of being, doing, or possessing something. As a count noun: a person or thing’s esteem or fame. Also: a source of honour and credit the beliefs or opinions that are generally held about someone or something: his reputation was tarnished by allegations that he had taken bribes. 5. a widespread belief that someone or something has a particular habit or characteristic: his knowledge of his subject earned him a reputation as an expert.”

The word is old. According to the OED, it came into common usage around 1390 and was first used by St Augustine in approximately 1350. Some highlights of its etymology follow: “In 1549 in T. Chaloner’s translation of Erasmus Praise of Folie sig. Fijj, observes, “Shame, reproach, losse of reputacion, . . . maie do the as much hurt as thou felist them.” In 1598, Barckley Disc. Felicitie of Man v. 526 comments that “Some hunt after honour, others after riches and reputation.” More poetically, in 1654, R. Whitlock *Ζωοτομία* 21 claims that The living may be Tenants at will to reputation; but it is the possession of the dead.” One only need remember the sullied reputation of former US President Richard Milhouse Nixon, fixed forever since his death. Or that of another president, Kennedy, whose reputation was irrevocably harmed only after his death by the true stories of a handful of those claiming to be his mistresses [4] and tell-all accounts of his infidelities which are being unearthed as recently as February 5, 2012 [4]: will he ever be allowed to “rest in peace”? More recently, in 1987 the OED [3] reports that in the N.Y. Times Mag. 5 Apr. 29/1: “For many of us, reputation is our most valuable, if least ‘priceable’, asset.” The most recent update in the meaning of the word, however, is hopeful. In 2004, according to the OED [3], in the *Journal of Law & Religion*. 20 29 “There is yet a Balm in Gilead—a faith that loss of reputation, property and even life will not have the last word.” We go about our lives today, however, in a fragile economy with a scarcity of jobs for many, with the omnipresence of Facebook, the blurring of our online and face to face physical lives as well as the overlap of our personal and professional lives—and at the heart of it all, an almost complete lack of privacy. The recent case of Weiner [6] in the US recalled the fallen reputations of so many public figures before him and surely, many in the future. Wikipedia even has an entry entitled, “List of scandals involving evangelical Christians” [7]—numbering currently 36 and including Jimmy Fallen, Jim Bakker, Melissa Scott and this year, 2012, Jason Russell. There are surely many more from many other faiths. These scandals have destroyed careers as well as lives. Indeed, it seems that we must side more with Cassio [1] in the belief and fear that reputation is extremely important. Today both corporations and individuals can even engage trust agents to repair and/or manage reputation [8-10]: it is perceived as that

serious. Indeed, in a completely wired transparent world, it would seem that, as Wikipedia [11] suggests, reputation “is a fundamental instrument of social order based upon distributed, spontaneous social control.” Even though it is still under review and probably still evolving, of reputation management, Wikipedia [12] claims: “Reputation management, is the process of tracking an entity’s actions and other entities’ opinions about those actions; reporting on those actions and opinions; and reacting to that report creating a feedback loop. All entities involved are generally people, but that need not always be the case. Other examples of entities include animals, businesses, or even locations or materials.” One remembers vividly—as Matthew Goode [13] writes of a city’s reputation, “Stanley Cup riots (of 2011) shame Vancouver”. One can only agree with the Wikipedia [12] observation that this new field, reputation management, “has come into wide use with the advent of widespread computing.” That is, before the online world became so pervasive and almost more significant than the physical world, managing one’s reputation seemed to mean working hard and keeping honest. But think of David Milgard [14] or Steven Truscott [15] who were honest and still—not only were they left with damaged reputations, but wrongfully incarcerated and only much later—far too late—were discovered to be innocent. Where does truth lie? How can we best navigate our journey?

## II. ONLINE LIVES, OUR VARIOUS SELVES, THE POLYPHONIC CONCEPT OF TRUTH AND BAKHTIN

Let’s begin with an examination of our worlds and the various selves we present: first is one’s own self and one’s opinion of one’s self or self-esteem. This varies depending on what has happened in our lives, on what others think of us and perhaps even fluctuates with time of day. It is hardly fixed. Then, what self do we convey to our friends and family and how does their opinion of us affect that self? And how does our opinion of them affect the dynamic and their own self perception? Next, in the slightly larger world of day to day interactions with those outside the family—perhaps friends and acquaintances, co-workers and shop clerks—what selves do we present? Further exploring the nesting of selves, what about our internet self? What worlds do we inhabit and with what frequency and what selves do we present on for example, facebook, professional forums, and in a variety of blogs, tweets and....? How do these intersect with our own concept of self or the self known by our face to face interactions with family, friends and co-workers? Finally, would be our spiritual self: how is that connected with the above: the death row inmate proven guilty again and again and yet who still believes in his or her innocence and that God or Allah alone knows the true self and sees that innocence? Or, in the case of David Milgard and Steven Truscott, finally the courts see the error of their initial judgment which restores their good reputation finally. But what damage has been done to these individuals who have had to suffer from a mistaken damaged reputation? So what selves are we referring to with regard to reputation and how does the internet change or modify this sense of self and our good reputation? Thomas [16] observes that: “In the digital world... the performance of identity is divorced from a

direct interaction with (the) cues from the physical, and instead relies upon the texts we create in the virtual worlds we inhabit. These texts are multiple layers through which we mediate the self and include the words we speak, the graphical images we adopt (perhaps) as avatars to represent us and the codes and other linguistic variations on language we use to create a full digital presence (pp 5-6). Additionally, critical social constructivists Phillips and Jorgensen [17] make similar arguments about language and discourse, foregrounding their work with this underlying belief: “Language, then, is not merely a channel through which information about underlying mental states and behavior or facts about the world are communicated. On the contrary, language is a “machine” that generates, and as a result constitutes, the social world. This also extends to the constitution of social identities and social relations. It means that changes in discourse are a means by which the social world is changed. Struggles at the discursive level take part in changing, as well as reproducing, the social reality.” (p. 9)

Further complicating matters of interaction online is not just the mode but the method we use to interact through language in an online environment. Nielson [18] proposes that, “online readers are ‘selfish, lazy, and ruthless’ they don’t cut you, the writer, any slack. They are slippery, peripatetic, and forever on the lookout... Instead of spending a lot of time on a single page, users move between many pages and try to pick the most tasty segments of each...In the thickets of online information, we become hunters and gatherers (talk about regression!), going after the easiest prey first and the lowest hanging fruit.”

Nielson [18] goes on to suggest: “online reading seems twofold like a giant-font letter F superimposed on the virtual page. Users first read in a horizontal movement across the upper part of the content area (the F’s top bar). Next, they move toward the bottom of the page and read across in a second horizontal movement that covers a shorter span than the first one (the F’s lower bar). Finally, users scan the page’s left side in a quick vertical glance (the F’s stem). “F for fast,” Nielson says of online reading, based on his eye-tracking results. Needless to say, this hardly engenders respect for the writer—or even that the message received by the hurried reader is even accurate or as the writer had intended. Kruger, Epley, Parker and Ng [19] further observe that, “by adopting email, let alone instant messaging or texting, as our prime modes of communication, we are compromising our ability to express ourselves precisely, forthrightly, and with nuance. Sarcasm and earnestness are mature, “adult” sentiments. Losing the ability to accurately communicate or “read” them significantly diminishes our repertoire of developed emotion and our expressive bandwidth. While predicting that the end of language as we know it is premature, research... indicates that netspeak represents a largely inadequate mode of communication, one characterized by informality to the point of sloppiness, curtness to the point of rudeness, and a childlike avoidance of complex ideas that cannot be reduced to monosyllabic words or frowns or smiles.”

In addition to the way in which language, text and our use of them impact online discussion and communication, Aboujaoude [20] points out that personality modifications can

ensue, “grandiosity, defined as an exaggerated belief in one’s importance and one’s abilities, seems to be in the Internet’s DNA...the sense of being outside of normal rules and of operating in an economic, legal and ethical vacuum... encourages the large-scale dreaming that defines many of our online lives...the conquistador mentality remains at the heart of our quixotic approach to the virtual world...the grandiose objectives that mark many people’s online lives tend to lie on the superficial side and are more preoccupied with reproducing short-lived attention than something substantive or lasting—a flailing chicken step will always generate more hits than any intelligent contributions in an online forum of ideas”.

Furthermore he goes on to state that Mark Leary, a Duke University psychologist, describes Facebook as essentially “a self-presentational vehicle” that is “a bit like advertising...while all cultures of the world have felt a seasonal need for disguise—think Halloween, Mardi Gras, Venetian masquerades, and Rio carnivals—reinvention and pretense are now pervasive and constant, thanks to a large degree to the internet. As a result, it is more difficult than ever to tell when one’s mask is on and when it is off... the Internet makes it easier to suspend ethical codes governing conduct and behaviour”. Importantly, “gentleness, common courtesy and the little niceties that announce us as well-mannered, civilized, and social members of the species are quickly stripped away to reveal a completely naked, often unpleasant human being.” (as we witness in cyberbullying and gossip)

In his *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Art* [21] Bakhtin introduces three important concepts related to this discussion of selves and reputation. “First, is the concept of the unfinalizable self: individual people cannot be finalized, completely understood, known, or labeled. Though it is possible to understand people and to treat them as if they are completely known, Bakhtin’s conception of unfinalizability respects the possibility that a person can change, and that a person is never fully revealed or fully known in the world.” Some may speculate that “this conception reflects the idea of the “soul” or the individual’s “potentially infinite capability and worth”[22]. Perhaps only the individual and his spiritual authority can judge of course but we each have this capability and in possessing this ability, a consequent sense of privacy. Reminiscent of Iago’s response about a lost reputation, “It is we alone who each determine and who govern what we choose to think in our own minds”[23]. Except when the opinions of others or perhaps even our own mental state takes over our private sense of self-worth and floods us with either an inflated or depressed view of ourselves such as the far too many cyberbullying victims who take their own lives as a consequence of the harassment. The second major idea in Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Art* is the idea of the relationship between the self and others. “According to Bakhtin, every person is influenced by others in an inescapably intertwined way, and consequently no voice can be said to be isolated. In an interview, Bakhtin once explained that, “In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one’s own exterior and comprehend it as

a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space, and because they are others.” [24] Thus, “Bakhtin’s philosophy greatly respected the influences of others on the self, not merely in terms of how a person comes to be, but also in how a person thinks and how a person sees him- or herself truthfully”[25]. Bakhtin found in Dostoevsky’s work a true representation of—although the concept is not original with him—‘polyphony’, that is, many voices. “Each character in Dostoevsky’s work represents a voice that speaks for an individual self, distinct from others. This idea of polyphony is related to the concepts of unfinalizability and self-and-others, since it is the unfinalizability of individuals that creates true polyphony...Bakhtin briefly outlined the polyphonic nature of truth. He criticized the assumption that, if two people disagree, at least one of them must be in error. He challenged philosophers for whom plurality of minds is accidental and superfluous. For Bakhtin, truth is not a statement, a sentence or a phrase. Instead, truth is a number of mutually addressed, albeit contradictory and logically inconsistent, statements. Truth needs a multitude of carrying voices. It cannot be held within a single mind, it also cannot be expressed by ‘a single mouth’. The polyphonic truth requires many simultaneous voices. Bakhtin does not mean to say that many voices carry partial truths that complement each other. A number of different voices do not make the truth if simply “averaged” or “synthesized”. It is the fact of mutual addressivity, of engagement, and of commitment to the context of a real-life event, that distinguishes truth from untruth. When, in subsequent years, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Art* was translated into English and published in the West, Bakhtin included an additional chapter on the concept of “carnival” and the book was published with the slightly different title, *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics*. Recalling Aboujaoude’s idea that we use different masks in varying online contexts and conversations, “Bakhtin, proposes that carnival is the context in which distinct individual voices are heard, flourish and interact together. The carnival creates a ‘threshold’ situations where regular conventions are broken or reversed and genuine dialogue becomes possible. The notion of a carnival was Bakhtin’s way of describing Dostoevsky’s polyphonic style: each individual character is strongly defined, and at the same time the reader witnesses the critical influence of each character upon the other. That is to say, the voices of others are heard by each individual, and each inescapably shapes the character of the other.” [25]

It is a challenge—if not impossible—to keep this in mind, to be focused on Iago’s pragmatic approach to the issue when one’s reputation has been damaged in whatever arena. In fact, the results can be devastating and can happen to nationalities (think of how Germany’s entire reputation as a country was impacted when information about the Holocaust which was made public in 1941 [26]), corporations (think of the Honda recall of December 2011) [27], movie stars (allegations that Tom Cruise is gay [28]) and even ordinary children not yet out of school such as Megan Meier.

### III. FROM GOSSIP TO CYBERBULLYING

The first case of cyberbullying occurred in 2006 [29]. Megan Meier committed suicide after she was rejected by a fictitious boyfriend created by her former friend's mother through the social media networking site, Myspace. In a study conducted by Pew Internet and American Life Project, "Cyberbullying and online teens" June 27, 2007 [30], Lenhart concludes that "girls are more likely than boys to be targets; and teens who share their identities and thoughts online are more likely to be targets than are those who lead less active online lives." The study ends with the dire statement that, "bullying has entered the digital age. The impulses behind it are the same, but the effect is magnified. In the past, the materials of bullying would have been whispered, shouted or passed around. Now, with a few clicks, a photo, video or conversation can be shared with hundreds via email or millions through a website, online profile or blog posting." D. Jackson [31] cites further examples of the way in which what would formerly be only gossip transmitted by word of mouth becomes magnified exponentially: "Amanda Marcuson, 14, of Birmingham, Michigan, reported some girls in her eighth-grade class for stealing a pencil case filled with makeup that belonged to her. As soon as she got home, the instant messages started popping up on her computer screen. She was a tattletale and a liar, they said. Shaken, she typed back, "You stole my stuff!" She was a "stuck-up," came the instant response in the box on the screen, followed by a series of increasingly ugly insults. That evening, Amanda went to a basketball game with her family. But the barrage of electronic insults did not stop. Like a lot of other teenagers, Amanda has her Internet messages automatically forwarded to her cell phone, and by the end of the game she had received 50 - the limit of its capacity. "It seems like people can say a lot worse things to someone online than when they're actually talking to them," said Amanda. The girls never said another word to her in person. Similarly. "Jodi Plumb, a 15-year-old girl from Mansfield, England, was horrified to discover an entire web site had been created to insult and threaten her. The site contained abuse concerning her weight and even had a date for her "death." Jodi found out about the web site when a fellow pupil tried to take a photograph of her with a digital camera and said it was for the web. [31] Cyberbullying is of course, not confined to adolescents. Most recently in the news is the Rutgers case of cyberbullying in which "a former Rutgers University student... allegedly used a webcam to stream footage of his roommate's sexual encounter with another man. Dharun Ravi faces a 15-count indictment, which includes hate crime charges, in connection with the death of Tyler Clementi, Ravi's roommate. Clementi killed himself after the incident, jumping from the George Washington Bridge between New York and New Jersey. Last year, Ravi turned down a plea deal that would have allowed him to avoid jail time." [32] What has happened to us? What happened to common courtesy and decorum if it ever existed? Aboujaoude [20] suggests that "The Internet makes it easier to suspend ethical codes governing conduct and behaviour. Gentleness, common courtesy and the little niceties that announce us as well-mannered, civilized, and social members of the species are quickly stripped away to reveal a completely

naked, often unpleasant human being...(furthermore) the lack of access to each other's emotions during a cyberbullying episode compounds the pain as we have seen in the incidents cited above. Kowlski [33] explains, "When people tease or bully face-to-face," "they use off-record markers (winks, smiles, etc) to indicate the intent behind their behaviour and to assess its impact. Such nonverbal cues—with the possible exception of emoticons...—are largely lacking during the virtual attack. The result is that the perpetrators are more out of touch with the pain they are inflicting because it is invisible to them, and the victims cannot know if the perpetrators are truly bullying them or "just kidding". Naturally, the victim's instinct of self-preservation makes them assume the worst about the attack and the attacker and convinces them that someone is really out to get them." Aboujaoude [20] concludes that "virtual violence seems to cause a rise in violence in the entire "global village", and across cultures with very different baseline levels of aggression and different child-rearing practices...as far as the less attractive side of virtual life is concerned, it would seem as though we are all more alike than different". Thankfully, schools are taking the problem seriously and there are a multitude of learning activities [34-37] addressing the problem and approaching it in with sensitivity and in a proactive way, encouraging students to think about ethics and the feelings of all parties involved. But of course, the work continues. With the growing use of cell phones for all ages and new ways of using technology, children and youth explore their own sexuality online rather than merely face to face, with sexting often presents dismal consequences for the victim and what was once very private exploration of pre-teen sexuality is suddenly at risk of becoming very very public.

### IV. PRIVACY

So, in an online wired post-911 world, is there any privacy? The OED defines privacy as: "The state or condition of being alone, undisturbed, or free from public attention, as a matter of choice or right; seclusion; freedom from interference or intrusion." [38] If reputation is what others think of you, then privacy is your own space, your own corner apart from others. Or is it? Do any of us have a "corner apart"? If we use computers to write emails, posts, blogs, tweets, journals, recipes, post photos, compose academic papers... if we use computers to connect online to any site we wish, then can we say that we actually have any privacy or is the Mark Zuckerberg observation of 2010 correct that, "the age of privacy is over" [39]. Although he relented somewhat and in the past year offered some increased yet complex privacy controls for facebook users [40-43], his statement is provocative. And persists. Indeed, it is evident that one must be vigilant and knowledgeable. A reading of T. Wilson's *Manage your online reputation* [44] suggests that we be cautious and careful in all our tasks at all times: that there is nothing more important than reputation. On the other hand, as Bady suggests only a few months ago in *World without walls*, "privacy has a surprising resilience: always being killed, it never quite dies" explaining that it was once that publicity which was the more foreign concept and that "in the last 50

years, the sheer density of the information environment has reached and surpassed the point at which privacy might be maintained by walls. And a legal system built on a presumption of information scarcity has no chance at protecting privacy when personal information is ubiquitous.” However, at the same time, Bady acknowledges that “contemporary information technologies are placing intolerable burdens upon the capacity of individuals and groups to seclude themselves.”

#### V. GUIDELINES FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

Brogan and Smith [46] propose several specific steps to protect one’s reputation which apply not only to individuals but corporations as well: “(1) monitor what is being said about you: build a listening station (sign up for a gmail account and got to [www.google.com/reader](http://www.google.com/reader) as well as [www.technorati.com](http://www.technorati.com) and type your name into the search bar. When the results page comes up, right click on the little orange RSS button and select copy-link location. Return to google Reader, click the blue plus button and paste what you copied into there; (2) ...be human (promote others twelve times as much as you promote yourself and share a bit of your personal life in your professional life); (3) make an impact, leave genuine worthwhile comments, often; and (4) if you mess up, remember the three A’s: acknowledge, apologize, act (pp. 78-102). Finally, I would add. Always always: think before you post anything. As it may be there forever. It may be viewed by millions. There is no anonymity. No privacy. No forgetting. Everything is public. At the very least, remembering the victims of cyberbully and ways in which gossip about a person loses no momentum online even after their death, be kind.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

In an online world, it would seem that Cassio’s distress—indeed palpable and almost physical—is more apt than Iago’s cavalier attitude that it does not matter, particularly if one is a victim and yet, it is also true that we own the thoughts in our own heads. Interestingly, if one is a perpetrator, it would seem that Iago’s words are more relevant and that reputation is not so important. However, whether we participate to a great or modest extent in the online world, our voices are now part of the multitude of voices on the internet. The online environment has effected fundamental changes in the way we read, respond and generally interact with others. We have become less careful. We hurry through text and image, often the only clues we often have as to meaning. We superimpose what we expect to find and we think that in this multitude, everything we may contribute matters less. Transience is the new permanence and thus reputation, care for the feelings of others and taking the time to explore, listen to others and reflect—all these are of little consequence. But our individual actions and thoughts—as we have explored—can have great consequence on the lives of other individuals as well as our own. It has the potential to make information instantaneous, to inform us, to unite us in helping each other. It would seem that the classic advice, “Think before you speak need be amended only by the addition of “write, post, or tweet”, which are now probably our more usual modes of communication. Our various selves, our

various voices on the internet, are visible as never before. But we can still have a sterling reputation and better not only ourselves but the world in both its smallest dimension as well as its largest by using the above strategies. Perhaps through this new transparency and accountability, we will each become better people as individuals. And the world will become a better, kinder place.

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