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Interview with Dazza Greenwood of the eCitizen Foundation

Posted on 16 August 2010 by Evan Carroll

We interviewed Dazza Greenwood, executive director of the eCitizen Foundation at Digital Death Day 2010. Dazza was previously a government attorney and lecturer and researcher of digital identity at the MIT Media Lab. This is another of several interviews with digital afterlife leaders recoded at the event. You can listen below or read the transcript.

Interview with Dazza Greenwood

Evan: Hi, Evan Carroll here with The Digital Beyond and I am at Digital Death Day. And there's a lot of ambient noise in the background. We will try to forget about that and keep going. But I am here with Dazza Greenwood, he is the Executive Director of the eCitizen Foundation. Like I said, we are here at Digital Death Day and we were just in a very interesting discussion about the idea of preserving all of your data for an

indefinite amount of time. So would you start by telling me what the eCitizen Foundation does?

Dazza: Sure, yes. Thanks, Evan. It's good to be here with you. First of all, the eCitizen Foundation is a non profit that exists to work with the public and private sector to architect, design, help deploy information architectures for really the benefit of ordinary people—regular e-citizens, citizens of the world now doing their every day things in cyberspace increasingly. Their government is e-government, their commerce is e-commerce, their learning is e-learning and so and on down the line. Their health is increasingly really happening through information systems with electronic medical records and online diagnostics and electronic patient identities that are giving consent. And so part of our interest here is as we talk with so many stakeholders about digital identity of the citizens and the privacy and personalization and right to responsibilities around that. A big missing piece is the identity transition of death of those citizens, the inevitable life cycle event when the citizen dies and the identity, the digital identities, the digital assets we are calling them here, their stuff in cyber space continues in some way. There is some state change that is not yet reflected or supported really in our systems designs and our services and our law and our business models, even in our thinking to a great extent. We feel that there is a missing piece and we are here to become more educated and to engage in dialogues and then to vector some of that of that thinking back into the policy making and the technology making circles that we participate in when we talk about the identity and the digital life of the citizens.

Evan: Very good, it's fascinating work. To connect back to a session we were just in, we were discussing how there is one perspective that says that we should keep all the data we create. And perhaps leave that to the future generations to sort through it and make value out of. Versus another perspective where it's actually good to delete things and to actually curate your own identity. What's your take on that?

Dazza: My take is yes. That's true, both of those things, although seemingly, cosmetically on the surface contradictory. They are both important principles and somehow must be accommodated in the information architectures of the future that are emerging now. And we need to do some more careful design work to make sure that we are accommodating adequately these somewhat competing goals. We know that privacy is important during life and it is no less important after death. In some ways it could be all the more of a cruel twist, almost a desperation of the person's identity to have some of the data disclosed, or taken out of context or used in an abusive way after death than would be even during their life for sociological or even religious reasons. We think that what you need to have really is a way to create and preserve and harvest the vast amount of data that we are creating in all of our appliances and transportation and all the activities of our life, in a way that preserves people's privacy and security. And there are ways to do that. Also there has to be traditional personal layer under the more narrow ownership and control of individual people, individual citizens, where they can, in a curated way, select just those artifacts that are important within a constellation of meaning and a suite of data and an identity, if you will, and pass that forward almost like a family album. Or a deliberate persona that they are constructing and projecting during their life and frankly after that as well. Now there's people that have fought long and hard about how to double blind data, how to disaggregate personal identifiable information from maybe population trends. Four percent of this population ate cheese sandwich on Wednesday, for example. Maybe individually that may either be irrelevant and you wouldn't curate it or on the other side of the spectrum it may be so relevant or so sensitive, because of the religious taboo against eating cheese with your meat on that day or something, you would never want to record it and attach to your name to it. And yet societally from anthropological perspective, we may want to preserve that data. In fact, I would say that we would certainly want to preserve all the data and we will want to allow for curated, very private and sensitive ways to correlate individual citizens. How we square that circle, how we balance that on the tight rope. that is the national dialogue that we want to help spark and make sure can emerge. So that we can intelligently, deliberately design the information architecture of our civilizations that will express that balance in a just and in a fair way.

Evan: Absolutely, we arrived at the notion in this session that Dazza is reflecting on is that the value is both temporal and situational. So it depends upon what type of information you are seeking, in the anthropological example you gave and the temporal so what is the value to me today may not be valuable to someone in the future, but maybe even more valuable to some one in the future. It's also important, at least in the conversation I had after this session, is what I see as valuable today is valuable in and of itself. So there is a sense of meta value that we are establishing that is fascinating. So, one final question. We are about halfway through the Digital Death Day workshop here. What would you say is your biggest take away so far?

Dazza: The major thing I have seen and acknowledged is validation that what we've been talking about in the eCitizen Foundation. The questions that we've been increasingly asked about, questions around deaths of people, what it means to their civic id, their digital identity have validations. These are timely questions and that there is a respectful and kind of professionally appropriate manner to discuss them. That the questions arise across different disciplines. We've seen people from many different disciplines here. And that the approach from little corner of the world that the eCitizen occupies, which is a design and architectural approach according to some of the softer types of requirements that comes from societal or legal premises is relevant in this area. It's really validated our interest in the area. And the second thing is, in a very practical way it's created value. Some of the companies that provide services in this area have indicated that they would like to come and participate in future event in Washington D.C. that eCitizen would be convene where we would talk from a policy and more from a legal perspective about some of the types of reforms. Maybe some pilot projects and some potential tweaks to standards that may be necessary as we continue the dialogue. So we got validation and we were able to meet birds of a feather who wanted to work together. And I would call it a very good start on this and it's a new beginning.

Evan: Absolutely. You are absolutely right. There was a great gathering of different perspectives here today. And a gathering that I want to see continued in the future because this is a very important conversation. Well, thank you for taking your time to join me and our listeners at The Digital Beyond and we look forward to speaking with you in the future.

Dazza: It was a pleasure and I will be sure to start pointing to your blog.
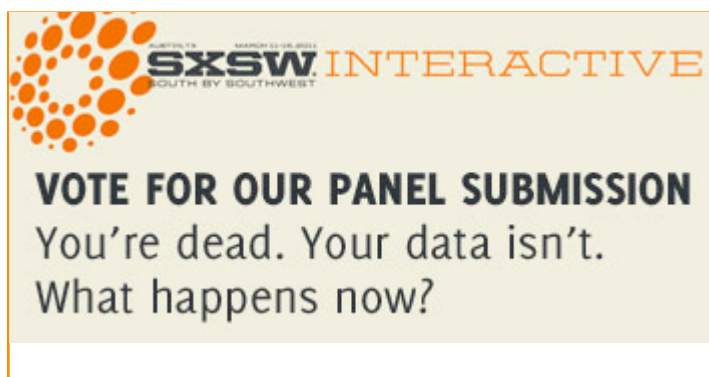
Evan: Very good. Thank you.

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