More Public-Source References to Impersonations

1. Online sites and Twitter accounts opened in the names of popular members of the academic community:

Thomas Verenna, whose website is located at http://tomverenna.wordpress.com/, is the author of a book entitled Of Men and Muses and a student at Rutgers University. A site opened under his name, and containing criticism directed at his person and work, may be found at http://thomasverenna.blogspot.com/.

A report on fake tweets impersonating University presidents explains that “fake presidential Twitter accounts have cropped up at Columbia University, Wesleyan University, Georgetown University, Brown University, the University of Texas at Austin, and Vassar College.” http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2011-04-18-college-presidents-impersonated-twitter.htm. The article indicates that university officials have occasionally submitted requests to Twitter to remove some of these accounts. See also http://chronicle.com/article/When-a-Twittering-College-P/47269/ (“Michael L. Wesch, an assistant professor of cultural anthropology at Kansas State University who studies Twitter and other social media, says he thinks the spoofs are revealing.”) Wesch is quoted as saying: “I actually like how ‘authentic’ they seem….”

2. Estimating the quantity of existing fake websites:

One social media law expert estimates that “there are tens of thousands of fake social media pages on social media platforms.” http://www.shearsocialmedia.com/2011/11/nj-fake-facebook-page-case-may-open-up.html. According to a recent New York Times article, “less than 4 percent of all social media interactions are false today.” The quantity represented by this figure may be estimated on the basis of the fact that literally billions of people engage in social media interactions. See: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/13/technology/false-posts-on-facebook-undermine-its-credibility.html.

3. Driving traffic to a website:

Some news reports have focused on websites using the names of popular individuals in their URL addresses to drive traffic to the site, thereby generating attention for an idea or project unrelated to the name being used. See, e.g., http://news.yahoo.com/naked-jennifer-aniston-helps-ben-stiller-195149683.html.

4. Social criticism:

In an elaborate hoax involving emails, press releases, and a website purporting to be official statements of the Canadian minister of the environment, an anonymous Internet group mocked Canada’s failure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Wall Street Journal erroneously mistook one of the fake press releases for an authentic
announcement. The Canadian minister responded by issuing statements explaining that the emails and press releases were hoaxes emanating from a fake website. See: http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/blog/2009/dec/14/environment-canada-spoof.

The “Quaker school whose student body includes President Obama’s daughters... got pranked today with a fake e-mail to … parents announcing that the school would henceforth make condoms available in school bathrooms and at … school activities... Soon after, another e-mail went out…. It said the condom e-mail, while pretending to originate from the school administration, was ‘a prank and its contents are fiction. It was not authorized by any school personnel.’ It was signed by upper-school principal Lee Palmer.” See: http://www.washingtonian.com/blogs/capitalcomment/local-news/malia-and-sasha-obamas-school-gets-hit-with-condom-prank.php# and http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/ticket/obama-daughters-school-hit-prank-email-sex-contraception-181555465.html.

“An online hoax that falsely suggests McDonald’s discriminates against African-American customers is causing a PR headache....” The hoax took the form of a widely disseminated image showing “what looks like an official McDonald’s notice in the window of a restaurant, telling customers that blacks will be charged $1.50 extra…. In response, McDonald’s sent a tweet of its own...: ‘That pic is a senseless & ignorant hoax McD’s values ALL our customers. Diversity runs deep in our culture on both sides of the counter.’” See: http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/lookout/racial-hoax-causes-pr-headache-mcdonald-145623383.html.

A widely circulated Internet message purporting to be a statement from Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg claims that security experts at Facebook have traced the origin of the recent Facebook pornographic spam attacks to the Philippines. It warns that users in the Philippines will be banned from Facebook if they do not stop sending the spam, and explains that “we at Facebook will not tolerate outlandish behavior and indecency.” See: http://www.hoax-slayer.com/porn-attack-philippines-origin-hoax.shtml.

“A report claiming Internet Explorer users scored lower on IQ tests... was released ... by what appeared to be a ... Web-consulting firm called Aptiquant. Major news outlets — including CNN, the BBC, NPR, CNET, Forbes and London’s Daily Mail and Telegraph — reported the story....” The report turned out to be an “elaborate hoax.” See: http://www.cnn.com/2011/TECH/web/08/03/explorer.report.faked/index.html.

5. Political uses of impersonation:


Maryland Congressman Steny Hoyer’s old account, taken over by a new user after Hoyer created a new, “verified” account, “started expressing some unusually caustic views during the President’s State of the Union Address.” Tweets sent out included: “This is what happens when political offices pay for high-priced, money-sucking ‘social media’ firms that have no clue what they are doing.” http://www.zdnet.com/blog/security/congressman-steny-hoyer-twitter-impersonation-attack/7983.

A New York Times headline explains that “Fake Identities Were Used on Twitter in Effort to Get Information on Weiner,” during the controversy that ultimately led to Representative Anthony Weiner’s resignation: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/18/nyregion/fake-identities-were-used-on-twitter-to-get-information-on-weiner.html.

6. The popularity of “phony tweets”:

The New York Times reported that “the phenomenon of phony Twitter accounts… is nearly as old as social media itself. All it takes to create an identity is an e-mail address and a ripe target with an outsize personality... And observing the tightrope that the band of fake Twitter brothers must walk — parody is not easy, after all — can help salve the sting of a desultory contest.” http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/14/sports/basketball/impostors-on-twitter-post-up-during-nba-finals.html.


In a New York Times article entitled “The Golden Age of Impersonation,” Nobel Prize winner Paul Krugman explains that he, just like the Italian banker Mario Draghi, has been impersonated on Twitter, and also on Google Plus; Krugman comments that in “the old days, impersonating someone was hard,” but that “these days, anyone can do it on social media.” [http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/17/the-golden-age-of-impersonation/](http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/17/the-golden-age-of-impersonation/).


In January 2012, the “‘Twittersphere’ was “hoodwinked” into believing the reclusive author Cormac McCarthy “had entered the world of social networking.” [http://www.theatlanticwire.com/technology/2012/01/unpublished-novelists-week-fake-cormac-mccarthy/48068/](http://www.theatlanticwire.com/technology/2012/01/unpublished-novelists-week-fake-cormac-mccarthy/48068/). The victims of the hoax included not only McCarthy himself, but Twitter’s co-founder and executive chairman Jack Dorsey, who “announced to his 1.8 million followers: ‘Join me in welcoming @CormacCMcCarthy to Twitter!’” See: [http://www.scotsman.com/scotland-on-sunday/scotland/twitter-ye-not-for-cormac-mccarthy-1-2097625](http://www.scotsman.com/scotland-on-sunday/scotland/twitter-ye-not-for-cormac-mccarthy-1-2097625) (indicating that “‘Tom Royal, deputy editor of Computer Active magazine and a social media expert, said a series of high-profile bogus accounts had damaged Twitter’s credibility, but questioned whether impersonating a celebrity online was necessarily a bad thing”). See also [http://www.theatlanticwire.com/technology/2012/02/learning-cormac-mccarthy-twitter-hoax/48147/](http://www.theatlanticwire.com/technology/2012/02/learning-cormac-mccarthy-twitter-hoax/48147/) (report on the incident by Atlantic Wire writer Rebecca Greenfield, noting that the “line” between parody and non-parody “blurs quickly”).

For a while, “it appeared that Rupert Murdoch’s much younger wife Wendi Deng was helping him learn how to use Twitter, but now, News Corp. says it’s just another impostor.” [http://www.theatlanticwire.com/technology/2012/01/wendi-deng-twitter-account-fake/46889/](http://www.theatlanticwire.com/technology/2012/01/wendi-deng-twitter-account-fake/46889/).

Victims have developed various strategies to deal with the phenomenon; “There are numerous Stephen Colberts, some of which … actively pretended to be him … until they were found out, but not by Colbert, who doesn’t have any interest in the issue. Pop musician Momus found his Twitter doppelganger amusing, as it fit into his ideas of postmodernism and authorship.” [http://tweeteronix.com/blog/2011/watch-out-who-you-impersonate-you-could-be-sued/](http://tweeteronix.com/blog/2011/watch-out-who-you-impersonate-you-could-be-sued/).
7. Academic experiments and commentary on the frequent lack of verifiability and authenticity of Internet identities:

Academics have created fake twitter accounts which are actually “bots,” i.e. computer-generated robotic texts, conning 500 people into interacting with them in the mistaken belief that they’re real people:  
http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/video/2011/dec/14/esc-ctrl-jon-ronson-twitter-bots-video

Discussing the phenomenon of fake Internet accounts and communications, one legal commentator has written that the “inability to authenticate ‘real-world’ identity means that people who use the Internet should be, and largely are, skeptical that people are not who they represent themselves to be.” K. Malone, “Parody or Identity Theft: The High-Wire Act of Digital Doppelgangers in California,” in 34 Hastings Communications and Entertainment Law Journal 275, at 308 (Winter 2012).

Similarly, in her report on the Cormac McCarthy incident (see supra), Rebecca Greenfield quoted the statement of one commentator: “If an account is not verified, assume it’s a fake,” as well as the opinion of Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, professor of internet governance at the Oxford Internet Institute: “We’re in a … postmodern world where we can’t tell the truth from fakery.” According to Greenfield, “some argue… these misrepresentations are a part of our own identities. The Internet is what Philosopher Slavoj Žižek called a ‘space of false disidentification.’”  

8. Satire that fools readers and creates controversy:

U.S. Capitol Police announced they were “investigating The Onion, a satiric media organization, for making false reports on Twitter claiming that there was a hostage situation inside the Capitol building.” In the end, the police issued a simple statement declaring the tweets to be fake. The incident sparked debate about the “limits of satire” on thousands of websites. See, e.g.:  

Another satirical Onion story duped the main Iranian news agency into reporting that according to one poll, rural whites prefer the Iranian president to President Obama. See:  

9. Civil disputes:

The activist group Invisible Children threatened to sue a website featuring parodies of them; according to Invisible Children, the website was creating “public confusion.” See:
A plaintiff sued “to get to the bottom of an apparent impersonation on Twitter,” in which he was portrayed as making racist statements.

Even when personification itself is not an issue, the Internet satire provokes civil disputes. “Birthers” Joseph Farah and Jerome Corsi sued Esquire over an article ridiculing them. See: http://blogs.forbes.com/jeffbercovici/2011/06/29/birthers-sue-esquire-over-parody-seeking-120-million/ (“As often happens with satire on the internet, the article was received by many readers … as straight news, forcing Esquire to add an update ‘for those who didn’t figure it out yet’: ‘We committed satire this morning….’”). The United States District Court for the District of Columbia dismissed the suit on First Amendment grounds. Farah v. Esquire, Memorandum Opinion, http://www.scribd.com/doc/95916577/FARAH-et-al-v-ESQUIRE-Memorandum-Opinion-Dismissing-Case.

10. Telephone and radio impersonations:

According to a recent Associated Press report, two well-known Australian disk jockeys impersonated the Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles in a call to the hospital where Kate Middleton was being treated. They succeeded in obtaining personal information about the state of Middleton’s health, and broadcast a recording of the conversation live on the Internet. See: http://news.yahoo.com/aussies-sorry-crank-call-kates-hospital-170538530.html.

Similarly, a Christopher Walken radio impersonator fooled the Associated Press into believing statements about things that Walken purportedly saw during the night of Nathalie Wood’s death. “Upon realizing they’d been punked, the AP promptly retracted their story and issued a correction.” See: http://news.yahoo.com/christopher-walken-impersonator-fools-ap-corrections-ensue-232404260.html.

These types of pranks also occur in other venues apart from the radio. The BBC and Reuters reported that a spoof of Kazakhstan’s national anthem was mistaken for the real anthem and played by mistake at a medal ceremony in Kuwait: http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/24/us-shooting-borat-idUSBRE82N05820120324.

11: Pseudonyms and anonymity:

The New York Times reported on a controversy that erupted when the Internet user named “Sophia Walker,” who had been “surfing across the Internet, vigorously defending the leader of the State Assembly, Sheldon Silver, and his handling of sexual harassment charges against Vito J. Lopez, the assemblyman and fallen leader of the Democratic Party
in Brooklyn,” turned out to be “an employee of Mr. Silver’s office, Bill Eggler.”

Another report in same newspaper focused on a website featuring anonymous accusations of bad real estate broker behavior, abusive landlords and run-down apartments; the article indicates that the “cloak of anonymity can help harsh commentary escalate” on the Internet. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/21/nyregion/the-appraisal-legal-battles-are-woven-over-tangled-real-estate-web-gossip.html.

According to yet another New York Times article, “Facebook…doesn’t always practice what it preaches... The social network requires people to use their real identity….[…] Facebook is by no means the first to promote critical stories about a rival anonymously. The practice is common in political circles…. and it has a long history in Silicon Valley.”
http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/14/technology/14facebook.html

12. Age of the phenomenon:

All of the above examples date from 2011-2012; however, controversies about online anonymity and Internet hoaxes have been a feature of Internet culture almost since the creation of the worldwide web.

For example, in 1999, George W. Bush tried to have the satirical website GWBush.com blocked, claiming it was “malicious” and stating: “There ought to be limits to freedom.” The Federal Exchange Commission dismissed Mr. Bush’s complaint without ruling on the issue. Many news articles discussed the controversy, e.g.: http://articles.latimes.com/2000/apr/23/news/mn-22599 (noting of a similar “Al Gore” blog that “the satire is lost on some visitors”).

Five years earlier, in 1994, an “AP news release” announced that Microsoft had agreed to acquire the Roman Catholic Church in exchange for “an unspecified number of shares of Microsoft common stock.” When Rush Limbaugh read the release on his national television program, “the company found itself fielding calls from outraged viewers.” http://groups.csail.mit.edu/mac/classes/6.805/articles/anonymity/short-pieces/lewis-nyt-dec3194.txt.