

**Come to “Personal Digital Identity With LID” @ OSCON: Thursday, 4:30 in E144**



## The Digital Identity Big Bang

Coming To You Any Year From Now

By Johannes Ernst

 <http://netmesh.info/jernst>

Originally published at AlwaysOn [http://www.alwayson-network.com/comments.php?id=10193\\_0\\_3\\_0\\_C](http://www.alwayson-network.com/comments.php?id=10193_0_3_0_C)

Are you on the internet? What a question, you say, I was on-line long before I walked!

But **where** are you on the internet? We know where Amazon is on the internet (at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)), where on the internet the Fedex package is that you are expecting (at [fedex.com](http://fedex.com), type in the package number), and even where this article is that you are reading right now if you are reading this on-line (just look at your browser's address bar).

But where are you?

Wait, you say, I have an e-mail address, and an instant messaging handle, and I even post my pictures to Flickr. I'm a registered user at the New York Times' website, and also at OSCON. And at dozens of other websites, most of which I have forgotten about.

Exactly. There are so many bits and pieces of you on-line that it would be a miracle if you could recall all of them, never mind recall what they know about you. Every website has parts of your personal information: your name, your address and phone number perhaps, and often your credit card number. Some allow you to send messages, some are just for checking your 401k balance. Many have information about you that you wish they didn't have. And if you and I meet at a party tonight, it's just about impossible for either of us to find each other again in cyberspace because, well, while Google is good at finding Amazon, it is very bad at finding "you". Because there isn't a place on the internet where you can be found.

Digital Identity technologies intend to change all of this. Instead of having multiple personality disorder on-line, these technologies promise to give you a digital identity that is the same everywhere, or at least everywhere you want it to be the same. Instead of having to update dozens of websites with your new address – if you can remember them all – you'd have to update it only once. Instead of being spammed or phished because somebody got a hold of your e-mail address and pretended to be somebody else, you could set your communications preferences once and technology would enforce it for everybody.

I wish, you say ... but things are not as far out as they might seem. Digital Identity technologies go back at least to the 1970's (see The History of Digital Identity at <http://connectedtosource.jot.com/WikiHome>) and have progressed steadily since. Its most visible recent effort, Microsoft's Passport, failed miserably, it is true. But then, Microsoft was blissfully ignorant of pretty much all requirements for such systems, as even Microsoft employees have pointed out mercilessly since (see Kim Cameron's Laws of Identity <http://www.identityblog.com/stories/2004/12/09/thelaws.html>).

But Microsoft is trying again, this time with InfoCards, a much more promising approach that will be built into their upcoming Windows Longhorn release. Project Liberty, founded initially as a competitive response to Microsoft, now has over a hundred member companies that are working to define interoperability protocols supported by many companies. And a range of innovative new projects have sprung up as well, from Identity Commons <http://identitycommons.net/> over SXIP <http://www.sxip.com/> to Light-Weight Identity <http://lid.netmesh.org/> (disclaimer: I'm one of the inventors of LID). Smartly, Microsoft's Infocard attempts to be an umbrella technology that integrates all the others. Even mobile phone manufacturers and operators are getting into the business.

## Come to “Personal Digital Identity With LID” @ OSCON: Thursday, 4:30 in E144

So one of these years, and soon, the digital identity mess is going to get sorted out once and for all, at least if you believe the proponents. Certainly, recent well-publicized identity incidents such as the ChoicePoint disaster have helped to even spur congress into action. ~~Rumor has it~~ one can even get on the cover of a major technology magazine with this subject. See <http://www.linuxjournal.com/issue/137>

But substantial difficulties remain, among them a lack of agreement on who the main beneficiary of digital identity technologies should be. This matters because some of the candidate technologies inherently benefit some stakeholders more than others, and if the “wrong” technology were to take over the market, this would assign benefits and disadvantages to classes of users for a long time to come.

1. Should the benefits primarily go to companies, so they can more easily exchange information about consumers with other companies? For example, this would allow you to painlessly book your Hertz car from the American Airlines website, because the companies could exchange your contact and billing information with each other directly. However, many consumers actively resist anything that looks like further erosion of their privacy in the name of better marketing.
2. Should the benefits go to enterprises and governments, for security and legal compliance? In the wake of Enron and legislation such as HIPAA and the Patriot Act, many enterprises and governments believe they must become capable to enforce exactly who gets to do what, who gets to go where and determine after the fact who exactly did what. Without some form of digital identity that’s universal at least within one enterprise or country, this kind of enforcement is quite impossible, independently of how wise it is.
3. Or should digital identity technology become a tool to empower the user, the consumer, or better: the individual? Could digital identity technology become a tool by which the individual could roll back some of the data gathering that powerful commercial interests have perfected over the years, by allowing people like you and me to claim ownership of our own identifying information, and only reveal it to those parties that we choose to? **Could we actually claim our place in cyberspace, and own it?**

Interestingly, there’s a clear trend towards the idea that it is individuals who own their medical records, and not the healthcare providers who might store them. There’s even political support for the idea. If such ownership of information is possible for your health information, why not also for your credit information, for your buying behavior, and for all sorts of other information that is regularly stored by others about you?

This week at the O’Reilly Open Source Convention some of the intense discussions will continue. There will be presentations on Passel, SXIP and LID (the latter I’ll be giving). There will also be a BOF hosted by Phil Windley and other to talk about digital identity. The digital identity subject clearly engages more people emotionally than other technical innovations tend to. After all, digital identity is about us, about our place in cyberspace, and who controls where you and I get to be, what we can and cannot do there, and what others can do to us there. Few conversations today will have broader ramifications for many years to come.

Won’t you join the discussion? I’m looking forward to seeing you around, in person or on-line.

More information on the subject of digital identity:

- The “Digital Identity Gang” wiki at <http://cis-berkman.editme.com/> (probably the best central point for an overview over the subject)

More information on Light-Weight Digital Identity™ (LID™), our simple REST-ful digital identity protocol:

- Light-Weight Digital Identity home page at <http://lid.netmesh.org/>

You can contact me through my LID at <http://netmesh.info/jernst> – during or after OSCON. I’m looking forward to it!