

29/9/15 Email

D4736

Male, 49, Married, Southampton, Air Traffic Services Assistant

Summer 2015 Part 1: You Online

First Task – Five words or phrases

Facebook

Email

Computer

iPad

Smartphone

Early Experiences

I use the internet on a continually daily basis.

My first memory of using the internet sort of predates the creation of the publicly accessible world wide web by a number of years. Although it was strictly speaking an intranet, we were using it such a way as would become commonplace in the future.

At my secondary school in the early 1980's we had in a dark corner of the computer room a large and bulky IBM VM370. It must have been someone's bright idea in the borough of Stockport to acquire, at probably great expense, one of these computers for each school in the area. This was at a time when secondary schools were just getting a handful of BBC microcomputers for teaching, some rich kids would have a ZX Spectrum at home, and the concept of the desktop PC was still some years away.

No one, not even the teachers, knew how to use this thing or what we could do with it. It was so densely unusable. The very beginnings of the internet was ten years away, there were no programs you could load on to it that we knew of, and this was a time when all programs had to be written in obscure machine code and typed in there and then. There didn't appear to be any instructions, method of storing data or saving programs easily that we knew of. This was a time when people were still figuring out what we might be going to use computers for. Even simple word processing or desktop publishing was a concept yet to be grasped. I remember lessons explaining how computers might be used in all sorts of applications that never came to be. Computerised scales in the kitchen that would automatically weigh ingredients and suggest recipes? Fridges that would tell you when you were running out of certain items? (Because opening the fridge door and looking was so old

fashioned and unnecessary) The most we ever did was the most rudimentary creation of data files, or creating a loop that would print a rude word across the screen until you pressed <ESC>

So, this pointless behemoth would sit in the corner with its little green cursor blinking away. Until one day, a message appeared: ==> Anyone there?

Someone had worked out that these computers were networked across the phone lines in the borough, and that we could send messages to each other; a schools intranet. Those at the back of the class soon figured out that this was a school on the other side of Stockport messaging us, and that we could reply when the teachers' back was turned. Computing lessons took on a whole new interest as messages went to and fro, and over the months we built up a picture of over twenty schools, those that had discovered this new portal of communication, their identities, and those that had yet to tap in to this new form of distraction.

Despite our teachers insistence that 'this is not what the computer was for' we always managed to grab a few minutes at the end of a lesson, or in break times. Soon jokes were passed back and forth, other bits of trivia and gossip, and eventually an ever-growing list entitled: '101 uses for an IBM VM370'. Most of these involved disembowelling the giant monitor of its screen and cathode-ray tube and utilising it as a plant pot, umbrella stand or hat.

We had inadvertently stumbled across what the majority of people would use computers for in the future, some twenty years ahead of time!

I first became connected online properly in 1999 when we bought our first home computer. It was a slow and frustrating business then. I remember Sunday evenings being the time when most people were on and the connection would grind to a halt under the internet's inability to keep up with demand. Email was the most important thing then, and as we had our newborn son, it became the medium by which to share pictures and keep in touch with the ever-growing number of friends in cyberspace.

Among early sites that became important was Friends Reunited, but this was soon eclipsed by the better connected and organised Facebook. I remember early websites being those created by individuals rather than the global companies that dominate now. My interest in aviation meant I was often looking at an individual photographer's collections of aircraft. In particular a chap called Mike Barth catalogued a gallery of the individual tail designs worn by British Airways' controversial ethnic livery at the time. Through this I soon found my way onto Airliners.net, which had existed since 1997, and has now become the go to website for photographs of airliners past and present.

Daily routines and practices

I use the internet and home and work on a daily basis. At home I have an 8 year old Compaq tower which is in our living room, and this I regard as the 'main' computer – it is connected

to a printer and has an external hard drive plugged in to accommodate all our family photographs. I also have a Samsung NC-10 Netbook which I use mostly for writing which I keep in my workbag. I often use this to access the internet quickly as the main computer is much slower to boot up, and its flexibility means I do use it around the house and when I go away on holiday or trips. Occasionally I use my Samsung Galaxy smartphone but only sparingly as I don't like its slowness or tiny screen for most of my internet use. It comes in handy for weather, road traffic, occasional Google searches on the go or a look at Flight Radar 24 for positions of aircraft flying over. I do not access email on this, preferring to do all of that on my main computer so deal with things in one go rather than being pestered all day.

At work we have a number of hot desks which we use to access email and updates on work procedures (air traffic control) as well as the company's intranet. We have internet access and I usually have at least one look per day. As I work in an operational environment we have several half hour breaks per duty where I might do this, I am not sat at a desk all day as in a normal office environment.

I try to ration my own internet use each day. It is far too easy and time consuming to sit and surf, wasting hours on pointless pursuits and distractions. I find I have to discipline myself and avoid turning on the computer unless I have specific work to do on it. When I do I tend to find I will swirl around for a couple of hours going through my bookmarked favourites unless I am doing something positive like banking, editing photographs, emailing or writing.

I would like to ration my family as I think they spend far too much time online. The precedent is set perhaps by my wife who suffers from arthritis and has had to medically retire in her 40's. She has to manage her energy through the day so will sit with her Kindle for a few hours at a time. My daughter will usually spend time on her iPad in the morning before school, and will be on it all evening apart from dinner, homework or other activities. Similarly my son seems to have spent most of the summer holidays playing online games or on his smartphone. Both of them watch a lot of vlogs and would count themselves and 'youtubers.'

My most regular sites are Facebook, Airlines.net and Flight Radar24 which I will look at on a daily basis. Other that I use when needed are the Met Office weather forecast, BBC weather forecast and occasionally news, Google maps and streetview and AA route planner. I use a few sites for research for my aviation hobby – mostly the Airline Fleets Index at planespotters.net, and LAAS Bizjets (The London Amateur Aviation Society) for executive jets. I have a few music and theatre venues and pop/rock band websites that I look at from time to time.

I have never completed a course to help use the internet or a computer. Despite doing computer studies at O level and A level in the early 80s, and studying computer science at Polytechnic, I wouldn't say I had any formal training other than picking it up as I went along. The way people use computers today is totally different to how it was when home computers and PC's were in their infancy. Generally speaking the idea of having a manual or instructions for us has fallen by the wayside as programs, games, applications and websites have become 'user-friendly.' Usually by trial and error you can find your way around, although that can lead to all sorts of frustrating hours spend at a screen. The things I was learning about at school and college might have stood me in stead if I had gone into the

computer industry, but have had absolutely no use whatsoever to the way we use computers today.

My first job after school and before going to Polytechnic in 1985/86 was at a company that sold early PCs to small businesses in. I had to sit and learn the word processing, spreadsheet and database programs just by trying to follow the manual and by blundering through. I was given only rudimentary introduction then left to get on with it myself. I guess they expected a teenager fresh out of school to be the expert while the other 4 or 5 staff were busy chasing customers! These early PCs were the Sanyo MBC-555 and Olivetti word processors, and compared to what has superseded them they were very clunky and not user-friendly. My official job title was 'computer demonstrator', but I admit I had not much of a clue when my first nervous secretary sat down for her first experience with a computer. I think I tried to cover every single text function the word processor could do in one day and the poor woman left in a state of utter bewilderment.

A few years later (1988) when I was working at a college in Cambridge as part of my sandwich year at Polytechnic, I bravely stepped up to take an evening class entitled: 'Introduction to computers.' None of the older staff were willing to do it and I saw it as a chance to make some extra money. For one evening a week for 6 weeks or so I had a group of about 20 folks, all of whom had never touched a computer before, eager to dip their toe in and find out. Computers were going to be everywhere in the future and everyone was going to have to learn how to use them. The idea that they would become so ubiquitous and simple to use was still unknown. There was no concept of the trivial uses to which they have been put today – it was really a glorified typewriter and data storage device.

In contrast to my earlier efforts I kept it really simple, demonstrating the very rudimental features of a word processor: creating a letter, saving it, and the basic editing functions of how to use the backspace, delete and cursor keys to move around the text on a page. In an era when most people were still using typewriters this was a novelty and a revelation!

Despite my early experience of the world of computing, I did not pursue a career in that field and wouldn't call myself particularly computer-savvy. I use them at arms length much like most people these days. I stubbornly refuse to use my phone for much else other than phone calls and texts, so am not particularly into apps per se. I have downloaded a cycling app that uses GPS to show distance travelled and average speed. Similarly my daughter got me to get one that acts as a pedometer – they are interesting curios but I don't use them as part of any fitness programme or lifestyle. I'm not that into sports or exercise enough to warrant any 'wearable technology.'

Communities and social networking sites

I use Facebook and am on a number of message groups mainly in connection with my aviation hobby.

I like Facebook very much for the level of contact it keeps you in with people. I would only phone or email a small number of very close friends, something that wouldn't be appropriate with the wider circle of people I know. Most social interaction is on quite a trivial level and Facebook serves this purpose very well I think. I like to see what people are

up to day to day, where they've been out for the day, or that they are out with their partner for the evening, or holidays. It's great seeing pictures from time to time of their children's activities – it's just enough to keep you in touch, to keep them in mind, which wouldn't work in the formal setting of letters, phone calls and emails. Most of social interaction is of a trivial nature. Facebook works for me on the same level as sharing banter in an office or around a round of drinks in the pub.

On the other hand it has been enlightening to see people airing their views on immigration, refugees and migrants. With some people I think I would rather not know their politics.

What has been particularly nice is getting in touch with folks I have lost contact with. It's an extension of what Friends Re-united tried to do, tapping into that 'what happened to them?' question when you think back to schooldays. Facebook's advantage is that it casts the net wider. A friend from church nearly 30 years ago who had emigrated to New Zealand popped up one day, and it was great to find out what had happened to each of us. We got to know his wife, always have a game of Scrabble on the go, and met up a couple of years back when he came back to visit his elderly father. We got on well and he talked up life in New Zealand so much that we decided to go there for a holiday, staying with them for some of the time.

I have kept in touch with dear old friends this way who now live in Australia too. How amazing one evening to say hi to my friend who is a geological surveyor, and get a selfie back saying here she was outside a factory early in the morning her time, waiting for them to open up! It reminds me of what we were doing at school 30 years ago – using computers in such a trivial way that could never have been predicted.

Within Facebook are common interest groups, and I post pictures to one that covers historical photos of the London airports and the aircraft that visited them in the past. There have been some wonderful pictures of long-gone areas, people and aeroplanes, and plenty of interesting stories and banter to go with it. Although I have not met any of these people you feel you are getting to know a whole new crowd that share your interests, and a number of them do get together.

My wife writes a blog from time to time and began following a lady in the US who wrote one under the name '10 minute writer'. They struck up an online friendship which developed on Facebook and in due course we became beta readers for her first three novels. She was commissioned by a publishing house to write a book entitled: 'How to write a novel in 10 minutes a day.' I was invited to help in its development by 'road-testing' the writing exercises for each chapter, along with another friend of hers. As we came to the end of the project I was due to travel to the States so we arranged a very serendipitous meeting to bring the project to a close.

My wife has also travelled to the States for a short break to stay with our friend in her home city, and I cannot but marvel at how far flung and disparate people can be brought together via the internet and what it has led to. There is now a large Facebook group of more than a thousand members gathered around the '10 minute novelist' banner, a worldwide community of writers.

There are a few networking sites that I have deliberately avoided. I have in the past been active on a couple of discussion forums. One was for a pop musician with a very long and

varied career and a fascinating character. It was fun for a while and there was never any bad stuff on there, but I came to realise there are only so many hours in the day. These things can be very absorbing, and likewise with the many aviation discussion forums, a lot of time can be spent very quickly scrolling through endless conversations. For the same reason I have never signed up to Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest or Snapchat. Quite simply: There. Is. Not. Enough. Time. My wife has been on Twitter and it seems very schizophrenic to me. Too many voices. At one time she had this thing called a tweetdeck, with conversations in several columns continually scrolling every few seconds as another message beeped in. I have difficulty keeping up with one conversation never mind several. It feels to me like one giant global pub, with a million different conversations going on at once which you can never hope to follow. There is a lot of shouting and only the loudest get to be heard. Not for me. I prefer everything in one place where I can manage it, and that place is Facebook. Even my wife has abandoned the tweetdeck, thank heavens.

Facebook has changed somewhat since its inception. Where people used to write a line 'I'm doing this, I'm doing that', it has become a much more visual place as people share pictures of themselves or funny ones they have come across. A post without an accompanying graphic generally goes unnoticed now. That level of detail about life has migrated to Twitter I guess. However Facebook seems to be able to encapsulate several uses and has been able to evolve with the progression of social media into our lives. That and its sheer inertia – I wouldn't use any other site as we're all signed up to Facebook. There would have to be some dramatic shift or revolutionary development to get everyone to find another site, and way, of communicating.

There is a definite generation gap between sites. It is well recognised that Facebook is the old-fashioned place for the first generation of media users like myself. My children are far more networked on Bebo, Snapchat and other platforms that I've probably never heard of. My daughter is on Facebook, but uses Snapchat a lot. My son is on Facebook but never uses it, he tends to Skype with his friends while playing on-line multi-user games. Our Godson is on Facebook, but I remember him saying around the time he was 17 that he was going onto Twitter so he could have private exchanges away from parents.

It is clear that different ages use different sites, but I wouldn't say there was a typical user of social networks. I think it very much depends on the nature of the site: mumsnet will have lots of mums, aviation sites will have lots of geeky blokes in their forums. It has surprised me who has popped up on Facebook. Some unexpected faces have joined, and others who you think it would appeal to steer clear. I imagine there is some reluctance to join the herd in the same way it is always cooler to be into a rock or pop band that no one else has heard of. Some people are just put off when 'everyone' is on a bandwagon, regardless of what that bandwagon is.

I don't know of anyone personally that has misbehaved on social networking sites, either using them to have affairs or trolling. These things do appear in the press from time to time but I don't believe it has anything to do with social media itself. It is merely another way humans interact, and the same things happened and caused concern/outrage when the penny post introduced letter writing or the telephone became the instant means of communication.

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Your identity

I use my real name and face on Facebook because I have properly adjusted the settings to share things only with people I have friended.

With forums I have done things slightly different. With the groups I am on within Facebook I use my own identity because it would be time consuming and tedious to have multiple log-ins and it don't see any purpose in not revealing myself.

When I was regularly contributing to a pop musician's forum I used an alias, based upon the number of a signed CD I have of his. In that sense I was a number, not a name and I quite liked the irony of that. However it was mainly just to have a nick-name, a 'handle' rather than being just any Joe Bloggs. There is no intention to hide behind it particularly, it just feels cooler to be called 'Top Gun' than Flt.Lt. John Smith.

This is slightly different on some of the aviation forums I go on. There are a few that are there to share information on expected aircraft movements at particular airports and airfields, and to answer queries on things people have seen. Lots of aircraft spotters do it; it's a way of knowing if there is something worth popping down to the local airport to see or photograph. Some of us who work at the airports or airlines have access to this advance information, and it is shared for the benefit of all. Of course, in this day and age with aircraft having been used so prominently in terrorist acts, and airports and airports high-profile targets, this takes on a whole new dimension.

What was once an innocent hobby that was regarded with polite disdain akin to that given to trainspotters has now become a different thing altogether. Authorities are usually tolerant and understand our hobby but there are always 'what ifs...?' If there was an act of terrorism and someone had posted that this aircraft was due, then there would be scrutiny even if there was absolutely no connection. Although forums and groups always have a closed membership, and you know that that information is unlikely to be of any significance, authorities are still suspicious and would obviously prefer it if nothing was put out there. It would make life simpler, but then life for our hobby hasn't been made simple, so people are going to carry on regardless.

To this end whenever I post information, which is quite infrequently, I used an alias and an email different to my regular email. I'm sure if the authorities or government wanted to trace you I'm sure they could (if they're not doing it already!). It just adds a level of anonymity to make it slightly harder to be connected.

I don't worry about identity theft or impersonation, and I don't know of anyone who has experienced this. I feel reasonably sure that the anti-virus software on my computers is doing its job, and I know the banks have some fairly sophisticated methods to check activity. Something like 2-3 times a year a credit card purchase made online will generate an automated phone call from my bank to confirm that I have made that transaction. I keep a careful check on all my financial transactions and I feel sure that if there was any illegal activity like an identity theft, it would all be possible to sort out. I would like to think that companies are aware enough of this kind of thing that they are able to sort it out. Maybe I'm just fortunate so far that I've not had my email or Facebook spammed to hacked to

pieces. Online activity is so convenient and often essential to modern living that it would be foolish not to take reasonable precautions, or rational to worry about it and not be online.

I can only imagine impersonation is a problem if you are someone in the public eye, where you need to have some control over your image to prevent people posting things in your name?

By the very nature of business conducted online, companies have to store personal data and I recognise that. Equally I recognise the need of governments in this digital age to use every means at their disposal to combat cybercrime and expose threats to our security. It's no big question than that which has always been posed of how much governments should know about its citizens and intervene in their lives. It's like back in the days of the cold war in the Eastern Bloc where every other person was an informant. A society ruled by fear is unacceptable, yet we need a certain level of surveillance and policing to ensure security for all. It's that age old question of how far...? Only an open and fair society can function properly, yet we have the paradox of needing surveillance to ensure things are open and fair for all. I have nothing to hide, and I feel fairly secure in an open and free society that I can express myself. However if something I said we're to fall foul of whoever was in power – easier to do in other countries then here – then I and everyone could be in trouble. Even innocent information about me could become dangerous in a different set of circumstances. Is it likely to ever come to that in Britain? It's not worth lying awake at night worrying about it otherwise you would not get anything done or enjoy the benefits of being online.

Online advertising is something that irks me somewhat. I feel I am fairly immune to advertising wherever it appears. I never look at any advertising in newspapers, and I only give a cursory glance to those that appear online. They really are an intrusion on my screen and I would never click on one. If I want something I will go and look for it, either in the shops or online. It is particularly noticeable though if I purchase something, especially an airline ticket, that I will see ads popping up for hotels and car hire at my destination, or ads from the same airline for the same destination! It is unpleasant to know that what goes into a search engine is clearly being picked up and distributed. Especially distasteful is the fact that the internet somehow knows I'm a 49 year old male, into stuff like aeroplanes and music, and insists that I want to see ads introducing me to Russian ladies or Chinese women seeking romance. I stopped using Google searches and tried Duck Duck Go which declares itself to be the search engine that doesn't track you, but it hasn't made a huge difference.

I resign myself to online advertising being a necessary evil like all advertising in life. I suppose it serves its purpose and means a lot of money goes into supporting a lot of things we use, but it washes over me. Spam and junk mail is another matter altogether and it is almost always intentionally malicious. The tedious side of online life, having to check emails carefully even though they are nearly always obvious. Even with legitimate emails that come from any company that I have purchased something online from, I will always immediately unsubscribe just to keep my emails to a minimum.

I always thought people who used dating agencies were a little sad and desperate, and at first I regarded the internet similarly. However my attitude has softened as time as gone on as so many people are connecting these days via the internet. I know quite a few couples who have met online and are married, and I have found old friends and met new ones online through shared interests myself. So much of our lives has shifted onto the web that it

is inevitably acceptable that this should happen. I still caution myself and would others, particularly my children, not to get sucked into spending their entire lives online. Generally though, as long as you can keep usage in check, being online has opened up opportunities to connect with people, and make new friends, so I can appreciate how people are now finding romance via the net.

Are there some topics that you would tell Mass Observation, but you wouldn't put or discuss online? By this I assume we are talking about pornography and the easy anonymous/discreet ability to meet people for sex. In the last week or so the Ashley Madison website has come under fire after the names of users were hacked and released. The rights or wrongs of that I can't quite decide where I stand, but the idea that a website was set up deliberately to encourage extra-marital affairs is very distasteful. I can easier understand websites/apps like Tinder and Grinder if that is the moral environment in which you live, but to suggest that married people should be casting around just adds a mudslide of immorality to that landscape. People have always met for sex ever since letter writing, the telephone, pubs, bars and nightclubs were invented, so to see it online is no surprise. It has just sped up the process, making sex a commodity rather than a part of the relationship that people have. If the internet has helped to make people more of a commodity, we are more de-humanised as a result.

Needless to say, I would never go there, and it is alarming see how easy it is to access pornography online, even with the filter settings on the computer. Like every male, I would daresay, I have had a look to see what is out there, but it's not a corner of the internet you want to hang around in. The likelihood of going to dubious sites with cookies, spam, and computer viruses ready to infect your computer makes it just not worthwhile. Equally the threat to the relationship with my wife makes it a no go area.

Memory and imagination

I haven't used the internet to a great extent to research things from my past. My sister and uncle have done considerable work on the family tree, but from my experience it can take a lot of trawling to find information. My sister has found she has spent a whole afternoon either online or looking through records in a library to only come up with one piece of information, so that puts me off.

I do quite a lot of aviation research online. I am always looking at photos taken at airports of the aircraft, buildings or vehicles from the past which is very enjoyable and nostalgic. I have recently been trying to fill some gaps in my notes and putting enquiries out on a couple of Googlegroups has come up with nearly all the answers. Looking at one website of old pictures I was surprised to see one of myself aged 11 with a group of spotters! Some people may be unnerved by this but it doesn't particularly bother me. Unlike my sister, who despite taking the lead of researching family history, won't sign up to one of the genealogy sites for fear of identity theft. I feel her embrace of new media stopped at email.

I think in the next 25 years the internet will continue to have an all-pervasive hold over our lives. It is difficult to imagine life without it now, just as we wonder how we ever managed to exist without it before. I anticipate we will become better connected, but less relational.

The internet can connect people so quickly and all of the time, and introduce us to new like minded people in any part of the globe. This morning I answered a question from an aviation enthusiast from Thailand who is staying in London about the best place to watch aeroplanes at Heathrow. I may never communicate with this person ever again or we may become the best of friends. He might be a terrorist who shoots down an airliner and I end up in prison by this evening. Who knows? The internet is a strange land that we are still exploring. Current fads like Facebook and Twitter will fall out of fashion and something else will take its place; even if it is the same thing but in a different form. Eventually I can imagine all communication and entertainment will be through computers, rendering TV sets, cinema and radio receivers redundant. Our identities will be encapsulated online, we will be able to choose how we present ourselves and to whom, and it will be a nice or nasty surprise to actually meet in the flesh.

Personally I would like to spend less time on the internet in the future. Even Facebook or aviation and music websites that interest me can be huge timewasters, never mind all the videos of cute kittens and people falling over. I don't like how much time we as a family spend online, often all three of them are sat there flicking at phones and iPads. The entire world is there in that tiny screen, but you can't see or comment on every single thing going on.

There are a couple of events that wouldn't have happened without the internet – both through connecting with people via Facebook. I wouldn't have got in touch with a friend I hadn't seen for 25 years or so who lives in New Zealand, and that led to going over there for a three week holiday last year. Similarly I wouldn't have got involved with a writer from the USA, with whom we have beta read her three novels and worked together on another. Following on from that my wife visited her and I got to meet her separately to close up the work we did.

Media

I don't think I have written a letter since the 1990s, and then it would be probably a half yearly catch up with only distant friends when sending a birthday or Christmas card. When email appeared I used it for a while to communicate the equivalent of letters but it has become a much more a way of sending 'domestic memos' to organise things. Letters really are a summary of what you are doing, and these days that has been replaced by continually or occasionally broadcasting what I am doing or thinking on Facebook. I think in this day and age we are so used to immediate communication the idea of composing a letter is quite antiquated, even though receiving one is actually really nice.

Similarly the diary I keep is for my own reflection and recording, whereas a blog is for broadcasting to whoever would be interested. Blogs tend to be more specifically tailored to particular interests I find, but some like my wife do write about personal issues as a way of exercising her thoughts. She finds the feedback and encouragement from friends or occasionally people she doesn't know helpful. I don't write a blog, not being convinced people want to know my innermost thoughts or opinions. Perhaps I have MO for that!?

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I've never used FaceTime or Skype. It looks like a more personal form of communication than a phone call, where it is more important to see someone, say between partners or children and parents if they are away. I can only think I would do this with my immediate family, or possibly closest friends for a particular reason. A phone call is on another level of interaction that suits most situations and wider circle of friends, relationships or 'business' needs in daily life.

Again, Tweets are for broadcasting something to a wider group of people, texts are direct and personal. They can be intimate, or practical, whereas tweets would be neither of those things.

I keep coming back to Facebook as my preferred platform for online communication as it is so powerful and flexible. I can message friends directly, creating the equivalent of an email or text. This can be practical information like a text, or more personal like an email or letter. Unlike the letter the response is prompt, it is current. It allows me to broadcast what I am doing or what interests me, with pictures. Most conversation is trivial, and I like that about Facebook, that you get to follow that day-to-day week-by-week activity that keeps you in touch just enough with people. Letter writing and email even now is too stiff, too formal.

So, depending on what I want to say, or who I am saying it to, I present myself differently on these formats, and even within a format.

Task

Googling my own name came up with 389,000 results in 0.53 seconds. I have a fairly unusual surname which is most commonly found in the North West of England, so I was surprised to see my namesake turning up quite a lot in North America.

The first result was for my profile on Facebook (which I share only with friends so a casual 'Googler' wouldn't see. There were only 6 others sharing my name, all from the USA, and a couple of others with different names but who lived in a town in Massachusetts that shares my surname. The origin of this town's name stems from someone who settled there from NW England, so the connection is unsurprising.

The second result was for a law firm in Ontario, Canada. A civil litigation specialist who shares my name and has a business in association with another lawyer. Very professional website which was nice to see.

Third result was LinkedIn profiles. I don't have one so I didn't turn up there, but there were 8 sharing my name here, 5 in the US and Canada, 2 in Australia and 1 in the UK. All holding quite impressive business credentials – Automotive manager, medical student, American Express regional manager, an arts & crafts studio director, someone in the mining industry, a construction manager and a handyman.

It feels nice not to see too many people sharing my name in the world, make me feel a little rarer and special. It's nice to see all my namesakes doing well for themselves too, but that is probably down to the nature of what they do resulting in having a LinkedIn profile or

website rather than our name being associated with special gifting or exceptional business prowess.

Further down the results is a baseball player from a team in South Dakota, who appeared twice, once on the team's webpage and as a link to his personal Twitter account. There is also a trainee curate in the Church of England's West Yorkshire & Dales diocese! Successful and holy...

The fourth result was for a website '192 UK Address' which was the most unsettling result. It derives its data from the electoral roll and showed my partial address, wife's name and 19 others people in the UK sharing my name. Notably most of these were in the North West. It said it was based on the 2002-2008 records and actually had one of our former addresses from before that period and had my age incorrect. It did show names of other people who had lived at that address and our current one, and there was a link to any county court appearances. I was surprised to find this information publicly available, I didn't know such a service existed. By signing up it appears more data is accessible, so I guess this is how advertisers get hold of you. I wonder if the data is not released immediately from the electoral roll which is why it is partly out of date? Slightly reassuring if it is. I suppose to live in the modern world one must be resigned to having some of your details openly accessible, otherwise you just cannot function. This information was probably always available in some dusty town hall filing cabinet, but with everything on computers these days it is so easily and readily accessible. That is all fine in principle and generally I'm not too bothered by it. I have done nothing wrong, I have nothing to hide. I am a decent law-abiding citizen. It's just you know in a different kind of society, in another country, it might take on sinister implications.

I looked at Google images associated with my name but was pleased to see that no photos of me appeared. It looks like people don't take too much care with their Facebook settings as most of them were from that website. I don't have my own website, Twitter account or association with anything of public interest, so it appears I am pleasantly anonymous on the internet.