

2. Modern Technological and Traditional Social Identities

Identity In a Community

Long ago there was one context that defined all. What you were and what you thought depended on where you sat: throne, bar stool, or the side of the field. Now, where you are sitting proves nothing.

Sitting at your computer you prepare to move some funds into bonds. Every year your retirement investing should become a little more conservative. So every year, the same week as your birthday, you reliably move 1% of your funds from the international equities market that has been so good to you, into Treasury Bills. The return may be less, but it will also be less risky.

Opening the browser window you see the first sale. AOL/Time Warner is being sold. What? Who is selling it? This is not a managed account. You end up taking two minutes and going to Google to get your fund's 800 number, since all links to contact lead to email. While you listen to the hold music the accounts you have spend two decades building up are emptying. FINALLY A HUMAN ON THE PHONE.

"Stop!! Thief!!" you cry. "lock my account"

"Sir, if you could just verify your identity. What is your mother's birthday?"

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"I am sorry but that is incorrect."

"SOMEONE ELSE CHANGED IT!! FREEZE THE ACCOUNT!"

"You will have to take this up with customer service. If a crime has been committed you must contact your local law enforcement. We can't do anything."

Not only is this imaginable, it has happened. A victim cannot prove himself the owner fast enough, even if she sees the account being looted. Identity systems are broken more fundamentally than at the technical level. Identity systems are broken, economically, and individuals are paying the price.

Yelling into the phone, watching retirement accounts descend slowly to nothing, how do you prove you are you? How do you connect all the work and hours you have put in with the wealth that suddenly seems so tenuously credited?

Long ago, lineage, location, and profession would have answered questions of rights and ownership. Choice of profession was a function of lineage and location. Potter, weaver, William's son, or the resident of the farm on the hill next to the manor could describe an individual with implicit and socially embedded information providing identity. But these names described the individual completely in one context because the context was small and the ability to track, confirm and share information was well within human abilities. Because the context was small, there were connections between everyone in the group. Such an environment today might be called a highly connected network or an information rich environment. Then it was simply the reality of a life that was likely to be short, difficult and extremely geographically constrained.

Indeed the adoption of these informal descriptions as last names was economic. The description weaver became the last name Weaver and William's son became Williamson because effective tax mechanisms required unique identification.

In that life, each name provided with it an evaluation of the person within the context of the community. Each description provided a reason to extend trust or not because each description provided a connection to this ubiquitous context, and to a reputation. Evidence of a 'good' family, wealth earned, a farm well tended, or a skill provided what would now be called information for a risk assessment and the potential to report any untrustworthy behavior to the community. Wealth was embodied in both tangible products and opportunity created from socially constructed identities. Today intangible production and wealth requires more carefully constructed identities.

Trust was based on identity, and identity was personal and family history. Such a history included an evaluation of behavior in past interactions and transactions. "An apple doesn't fall far from the tree." implies not that there were few distinct apples, but rather the larger tree defined each individual. It also meant no credit or quarter was given to the person identified as being part of a larger, distrusted family. As Snopes in the stories of Faulkner creatively illustrates, rising in the social and economic ranks was not made easier by association with a family that was not trusted as recently as the nineteenth century.

A person could improve his station in life to some small degree based on charisma, hard life, work, and luck using a positive local reputation. Apparently good weather and surviving a plague helped too. Individuals could not necessarily access even greater opportunities by escaping a bad reputation. Both traditional community suspicion of wandering souls, and modern mathematical models illustrate that the only reputation worth escaping is a bad one.