The Future Agenda for Authenticity

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What is the future agenda for authenticity? This was the question posed at a Vodafone Future Agenda breakfast seminar with some top thinkers from the corporate and academic world. You can read Diane Coyle's excellent discussion paper here. Here are my very rough marginal notes on that, I will write a separate blog about the actual seminar. All quotes are from Diane's paper:

> *'Authenticity has great salience in our times because new information and communication technologies have greatly expanded the scale and scope of the inauthentic.'*

This may be true but it ignores the parallel historical reality that a) mass media has also produced a distancing, inauthenticating effect that is now being contrasted with the greater apparent personalisation of social media.

Research at the LSE Media and Communications Department shows, for example, that the idea of digital natives is a myth and that factors like class, education etc are just as resonant in the digital sphere as they were before.

> *'People can be authentic or not'*

Again, this is true but the choice is more significant than just a choice of disguise. Those who are not authentic online devalue their own real presence as opposed to the constructed online presence. A lie, even online, is a lie. Online can sustain the lie, but to have a real world effect, online authenticity is necessary. Piracy is not the same as fake – this is to confuse ownership with authenticity. As Diane Coyle says ' an online copy of a song is no different from the original'.

The BBC snow experience, where UGC imagery gave a completely different narrative (A great day off work where people had a wonderful shared experience) from the mainstream media (It's a disaster for GDP because no-one went into work) shows the choice between one constructed version of reality and another – neither is right –but at least we have choice and they are contested in a way that they were not in the past.

> *'The establishment of credible, digital identities.'*

We are all going to have to get used to the fact that we have different identities – this was always the case – I am different aspects of the same person when I am at the football, at work, at home on holiday or in breakfast futurology seminar. The key word here is credible – as in credit-worthy – we can chose how authentic those identities are.

> *'The protection of intellectual property in the online world while continuing to protect civic space, an intellectual commons'*

I think that this is perfectly attainable if we wish to throw away the potential gains – I have no objection to markets, or pricing or property but all practical implementations of this that I see – such as Mandelson's latest proposals – involve trying to reduce digital creativity to physical property – this is trying to suggest a stream is like a house – one is a relationship of space and movement and shifting contiguity – that is, dynamic – while the other is concrete, static and discrete. We need quite a different order of economic relationship between production and reward – and I have no idea what it is.

> *'The continued provision of widespread access to communications and information. This brings enormous benefits especially to people largely excluded from the privileged information access of the past (libraries, print media). At the same time we must build in verification mechanisms, ensuring the reliability of widely-accessed online information.'*

This is quite right but it begs so many questions. There is an abundance of information but access is limited – not by the old physical limits but by authoritarian controls, inefficiencies and the limits on public media literacy .

I would suggest that the best 'verification mechanism' is journalism – but not traditional journalism, but what I describe as networked journalism where people participate in the process of information sharing and analysis and where 'journalist' of all kinds act as facilitators not gatekeepers. As Diane says:

> *'The most effective way to counteract falsehoods in future will probably come from the pooling of many messages and reports so the people can see where there is a consistent story… Trusted guides will come to play an increasingly important role. These could be social networks, media organizations, certain connected and well-informed individuals, or companies or other organizations. For these guides, too, reputation will be all-important and will require constant vigilance'*

But before we get to verification we need disclosure and at the moment government, business and civil society still see the digital sphere as a space to control their message rather than to open up to debate, accountability and engagement. The efforts of marketing people of all stripes are still simplistic at the moment – from eDemocracy to eSupermarkets there is a failure to truly understand authenticity or the networked effect.