

Almost never too late

the price we have to pay for not protecting and shaping our digital footprints is escalating.

Who decides who we are, what we are and how much we are worth? Who decides about our integrity, dignity and reputation?

To assert personal control over our own identity and reputation is certainly a challenging task given the sheer magnitude and complexity of contemporary digital technology.

However, we propose in this article that the magnitude of exploitation and criminality which goes with this technology now makes the assertion of personal control an absolute must.

Whilst it is well known that digital identities are built behind our backs by search engines and social media, many people tend to overlook the fact that

- the search engines and media create different images of who we are;
- some of these identities are very distant from how we see ourselves or how we would like to be seen by others;
- in an increasing number of aspects of our lives, the significance of our digital identities can well exceed that of our genuine human identity;
- our digital identities and activities leave not only digital footprints, but also ethical footprints - ones which can sometimes be quite difficult to change.

Contemporary tools allow us to create our own digital identities very consciously, and perhaps also to 'fake' them just a little, too. Such tools can, however, also be used by third parties to fake our identity in a way which we do not choose. Our faces, voices, visual appearances, environments and activities can all be manipulated and faked - either to our advantage or to our disadvantage. Consequently, digital identities now have a price, a value for ourselves and others - as reports on examples of extortion and sextortion clearly show. Whilst the misuse of credit-cards, for example, can often be rectified, identity-theft can lead to unrecoverable financial losses which run into millions. Coupled with the dangers of such serious financial losses comes a danger which is perhaps even more devastating: the damage which can be caused to what we term our personal 'ethical health'¹ - i.e. our moral conscience, dignity and social reputation - as also the ethical health of our loved ones and the organisations with which we are involved. In particular, violations of our personal deep-ethics² can cause far-reaching damage to our ethical health which, in turn, impacts negatively on our mental well-being, our emotional stability and our purpose in life.³

As an example, a family in England had to move its home after indecent images were sent to dozens of women in the local area in 2017 by a man who had misused the digital identity of

¹ Robinson, S.D.G., 2016, Ethical Health Management - An Introduction To Central Terms And Concepts, <https://www.praevmedic-vph.com/discover-more>

² Robinson, S.D.G., 2017, Ethik Macht Krank - die medizinischen Folgen ethischer Konflikte am Arbeitsplatz, <https://www.praevmedic-vph.com/discover-more>

³ Robinson, S.D.G., 2014, Interethical Competence, <https://www.bbv-consultancy.com/articles/>

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the father. “It destroyed everything – our home, where we live, everything for the kids – their school... It’s had a massive tsunami effect. It’s completely ruined me,” the father said⁴. Cases like this can often lead to broken relationships, long-term depressions and suicides.

The types and gravities of damage which are caused by the proliferating misuse of digital identities have been studied in detail by various organisations and many of the results have been made publicly available, e.g. the Identity Theft Aftermath Report 2018⁵. One of the key conclusions which can be drawn from these reports is that the proactive, adequate shaping and protection of our digital identities is indeed a must.

This requires us to be fully up-to-date about both the technology and the motives behind how our personal data can be ‘mined’ by other individuals and organisations. It requires us to know and control what information about ourselves is available on the internet and even on the dark net. In reality, however, few of us have the time or the motivation to follow each and every technological development: how many of us even have the inclination to read and understand all the small-print in ‘conditions of use’ or to learn about the crucial information which is not even written there? The pace of everyday life and work is such that we often have to quickly click on that button which confirms that we have read and understood each and every condition and caveat. However, not only such button-clicks, but also each time we even start typing into our computers, whether on- or off-line, can mean that we forfeit yet another portion of our privacy and our inner peace of mind - unless, that is, we do take adequate precautions to protect our digital footprints.

In considering how to identify and undertake adequate measures to protect and shape our digital and ethical footprints⁶, it can be helpful to draw on the term ‘integrity’ as a guiding principle. This concept has taken on a slightly new meaning in the context of multiple identities and digital footprints⁷. In order to for us to be perceived by others in today’s world as being a person with a high level of integrity, we need to ensure that

- our various identities and footprints are in ethical harmony with each other;
- the ethical contents of the harmonised identities are shaped in a way which corresponds to what contemporary societies, relatives, friends, colleagues and/or other relevant third-parties expect of us;
- the identities and footprints are adequately protected from wilful damage or misuse by third parties.

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⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-dorset-48199225> / (accessed on 12th January 2021)

⁵ <https://www.idtheftcenter.org/aftermath2018/> (accessed on 12th January 2021)

⁶ Robinson, S.D.G., 2016, Ethical Health Management - An Introduction To Central Terms And Concepts, <https://www.praevmedic-vph.com/discover-more>

⁷ Robinson, S.D.G. & Ettlín, A., 2020, Personal and Corporate Integrity – Reflections on a Grossly Misunderstood Builder and Destroyer of Worlds, <https://www.bbv-consultancy.com/articles/>