



Call Me by My Name

Identity and digital identity
in Argentina.

Author



Paz Bernaldo

This publication presents the main results obtained during Paz's Yoti Digital Identity Fellowship, between September 2019 and October 2020. More details on her work can be found in the project website: www.identifique.cc.

The views expressed in this publication, except the ones attributed to the respective interviewees whose real names have been changed due to privacy reasons, are the author's alone and are not necessarily the views of Yoti.

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About This Report

This report presents the main results obtained during my year as a Yoti Digital Identity Fellow. My research question was: *How do vulnerable un- and under-employed people living in Buenos Aires and Mar del Plata understand and experience identity and digital identity?* In order to respond to this question I reviewed literature, conducted interviews with a range of people working and researching technology, society and human rights in Argentina, and conducted twenty-one semi-structured interviews with un- and under-employed people living in the cities of Mar del Plata and Buenos Aires. The systematic qualitative analysis (thematic analysis) presented in this report comes from those twenty-one interviews with people currently living in two neighborhoods in Mar del Plata (Malvinas y Libertad) and in a few different neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, including Villa 31, now formally called Padre Mujica. Additional outcomes from the Fellowship can be found at www.identifique.cc

The views presented in this report are those of the author only and do not necessarily represent those of Yoti, nor the views of any of the people interviewed as part of this work. The author bears full responsibility for any inaccuracies presented in this report. Please do not hesitate to get in touch with any suggestions, criticisms or comments to hola@identifique.cc

Who Funded This Work

Yoti is a global technology company founded in 2014. The company offers a digital identity platform aimed at improving security by verifying and authenticating the user. In 2019 Yoti launched its Fellowship Program, one of the key pillars of its Social Purpose Strategy and which offered a year long, funded scholarship for people passionate about carrying out grassroots research on identity. See more at: <https://www.yoti.com/social-purpose/>

Introduction

My research question:

How do vulnerable un- and under-employed people living in Buenos Aires and Mar del Plata understand and experience identity and digital identity?

The reason I applied for a Yoti Fellowship in the first place was my experience feeling I had to adapt my 'digital identity' (whatever that was) every time I was unemployed and looking for a job. I took particular interest and cared about what was there, online, about me, and how that could impact my chances of getting a job. I knew I existed online and offline and that I had some chances to 'curate' how I looked. So I thought it would be important to see if vulnerable people (made vulnerable, not born 'vulnerable') would do and feel the same. My assumption was that people interacting with a wide range of organizations through digital means would maneuver their identities, enhancing, modifying, or hiding parts of themselves. And, that unlike other groups, un- and under-employed individuals do so in rather conscious ways.

Little did I know I was getting myself into more than just a 'curating your online persona' scenario. It was about the role of the internet in the lives of low income and low middle-income people, about people proving - or not - they were who they said they were, in legal terms, online. Having to prove something to someone likely involved power relations. So, yes, I found myself digging into a complex issue.

For people struggling to make ends meet, like my interviewees, the online identities they can actually curate and willingly perform are little to nonexistent (Facebook is everything but a place for autonomous identity expression). They know they have much more power over in-person interactions, where they have a level of agency they don't have online, and that such interactions can actually get them a job (not Facebook). They also know there is an increasing digitization of all their interactions with the State and while some aspects of these seem beneficial, other aspects are a burden (such as requiring certain hardware). A burden many just can't get past, making them even further excluded. The IFE (Covid family emergency funding) was one example of these new burdens imposed on people. Local NGOs reported having to spend a big part of their time helping people apply to IFE. People did not have the right hardware, or the internet connection, or the knowledge or confidence in their knowledge to apply themselves. This makes us think IFE was not reaching the most vulnerable, such as people in rural areas, with little mobility, or un-housed people.

Context

The Start - in the words of Mercedes García Ferrari

At the end of the 19th century, Buenos Aires city saw the opening of the Anthropometric Identification Office, the first in Latin America and one of the first in the world, while the Buenos Aires province pioneered a system for classifying and filing fingerprints which was to become widely adopted throughout the 20th century, mostly in South America.

Historian Mercedes García Ferrari explores some of the reasons for these police identification developments in her book *'Ladrones Conocidos/Sospechosos Reservados'* (2010). One phenomenon she believes had a huge influence was immigration and its specificities. Between 1880 and 1914, Buenos Aires received the largest number of immigrants in relation to the local population in the world. The city quickly became unrecognizable, becoming the second largest city in the continent, after New York. As a result, old ways to individualize people became ineffective. From 1880 onwards, anonymity was the rule in the city, and authorities did not like such lack of control, especially because of their ideas around immigration: it had to be monitored for its association to the new dangers of the decade, socialism, communism and anarchism. García Ferrari's book is illuminating as it shows some of the root causes of the prevalent approach to identification in Argentina. The logic of control and the role of the police are still running engines, and the creation of SIBIOS (see below) is perhaps the most telling example.

Identification and control – SIBIOS, DNI, SID

In Argentina, the DNI (National Identity Document or *Documento Nacional de Identidad*) is the only personal identification document individuals are forced to hold. Law No 17671, which also created RENAPER (National Registry of Persons), has regulated its format and use since 1968 (when dictator Onganía was in power). It is issued to all people born in the country, and to foreigners who apply for a residence permit (see more on GISWatch 2020).

In 2014, RENAPER issued a resolution that established that the only valid identification document would be the new digital DNI, and that the citizen's biometric data was to be digitised and collected into a unified database. That database is the Federal Biometric Identification System for Security (SIBIOS), created in 2011 by an executive order under the Ministry of Security. SIBIOS collects biometric data, mainly fingerprints and facial patterns, and its main users are the Federal Police, the National Gendarmerie, the National Coastguard, the Airport Security Police, RENAPER and Immigration, but each province can adhere to include their police force as user and contributor (ADC, PI 2017). At the beginning of April 2017, another decree established the extension of the invitation to join SIBIOS to "all those agencies dependent on the Executive Power or Judicial Power, both National and Provincial and of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires", so they could formulate biometric queries in real time (PI 2019).

Argentina's Sistema de Identidad Digital (SID) is a platform linked to RENAPER. It is voluntary and uses facial recognition software to validate users' access to public and private services with a particular focus on integrating the system with health and banking services in the country (CITRIS Lab 2019). The facial recognition system verifies the user by matching the scan to biometric data the Argentine government already has through SIBIOS and linked to the RENAPER database.

As an important note, none of these systems and mechanisms were developed or implemented after democratic debate. This issue has been extensively documented and analysed by ADC (adc.org.ar).

The (in)visible link to human rights

So, on the one hand we have these very hidden processes aimed to identify us, collecting the most immutable traits that form our identities. While on the other hand, there are very vivid and explicit narratives related to the "right to an identity" as linked to fighting human rights violations. The famous Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo is an example of such a fight and has helped create collective care and understanding around "identity" and "right to an identity". They formed in 1977 to seek the restitution of hundreds of children kidnapped or born in captivity during the 1976–1983 dictatorship, and have had important successes in seeking justice since.

Maybe this narrative has unintentionally helped Argentines think uncritically about the extensive collection of their data by the State, the same State (back then under undemocratic control) that violated the human rights of those children and their parents. The dictatorship likely used the already in use identification systems to find and kidnap people.

A few numbers

- 46.1% of workers do not have social security in Argentina (UCA, 2020)
- Out of 28.5 million respondents to the EPH survey (INDEC, 2020):
 - » 10.7 million are employed: 15.2% under-employed or working less than 35 hours per week, and 51.7% over-employed, working more than 45 hours per week.
 - » 1.4 million are unemployed.
 - » 3 million work informally, without a contract and no social security.
 - » 87.3% of them work independently.
- In the third trimester of 2020 (INDEC, 2020):
 - » Nationwide, employment rose 37.4% and unemployment up to 11.7%.
 - » Mar del Plata: 36.2% employment, 13.1% unemployment.
 - » Greater Buenos Aires: 35.7% employment, 1.38% unemployment.
- 4.8 million new bank accounts were opened during the second quarter of 2020 (Central Bank, 2020).
- IFE (Covid funding for vulnerable workers) was received by 9 million people in each of its three instalments in March, June and August 2020 (El Cronista, 2020).

Concepts

There is an important distinction I have come to value. That is between *identity* and *identification*. Often, in the relevant literature, these terms are used interchangeably. But I believe it is important – at least in this specific context - to differentiate between them in order to challenge certain narratives that go against data justice agendas and also to make it easier to translate some of the complex problems into messages that are accessible and meaningful to wider groups of people.

There is plenty of literature that has helped me make sense of the wide-ranging digital identity issues and of my collected data, but in this section I present the ideas and concepts that stood out in view of my analysis. The list of all the literature can be found on the project's website at <https://identifique.cc/resources>.

- Data justice (Linnet Taylor)
- Group privacy (L. Taylor and others)
- Corporatized identities ≠ digital identities (Charlie Harry Smith)
- Privacy (Julie E. Cohen)
- Digital ID capitalism (Jacqueline Hicks)
- Extractivist policies on the body, the case of SIBIOS (Andrea Torrano & Lisandro Barrionuevo)

Data Justice

Taylor defines data justice as “fairness in the way people are made visible, represented and treated as a result of their production of digital data”, in a datafying world. Three pillars form the basis of this notion: **(in)visibility, (dis)engagement with technology and antidiscrimination**.

Making data justice work, she says, would require going from thinking that individuals should be responsible for understanding how the data market works and protect themselves towards “making national and international **authorities accountable for data governance**”. Responsible data use wouldn't be enough, we would also need *accountable data use*,

which is much more difficult because it requires structural change “rather than allowing our guardians to guard themselves” (Taylor, 2017, p.12).

Such data governance would have to deal with the complex hybrid between private and public sectors, which get very little attention in Argentina: “The public—private interface is important because many of what we perceive as public-sector functions (counting, categorising and serving our needs as citizens) are in fact performed by the private sector, with corresponding implications for transparency and accountability” (Taylor, 2017, p.3).

Argentina, for instance, has a Digital Identity System (SID, mentioned in the Context section) available for banks and other private companies, which is an example of lack of transparency around who is doing the data management (not just any data, biometrics) and analysis, and how they do it. Right now, it seems completely normal that the government does not inform the public about this. If you visit its website, there is no single reference of the private companies they work with. “Markets are a central factor in establishing and amplifying power asymmetries to do with digital data” (Taylor, 2017, p.3) therefore the need to find new strategies that can address this public—private interface and allow us to determine whether data technologies serve us, or simply control us, says Taylor.

As information, knowledge, and power asymmetries are widening by the day, data governance is a pretty urgent need.

Group Privacy

Taylor edited a very timely book called *Group Privacy*. One of the book’s basic claims is that the issue of profiling and machine learning technologies have so far been addressed at the individual level, despite the fact these technologies are precisely directed at the group level. These technologies “enable their users to target the collective as much as the individual”, and if we care about social justice, reducing poverty and inequality, they should make us worry.

Argentina has a huge proportion of its population interacting constantly with the State in order to receive social benefits. Companies running data-driven systems are now increasingly mediating interactions that up until recently used to be between citizen and state. How are these companies doing the grouping, categorization, profiling, and prediction of vulnerable/low income groups? Right now, this is a black box.

Considering group privacy and not only individual privacy opens up a larger window for active social movements to engage in data justice work. If it becomes clear in an accessible narrative that privacy is not only about yourself and your short, medium and long-term future but that of your family's, it might be easier to get people moving and change happening.

Corporatized identities ≠ digital identities

Smith's recent work was – unfortunately - the last one I found. He distinguishes between *digital identities* and *corporatized identities*, which I believe is a timely distinction to make and useful to help explain part of the uneasiness my interviewees and I felt when discussing our digital identities (they don't feel really 'ours'). He argues social media platforms produce corporatized identities that end up undermining their user's autonomy and wellbeing.

The author explains that digital identities have a lot in common with our analogue identities: Both are the result of ongoing social processes of negotiation, of a "struggle to present and maintain a particular impression of oneself in the eyes of another". Each identity is individualised, distinct and contextual (Smith, 2020, p.58). He argues these "unique, fluctuating digital identities that we seek to create and maintain over social media are being corrupted by the production of corporatized identities that identify individuals for advertising and tracking purposes" (Smith, 2020, p.62). These companies are "parasitic accessories" to our performances in order to monetise our interactions. Could we then think that our digital identification is primarily designed to transact online with our government and private businesses (we use our DNI every time we buy something online) with the main purpose of creating predictions so our transactions are monetized? (See Sullivan, 2018).

Digital ID Capitalism

I also found Hicks's paper quite late. Her argument is that "state agencies help guarantee personal data for commercial exploitation by connecting it to the provision of state welfare services" (Hicks, 2020, p.1). And this resonates with what I noticed throughout my interviewing process: in people's minds, it is only Facebook that's monetizing our data, not the private partners dealing with the government, as if they don't exist. For

Hicks, “the benefit of framing it as a capitalist system is that it **sharpens the focus on the corresponding social relations** and potential for **group governance** of this important twenty-first century resource” (Hicks, 2020, p.1). Going back to the first concept, in order to get closer to data justice, we don’t only need responsible data use but also accountable data use. And for such accountability, we need to identify and make visible the power relationships that allow for our identity data to be commercially exploited.

Privacy, turning it inside out

I struggled to ask about privacy during my interviews, and I believe it is related to me being too used to thinking about privacy from what Cohen calls a ‘subject-centred approach’, which emphasises ‘notice’ and ‘consent’. Cohen says “formulations of privacy in the liberty-based language of human rights discourse are both difficult to dispute and operationally meaningless” (Cohen, 2019, p.1). Notice and consent are the key elements of the infamous terms and conditions, about which one of my interviewees, Michaela, said, “I used to try read them but they were nonsense, I would not agree with any of that, but then if I said no, I would not have downloaded any apps!”. So, in reality, we are not given any options. Cohen says notice and consent “are widely recognized as both unilluminating and impracticable in the face of inscrutable, machine learning-driven algorithmic mediation” (Cohen, 2019, p.2). I think Michaela would agree. We need other takes on privacy.

Extractivist policies on the body: SIBIOS

The (widely uncriticized) use of biometrics for identification in Argentina is Torrano and Barrionuevo’s main concern in their very illuminating paper (Torrano and Barrionuevo, 2016), as it results in the extraction of data from our bodies. This is another type of extractivism in the age of capitalism: taking biological and behavioural information from us for economic and political use. This is an exercise of power over people’s bodies. I hope these two authors carry out further research on SIBIOS at some point in the future.

Methods

Initial plan and Covid-related adjustments

The initial plan I had for my research (which can be found on the identifique.cc website) involved many in-person activities, including reflective focus groups with the initial interviewees in order to discuss their feedback on my analysis, and incorporate that in the final products. The Covid-19 pandemic of course put pay to those plans. The way I found my interviewees was through organizations; I did not find them randomly. I did it that way precisely in order to build relationships with organizations and be able to meet my interviewees at different times throughout the year. The organizations I collaborated with were Sol de Mayo (DIAT Casa Caracol) Mar del Plata, Barrios de Pie Mar del Plata, Fundación Cultura de Trabajo, Barrios de Pie CABA, and IADEPP in AMBA.

I interviewed two groups of people, only using the first group for my formal analysis. Group 1 was composed of 21 adults aged between 18 and 55, living in two metropolitan areas: Mar del Plata and Gran Buenos Aires. Ten of them were male, and eleven female. All of them lived in vulnerable neighbourhoods. A few of them had part-time jobs, one was not looking for a job, and the rest were looking for a job(s) or had been before the lockdown. All of them were in need of income. I interviewed three of them in person before the pandemic hit and the rest were interviewed over the phone (without video). Those I interviewed during lockdown received payment for their time and collaboration. I believed paying them was the right thing to do, especially considering the context. The cost of paying the interviewees came from my Fellowship expenses budget.

Group 2 included academics, activists, researchers, NGO workers, public sector officials, technologists, businesses, journalists and computer programmers (the full list can be found in the Acknowledgements section). These diverse and open interviews were aimed at helping me (a recent immigrant) understand issues of technology and society in Argentina better and in the shortest possible period of time.

Covid hit, how did I iterate?

Since the beginning of lockdown in March 2020 I followed strict measures to avoid the virus, but I still thought the emergency would be over soon and I would resume the travelling and in-person activities. That sort of denial led me to iterate rather late in the process, and therefore to need more time to finish the analysis.

The main iteration I tried was to get direct collaborators, some of them among those I had already interviewed. My collaborators were Darwin Quispe, communicator and photographer from CABA who produced audio-visual material in Padre Mujica neighbourhood where some of my interviewees lived; Mishel Tapia from Mar del Plata who interviewed three people in her close circle; Luz Guzman who produced the visual registry of the neighbourhood where many of my interviewees lived in Mar del Plata; Daniela Vega who was also in charge of collecting visual registry in a second neighbourhood in Mar del Plata; and lastly, Pablo González, a photographer from Mar del Plata who happened to already have great photos in his portfolio which I could use for this research. Working with them was a fantastic decision.

Despite the adjustments, some things did not go well. One concerned phone interviews. Because of the lockdown I was unable to interview them in person. Living in another city meant I was simply too far from my interviewees to even try meeting them. As a result I missed out on visual clues and I could not take mental notes of what I saw and adapt my attitude and questions accordingly. The second point was that I did not reach the “data saturation point” (see pages 55-56 in Braun & Clarke, 2013), which means the moment you feel you have gathered enough data to formally start the coding and analysis. I felt I needed more interviews but I did not have the time to look for new people. I also made the (classic) mistake of starting the transcription later rather than sooner (transcribing always takes more time than expected).

The methods and tools used

In sum, I conducted qualitative semi-structured interviewing and later did a patterns-based analysis using complete coding. I was the only person with access to the audio files, and I transcribed them myself. The audio files were not placed in any online repository and will be deleted in February 2021.

For the coding I used Taguette, a free and open source software tool for qualitative data analysis, which I combined with manual visualizations. I then continued with thematic analysis as a patterns-based approach, which assumes that ideas that recur across a dataset capture something psychologically or socially meaningful. Working out which patterns are relevant in relation to the research question is not just a question of which are the most frequent. Frequency is important, but as is finding out which elements are meaningful. As Braun & Clarke (2013) explain: searching for patterns is “more akin to the process of sculpture. Analysts, like sculptors, actively make choices about how they shape and craft their raw data (e.g. a piece of marble) into an analysis (like a work of art as Michelangelo’s David). Like the sculptor’s block of marble, the dataset provides a material basis for the analysts; it provides some limit or boundaries on what is possible to produce. However, it does not completely determine the shape of the analysis; it is possible to create many different analyses from qualitative data, just as it is possible to create many different sculptures from one piece of marble” (p. 225).

Call me by My Name (Not My Number)

Analysis and insights

A reminder of the research question:

How do vulnerable un- and under-employed people living in Buenos Aires and Mar del Plata understand and experience identity and digital identity?

All of the people I interviewed from Group One, except for three, had their national ID cards since they were young children. Just like me, they are used to having an official national identification credential that acts as a legal proof of who they are, and that is required in a wide range of interactions with both the private and public sectors. The three exceptions got their first ID cards as adults with the help of specialized NGOs after years of suffering the consequences of being considered “non-people” (as basically “nothing”) by the State and fellow inhabitants. Being non-people meant they could not formally enrol in school (or graduate) or be admitted into public hospitals for treatment.

In this section I use ID card (identification card) and not *identity* card because the distinction between identification and identity is paramount. In a nutshell, every living person on earth has an identity, but not everyone has a legal identification. And not having a legal identification does not make anyone less of a human person, nor should it make them feel so. National ID cards in Argentina (DNI) come with a unique identification number, and most of us know these numbers by heart, yet nobody wants or chooses to be called by their unique number; we all want to be called by our names (hopefully spelled correctly).

As explained in the methods section, I defined the following themes using the data collected from 21 semi-structured interviews, which I recorded, transcribed, and coded. The themes did not *emerge* from nor were *discovered* in the data; they were defined by my own conceptual assumptions and biases, through what I believe was a thoughtful process of pattern-based qualitative analysis using complete coding. What follows are themes that help summarize and explain meaningful issues within the data, in view of the research question, and therefore form the skeleton of the analysis.

Full list of themes and sub-themes

1. Identity is expression
2. Identification is a proof
3. Identity and exclusion
 - a. Stigma versus identity (sub-theme)
 - b. Physical and digital exclusion (sub-theme)
4. Identification for exclusion
5. Criminalization of poverty
6. Systemic discrimination
7. Systemic labour abuse
8. Internet does not help in finding jobs
9. Tech treated as a solution
10. Hardware is vulnerable and unreliable
11. You don't know if you are being lied to/misguided on the internet
 - a. Facebook is a copy of the outside
12. Growing awareness that privacy seems to be more than just a personal choice
13. Permanent surveillance
 - a. The poor do not have privacy
14. Banks and permanent mistrust

What is in these themes?

By far, the question I felt was easiest to answer by most interviewees was **what is identity?** I did not get simple answers. Their answers were mostly nuanced, detailed and articulated. Identity is complex, context-based, autonomous, and unique. They thought of identity as related to common things like place of birth and age, but also to their parents' culture and languages, their gender, their abilities, goals, preferences, dreams, and so on. Importantly, they also noted identity was always changing and it was formed by many identities, expressed differently depending on the context. As a student you act differently to how you act as an employee. People express their identities, all the time and in different ways:

No, prove to others no, it is more personal; it comes out of you. Your identities, apart from the one you develop within your family, come with experiences. (...) As you grow, your identity changes.



– Hugo

Surprisingly, nobody seemed to immediately link identity and DNI. When asked what they would actually use to prove who they were, to a police officer for example, they said oh yes, the DNI, obviously. But the DNI was certainly not their identity; it was related, but not the same.

Apart from DNI, others mentioned passports or credentials from their home countries, “my Paraguayan DNI”. This shows how normalized the process of proving who we are has become, but not an easy one. For many people, migrants for instance, getting their DNI could take years, and in the process, they are in a limbo of rights. Like Isaac, who spent the whole of 2020 waiting for his (renewed) physical DNI credential. He needed it to prove he had entered the country on a specific day (information shown on the back of every migrant’s DNI). He had to do all of this so he could apply for

Covid emergency public benefits. The DNI is an identification credential that has a very specific task: to prove.

Identity as an expression was often mentioned together with a **phenomenon that was persistent throughout most of the interviews: exclusion**. They would feel permanently excluded precisely because of (but not uniquely) their self-expressed identities and the identities presumed by others. Being a migrant, having dark skin, speaking another Latin American language, having another accent, not having DNI, living in a certain area, doing a certain job, those are common reasons for people to tell others: no, not you.

When I am talking to my Peruvian friends, I speak Peruvian, but when I speak to Argentinean friends, I have to speak like an Argentinian.



Only my mother (speaks Quechua), but she did not teach us, she told us: 'if you speak Quechua you will speak differently' and because of the stigmatization...

— Pedro

There is consensus about how detrimental it is for people's well-being to be excluded on the basis of their both chosen and unchangeable identities (like their place of birth). But how is this happening online?

On the question of whether they ever felt their identity as presumed by others was not an accurate reflection of who they are, a significant number of interviewees said yes. And the migrants were the most frustrated about it: "Oh you are Peruvian, you must be a thief".

Stigmas are like marks on people's bodies, fighting people's real, self-performed identities. Stigmas, brought forward by people as diverse as your next-door neighbours or authorities, have a huge effect on people's confidence, but also on their opportunities. They help define public policies

or the lack of them. This has happened in the physical world for decades (not to say millennia), but it is also happening in the digital world (or layer) today.

When the stigmatization, which results in grouping and categorization, happens in the physical layer, people often notice, but it's not as easy to spot in the digital layer.

Then they judge you according to the particular experiences they have had. That is, without knowing me, they judge how I am, who I am (...) people judge you according to their first impressions.



— Pedro

Part of what constitutes someone's identity is where his or her home is, and if it is a 'bad' neighbourhood exclusion will likely take place. (Often, in Argentina, you can't hide your address because it is printed on your DNI). And such exclusion takes very concrete expressions: no stable Internet connection, no permanent potable water or electricity, and so on.

Even something seemingly as simple as mail shows exclusion in its digital and physical forms, depending on where people live:

They sent it to me by mail, but the mail never arrived, and the digital mail did not either (...) The mail service doesn't work in the Villas, they quickly come in and go, without really looking for the address.



— Isaac

Identification for exclusion was portrayed in many different ways during the interviews: people informally hiring workers yet asking to see their ID cards and deciding to exclude the ones that live in certain 'bad' neighbourhoods, others firing

people precisely because they live in 'bad' places during the pandemic and could get them 'in danger by bringing in Covid' or companies hesitating to install Wi-Fi in your house because it is a 'dangerous street'. People get put into categories or groups they're not aware of and might not approve of. Identification is used to provide people with social services, follow up on them, all very normal things to want for any government. But identification is also very useful for excluding people on the basis of wrong or unjust ideas.

During the first weeks of quarantine, nobody could leave and since I didn't have a DNI I couldn't get the permit to go out, so I was locked up for a month, and then I got the permit and went to work, but since there were so many Covid cases here in the Villa and I could infect them, they fired me.



— Isaac

Very much related to the above, **criminalization of poverty** was very present in the interviews, even seen in people's own fears of living around others who could steal from them. That narrative of poor areas being dangerous is in everyone's head. And if you live there yourself, it is easy to feel criminalized and/or in danger all the time. People are very used to carrying around their ID card, in case the police ask for it. I live in a place where I don't feel I need to carry it around with me; I know the police are unlikely to control my identification because this is perceived as a 'safe neighbourhood'; my interviewers did not feel the same.

- *The Police are here in the Villa, at the entrance/exit, because of drug sales and stuff.*
- *Are they always controlling the entrance?*
- *Yes (Isaac)*
- *Did you buy second hand phones?*

- *No, I always bought them legally (...) always at mobile phone stores (Gastón)*
- *Regarding the DNI, one thing is that they don't attend you, at school they turn you around... and the police...*
- *Did the police ever stop you?*
- *Several times, they even took me to the police station for background checks (Gastón).*

This is a **systemic issue**, supported or perpetuated by policies, laws, during dictatorships as well as democratic regimes, and also supported by the workings of the private sector. In February 2020, the Civil Association for Equality and Justice (ACIJ) sued Telefónica for failing to provide information about their operations in poor neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires city. The company had been accused of discriminating against lower-income residents when it comes to offering telecom services (ACIJ 2020).

- *How is the internet access in your neighbourhood?*
- *Movistar does not even enter, no major company does (Isaac).*

So, have digital technologies had transformational effects on people's lives? What did my interviewees think? Mostly that digital technologies have facilitated certain processes, but that have not changed their lives. A couple of them said technology gets treated as a solution and not as a tool. When talking about face recognition and CCTV cameras for security reasons, this is what Hugo said:

Machines should not replace workers (...) If just the institutions did their job. You go down a street and (the police) they are drinking mate! ... Policemen used to come to my workplace (fast food restaurant) for a drink, and if you didn't give them something (for free) and later on someone assaulted the shop, that police officer wouldn't come (as revenge). Then they try to make up for major flaws with technology....



– Hugo

Regarding the digital DNI, Isaac explained how in his case, getting his digital DNI on his phone (with all its facial recognition for verification processes), had made no difference and had not helped him with what he really needed: to collect public emergency benefits. The government claims the digital DNI has the same validity than the physical credential, but that was not the case for Isaac:

At the beginning of quarantine my DNI was already printed but I could not pick it up due to the confinement. Then I got the digital DNI, which supposedly works for everything. But it did not include all the data the physical credential does. So when I wanted to apply for aid, they told me they couldn't help me because they don't know when I entered the country. For other things, the digital DNI worked, when the police stopped me and to get my permit to go out.

– Isaac

A lot of people have smartphones, but many are low quality with little memory space. **People feel phones aren't reliable, as they get stolen, broken,** or they don't have computers to back up their data.

- *"What do you like more - phones or computers?"*
- *Computers a thousand times.*
- *Are you afraid that your mobile phone will get stolen?*
- *Yes, because it is very difficult to buy another one, for me it is inaccessible and also because I have many personal things there, sometimes I even have some passwords" (Sofía).*

And when I was homeless, they also stole my mobile phone, it happened at a shelter.

– Renata

We might quickly assume that in a dysfunctional labour market the internet would actually help people find jobs. Well, this was not the case among my interviewees, who are used to working in informal and precarious settings, where labour abuse seems to be the norm and not the exception. The internet doesn't even help them find the informal or precarious jobs they dream not to do anymore.

The easiest is fast food restaurants, they tell you that you are going to have flexible hours, and you do, to a point, but then they start to stretch your hours to their convenience, I often had to fight. I come here to work not to be enslaved!



— Joaquín

Everything is better (with a formal job), in terms of schedule, how they treat you. Not like informal jobs where people threaten you with firing you unless you do everything they say, you cannot complain, they don't pay you overtime, etc.

— Renata

How is this related to identification and identity? Identification credentials seem to make either no difference or a bad one: getting fired because of your postcode. And identity? Most people don't have computers at home, or a reliable Internet connection. Creating and updating their CVs online is difficult, and it is even more difficult to try to 'curate' their online identities. Job search platforms like Computrabajo don't seem designed for people that have mostly accessed precarious jobs. Many said they had used them in the past, without success. And Facebook? *"It is just full of other unemployed people!"* (Olivia).

— (...) *I've sent my CV over the Internet, Computrabajo, etc. And nothing. I saw how many*

had applied, 1000 people! (...) They never called me.

- *Did someone write back to you saying that you had not been selected?*
- *No, nothing (Isaac).*

My interviewees typically find jobs by walking and talking to people, directly, and mostly, through friends. That way they get feedback and have some control over what identifies they perform. The internet is not an inclusive and accessible place, so no wonder those who are routinely left out of public places, or feel unwelcomed, feel the Internet isn't for them.

Most people feel a bit uneasy on the internet. This uneasiness usually comes from **not knowing whether they are being lied to, misguided, or stolen from, on the internet**. And this was felt by the most advanced internet users I interviewed. This might in part be a consequence of Facebook being the go to platform for most people, the 'homepage' that stays there as your forever home. Even if you run out of credit and can't surf the wider internet anymore, you can still access Facebook (the Zero Rating and net Neutrality debates haven't unfortunately reached the wider population). Facebook is like the very bad friend you have who is always there when nobody else is, by your side, and is still your friend despite being a very bad influence.

(Before the pandemic) I was connected every day. But I don't have the Internet at home so I had to go to a friend's. With Movistar, once your 200 pesos plan is over, it gives you 1 Giga and when it runs out you have Facebook, it takes time to load but it loads, and there you go...



– Isaac

Almost all my interviewees would basically check everything on Facebook, from the news to the marketplace. When asked if they trusted the information they saw there, they said they didn't. But apart from Facebook, they agreed they felt suspicious about the information and interactions online. The internet doesn't feel safe.

"For me, entering Facebook is like entering an open world where you don't know where you will end up. Who are you talking to, is it a dog or a cat?" (Eduardo). They just don't know if the information they get is truthful, or accurate. And this results in them feeling fear about interacting with people online, from shops and payment platforms to strangers on Facebook groups. Their safety was at risk, often.

- *(...) On other pages they ask you to add your credit card info and I don't trust that at all.*
- *Why?*
- *Because you are giving your data to someone. Unless you see solid reviews from many years back... (Hugo)*
- *Do they also ask you to send your CV?*
- *They just ask me those questions and then I check those jobs' locations and all that, but you have to be very careful because in some cases people lie and that is the reason why I do not send personal information. (Renata)*
- *Do you ever upload videos?*
- *Only on Facebook and only of my face, without showing my body, because of the harassment on Facebook. (Renata)*

Concerning **privacy**, often my interviewees gave me this quick and short answer: that it is a personal choice. If you are a private person, you are going to be a private person online; if you are an extroverted you'll be the same online. But more

nuance appeared later on in the interviews. And such nuance showed there is **growing awareness that 'privacy as a personal choice' is not the whole story.** Why this awareness? Marketing seems to play a role. People seem to be becoming more aware of the ads they see on Facebook or on Google. Subtle but persistent, maybe during the pandemic being at home much more, and lacking money, being shown things to buy (that they can't buy) feels especially annoying.

What bothers me the most is the publicity. I was going to tell you the comments, but people can say whatever they want. What bothers me is the publicity.

– Isaac

Google has all the information in the world about you. For instance, when you activate your location, all your data shows up!

– Renata

In Argentina, particularly people living in rather vulnerable areas are used to being permanently watched. They are, or live next to those who are, the forever-suspicious ones in society. The dominant narrative is: if people approve of the use of CCTV cameras for their own safety, then they can't expect privacy. Security and privacy are presented as opposing poles. But again, my interviewees seem more and more aware this is not the whole story. With growing digitalization, they know more and more data about them (apart from their CCTV captured faces) is out there: their debts, their social benefits, their likes. What happens with that information? The first step, being aware we don't know about something, is a step my interviewees already took.

That's why on Facebook I only have my first and last names, I don't have my resume, or the jobs I've had, I don't publish photos (...) It's not paranoia. I find out about so many things... nothing is private!

– Isaac

There is no privacy, they know where you live, how you live and all those things (...) And if you have children you have to be more careful, because one thing is yourself, but children are children...



— Renata

In the book called “Redes Sociales: Las Nuevas Villas Miseria” (which roughly translates as “Social Media: The New Shanty Towns”), Argentinian author Patricio Erb argues that **social media has become the new place where lower classes meet and share all their data (unknowingly) for the benefit of certain powerful groups**. Facebook being the “go to home” should worry us all. Among my interviewees, a common feeling was that there is nothing they can do about having no control over their data. However, together with this hopelessness, I also perceived frustration (which many times makes us want to act).

I started asking about people’s relationships with banks after hearing the government had added an important requirement for the collection of the Covid emergency funding for precarious workers, or IFE (see more in my blog dated 23rd of July 2020). This requirement was to have an active bank account. Because it is commonly known banks do not want to have clients who ‘lack money’, a new regulation forced banks to offer fee-free accounts to anyone with just a DNI (*Cuenta Gratuita Universal*). In addition, because of lockdown, banks decided to allow accounts to be opened online, via their apps. Doing so required facial recognition procedures.

As expected, one buzzword you’ll find behind this agenda is “financial inclusion”. I wondered why there were so many efforts to get everyone to use private money, cashless systems, or digital IDs to deal with corporations and governments? And it turns out, that’s a whole new line of research. But returning to my interviewees, it was clear that getting banked in order to get the IFE had been a nightmare

because of hardware, connection issues, complicated information and so on. Many of my interviewees were already banked though, as they were already permanently receiving public subsidies directly into their bank accounts. Overall, the interviews showed there is a **persistent mistrust around banks**. People admitted that digital money was convenient for buying things or getting paid, but they also maintained that banks are most useful when you have an ability to save, which is not the case for them. They have a rather negative view of using credits, or taking out loans, because of their own poor experience and those of family members. The issue of people having their transaction history monitored, or used to determine their credit worthiness, was not discussed.

Reflections and future

How do my interviewees understand and experience identity and digital identity?

They understand identity in full: deeply personal, unique, individualized, context-based, fluctuating. Defining digital identity, in contrast, felt unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and weird. This was not surprising considering the internet is an often unwelcoming space, an unknown territory where abuses and vulnerabilities get repeated or amplified. It's also a place where corporatized identities take preference over digital identities people would actually feel in control of. It is a place for the experts, the ones who can escape the online abusers without much effort; for those who can afford high-end mobile devices and internet, at home and on the go; for those who can complete all the questions asked on sites like Computrabajo and who went to all the right universities; for the ones with personal computers who actually get to study and work with them; because mobile phones are very limited, despite publicity claiming the opposite. The only interviewees who showed enthusiasm for the internet, rather than criticism, were people like Eduardo, who had attended an in-person four-month long course on searching the web and using it to find jobs, including using his email correctly and with a purpose, and Carmen, who was enrolled at university and was actively using her Conectar Igualdad¹ laptop.

They experience digital identity as digital identification, in similar ways to how they experience identifying themselves offline: normal, permanent. With the difference that online processes get more complicated. *"Every time you need to do something with ANSES², you always need your DNI or your document number and online is the same, plus the email". "Digital technology is how the world works, this is where it goes, like being paid online", one of them said, "it is inevitable".* One problem, however, is that those being left out are not just a few very old people. They are young, old and middle age: those who are only sometimes online, those trying first and foremost to find a job. There are also those who think, like Ernesto, *"I am often not connected, because I can't afford it, but I don't need to be connected, it is not essential as water is."* And the thing is: it shouldn't be essential. It should not be mandatory to be online to communicate with the State.

How are the State and private actors profiling people? What about vulnerable groups, those interacting the most with the State? What decisions/policies are being put forward using such profiling? What's the role of digital identity in these systems? Which private sector companies (e.g. banks) and what public offices are accessing people's behavioural data, and for what reason, and on what grounds?

There is a strong need for case studies that can help people grasp what is at stake, for themselves as individuals, and for themselves as part of a group; case studies that can also inspire truly responsible companies to join the fight for the right regulations on data governance. People need to know, and they are eager to know what happens with their identity-related data and identification data, but they do not want *just to know*, feel anger or sadness, they also need options, alternative scenarios. For example, instead of having to fight for the ability to change our gender on our DNI (a battle won in 2012 in Argentina), what if we have gender-free ID cards? (see Dutch Gender Free IDs³ and Argentina's Gender Identity Law⁴)

There is also a need for social movements to get in on the action. What new narratives could awake the good-at-complaining Argentinians, and mobilize the already active movements campaigning for social justice?

1 - Conectar Igualdad is a public program that provides personal computers to primary and secondary school students in the country.

2 - ANSES is the National Administration for Social Security.

3 - Dutch ID Cards To Become Gender Free – Could More Of Europe Follow? <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamiewareham/2020/07/07/dutch-id-cards-to-become-gender-free--could-more-of-europe-follow/?sh=2112ba763207>

4 - <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/justicia/derechofacil/leysimple/identidad-de-genero>

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