

My timeline is bigger than yours

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Abstract

The personal activity timeline has become a pervasive representation of personal identity in the life and work context. For example, people use Instagram to share life moments and LinkedIn to share their work achievements. At the same time, timeline events are created and shared with others as a representation of the evolving self, which has to fit in those systems. In this work, we study the case of the academic curriculum vitae (CV), because it is usually required to be public and thus it is visible in personal and organizational repositories. Moreover, the academic CV has a long history, which enables the study of temporal patterns across cultures and times. We demonstrate that the academic CV is shaped by implicit assumptions about what is valuable and it is crafted by contemporary tools. We suggest that the value system that underlies the creation and sharing of timeline events, also shapes the goals and the means that a person employs in everyday life. Since contemporary timelines emphasize the comparative and quantitative aspect of personal contributions, we suggest that further work should consider the collaborative and qualitative aspects.

Overview

It is usually assumed that an individual or larger social circles, such as organizations, cities, and nations have a particular identity, which regards their life and work activities, according to past achievements. As a matter of fact, biographies and history present the past as a series of events on a timeline. As soon as we realize that the representation of past events on media formats, such as paper, books, and digital media, is only a curation of past events, then we may regard any timeline and the respective identity as a semi-fictional story in the making[Josselson et al., 1997]. This malleability of any representation of identity suggests that besides the actual events the most important aspect is the representation (authoring) of those events on media formats. In this work, we suggest that the malleable aspects of identity representation should be consciously defined and authored by individuals, instead of being implicitly adopted through existing norms and practices, which might have ambiguous or even conflicting interests.

Identity representation is not just a reflection of reality and it might provide a context or even a blueprint for present and future action. There is a long tradition of work that regards identity as a malleable quality. The ship of Theseus is a philosophical thought experiment that questions the nature of perceived identity[Lowe, 1983]. In brief, the ship of Theseus is being maintained and gradually there

is no original piece on it. It is argued that the ship is no more the same one, but it still stands for the idea and the meaning of the original one. Thus, it is obvious that identity could stay the same over the years, as long as this is something that we wish. On the other hand, it is also implied that we could gradually emphasize alternative readings of the original story as we go along in the maintenance of the identity.

In this work, we focus on the authoring of biographies and in particular on the construction of the academic curriculum vitae (CV). It is very common to pick one of the popular CV templates, such as the Europass CV or fill-in the respective forms in a social medium, such as LinkedIn. It seems very convenient to fill-in the data in a pre made template, or in an interactive form that guides the user from field to field. At the same time, those templates can also be regarded as stories that have been told already in too many variations. For example, if you have filled-in the field with the undergraduate degree, then it is an easy guess that you are probably going to fill-in the next field with the MSc, and the next one with the PhD, etc. In other words, the preparation of a CV that is based on a (strongly) opinionated template is very much like the adoption of an external identity for your past, present, and most notably for your future, too. As a remedy, we suggest that we take the authoring of our CV in our own hands and we define both the template and the creative process for representing our identity. For this purpose, we demonstrate digital tools that should facilitate the gradual empowerment of the individual toward a more open-ended biography. We suggest that the academic duty of independent thinking might be served better by reconsidering and reflecting on the main values of contribution and that this purpose might be facilitated by a personal involvement with the tools that produce the CV.

References

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