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Running Head. Introduction to the special issue: self-(re)presentation now.

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Introduction to the special issue: self-(re)presentation now

A special issue called self-(re)presentation now cannot ignore the political, social and events that have overtaken us since the original call for papers in July 2015. The battles we are seeing in physical and digital spaces and in their intermingling, makes plain that questions of presentation and representation of individuals, groups and communities are key sites of struggle in the contemporary moment and, relatedly, the roles of digital affordances, systems, industries, structures are also thrown into relief. The scholars writing in this special issue touch in more or less direct ways on how critical scholarship on questions of the representation, re-presentation and presentation of self are enmeshed in wider struggles. That is, issues of representation, re-presentation and presentation of self should now be understood as more than a niche part of the fields of media, communication and cultural studies. Taken together, the articles collected here suggest that questioning the self in digital culture is key to how the field of media and communication engages with contemporary politics and the political.

The selected articles - and the enthusiastic response to the original open call for papers - demonstrate the wide range of scholarship focusing on presentation and representation of the self in this moment. This special issue shows that questions of self-presentation and representation in digital culture are the focus of lively debate, critique and investigation and that this is taking place from a number of theoretical perspectives and indeed in a number of fields and locations across the globe.

This special issues features scholars speaking from Australia, Denmark, the UK, Canada and the US. The time for a critique of the concepts at hand and their relations is quite clearly upon us as the recent explosion of publications engaging these concepts already attests (see for example, Dayter & Muhleisen (eds) 2017, Dobson, 2015, Kennedy 2016, Senft & Baym (eds) 2015)). The authors in this issue join the debate; subjecting the concepts of representation, presentation and, the self (taken together and taken apart) to thoughtful critique. The articles explore a range of objects and processes, namely gender diverse and gender fluid selfies, 'migrant related selfies', parent bloggers, 'non-selfie selfies', Chatroulette, and Twitter, and in so doing they insist that the field of self-representation and self presentation and performance online be opened up beyond the selfie to include the selfie in a rather larger set of practices and processes. The authors here employ a range of perspectives and methodological approaches. Despite their diversity we can read the articles presented here as prioritizing a couple of key foci, which set the debate for research in this area from now on, namely: the self itself and power relations. I discuss each of these themes and their location in the articles, below, concluding with some thoughts about where the original research presented here takes us in relation to theorising the self in digital culture.

Key themes: the self and power

There are two key points of consonance in a special issue that raises much to debate for scholars interested in representation and presentation of selves.

First, the articles collected here suggest that the everydayness of self-representation/presentation is now understood as the starting point of scholarship in

this domain. The authors in this special issue all suggest, to this reader at least, that the next step must be to interrogate and to theorise the conception of the self at work in practices of self-presentation and representation and in our scholarly work. Secondly, and relatedly, the authors writing in this special issue all seem to suggest that an exploration of power relations should be at the heart of any attempt to understand ubiquitous self-presentations and representations, their production, their content, their form and their circulation. I discuss the two themes - the self and power power relations in the production and circulation of self-(re)presentations - in turn below.

The self

Firstly, every author's starting point in this special issue is the very everydayness of the self performing, presenting, representing and circulating in digital culture. Thus it is acknowledged that forms of self-presentation and representation are everyday and this is a starting point not a question in itself. As Sandvik et al note '...the study of media in the mundane contexts of everyday life has been part of the endeavour to expand and contextualise both a recipient and a user perspective of the media' (Sandvik et al 2016 p9). Each contributor to this special issue moves from a position of asking, if presenting or representing the self is part of the everyday, then - once that is established - what questions must follow? That is, the banal everydayness of self-(re)presentation leads the scholars in this issue to ask what does this context of mundanity mean for the self itself and for our scholarly understanding of it?

In her article, 'Verified: selfhood and self-presentation in the age of big data'

Alison Hearn recounts a history of sociological theories of the ideal self in relation to broader historical and capitalist moments to argue that we are now seeing the era where the ideal type self is what she calls 'the anticipatory self', because of our thorough enmeshing in 'regimes of anticipation' in which, Hearn argues, 'intent matters little' (Hearn, p). Hearn's argument is fundamental: that the self itself has altered in line with the practices by which we have become conditioned.

Lilie Chouliaraki and Jenny Korn both ask which selves present /represent and when and where and to whom, and, moreover, which selves do we ignore or make assumptions about when considering self-presentation and representation in our scholarship, and also out there in the mediated world. In 'Symbolic bordering: the self-representation of migrants and refugees in digital news' Chouliaraki argues that the selfie does not function as a vehicle of self- expression for migrants but instead works to inscribe 'symbolic borders'. Chouliaraki argues that we don't see migrants' own selfies in Western news media, but we do see a lot of 'migrant related selfies'. And, once images of migrants taking selfies are remediated in western news these images simply become more fuel for 'our' own self-contemplation and thus they become imbricated in 'our' dehumanising of 'them'. So, for Chouliaraki, it is the remediation of selfies that reveals which selves matter in a Western European imagination which both refuses entry to migrants and, crucially, dehumanises them via symbolic means. Thus Chouliaraki refers to ' practices of “symbolic bordering” that appropriate, marginalize, or displace their digital testimonies in Western news media'. (Chouliaraki p). Hence she shows how migrants are not the selves of self-presentation or representation in Western European imagination.

In her article titled 'Expecting Penises in Chatroulette: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Anonymous Online Spaces', Korn presents a critical autoethnographic study of Chatroulette which was '[w]ithin the past decade, [...] the premiere site for webcam chat with anonymous strangers that spawned an entire generation of derivative webcam-based sites for anonymous sociality ' (Korn, p). In the course of her discussion Korn highlights the absolutely fundamental centrality of race, gender and sexuality to even the briefest and most silent of online interactions. Korn's piece serves as a powerful reminder that as scholars we cannot meaningfully talk about practices, experiences or meanings of self-presentation without addressing the particulars of the self in question. Indeed, she suggests that we might need to revisit our methods of understanding the self in practice; critical autoethnography reveals an experience of being the particular, presenting self that it seems unlikely one could access by other methods. But, as Korn notes, such method comes at an emotional cost, which requires attention.

In very different ways, Alicia Blum Ross and Sonia Livingstone's article and Son Vivienne's piece return us to the problem inherent in assuming that a unified self exists at all. In 'Sharenting," parent blogging and the boundaries of the digital self' Blum Ross and Livingstone also take an ethnographic approach, exploring in-depth interviews with 17 parent bloggers in order to ask how digital culture has exposed the problems in the way we conceive of the self as individual. Further, they enquire whether the borders between parent and child have changed in a context of online sharing by parents. They highlight the importance of a historicisation of the topics that many in the field of communication and media studies are exploring in relation to the contemporary digital world, reminding us that the issues arising from the practice

of 'sharenting' are not new. Thus, the pertinent question becomes, what has digitization meant for the (already existing) sociological question about where the boundaries of the self lie either for a parent of a child or the child of a parent? As the authors note, these are not small questions, though they are crucial ones. Has digitization, and the practices that have emerged alongside it, led to more blurring of the boundaries between parent and child because of the practice of sharenting online? Or is it, rather, that when faced with intensified articulations of blurred boundaries between the selves of the parent and of the child, we are forced to confront the issue of the bounded/unbounded self in our scholarly work? That is to say, we cannot avoid the question of where the boundaries of the self may lie.

The ambiguous boundaries of the self are addressed from a different perspective in Vivienne's ''I will not hate myself because you cannot accept me': problematizing empowerment and gender-diverse selfies'. She draws on textual and discourse analyses of 'online cultural artefacts' including selfies and ethnographic action research with trans 'social media storytellers'. Here Vivienne echoes Korn's call for researchers to attend to the specificity of the self in terms of race, gender, and sexuality in any enquiry about self-presentation or representation online. Ultimately, Vivienne concludes that 'gender-diverse and gender-fluid selfies are contributing in a small but significant way to redefining society's constrictive and binary expectations of masculinity and femininity' (Vivienne p). However, she notes that a perceived requirement to present a coherent, unified self produces anxiety for her research participants and, at the same time, in line with previous work in this field, that these very characteristics of online self-presentation in fact facilitate the foregrounding of multiple (including fluid) selves. Vivienne's research suggests that faced with the

existing possibilities for the expression of multiple selves, scholars should consider again their tendency to impose or assume a unified self. This is precisely the question addressed by Andrew Whelan and Katrin Tiidenberg in '#EDC and #GPOY: visual self-representation in “not-selfies”'. In their article they query the tidy correspondence of face to self that is the starting assumption of common understanding of many analyses of self-presentation and representation, which assumes not only that the self is a unified individual but also that said individual can be and is represented by a face or body.

Power relations in the production and circulation of self-(re)presentations

The second area of convergence across the six articles presented here is that the focus of research in this area should be on power relations. Focusing on 'symbolic bordering', as we have seen, Chouliaraki argues that physical borders and hierarchies are reinscribed via the remediation of 'like selfies' - images of migrants taking selfies that we see in western media. Chouliaraki notes that we do not get to see the migrants' selfies rather, the images of migrants using camera phones are inserted into moral and imperialist discourses that other and dehumanise the migrants; we ask, why do they have phones, not, what are they saying. In this way, for Chouliaraki, the migrant selfie joins established discourses of geo-political power relations; it does not alter them but rather shores them up.

For Hearn, an equally bleak look at the power relations in which presentations of self are situated suggests, like Chouliaraki but from another perspective, that what presenting and representing selves do or think they do 'matters little' (Hearn p). For

Hearn, self-presentations are best understood in terms of their generation of capital for the companies that profit from their ubiquity - from their banality, in fact. But more than this, Hearn's argument, discussed above, that the very normality of the generation of self-presentation means an altering of the self itself (in which process the self becomes 'an anticipatory self') suggests that power sits firmly with capital, with the big companies, such as Twitter, that shape and own the platforms and reap the benefits.

The remaining four articles in the special issue all look at power relations at a more social and, even, intimate level, asking what they are and how they operate within and through practices of self- representation and presentation. And in so doing these authors confront the concepts and methods of research on self-presentation and representation in challenging ways which will, I think, help us to progress this field of research. Thus, Vivienne proposes 'privilege' as a more useful critical concept than the oft-used term 'empowerment' for assessing the multiple and contradictory work that self-presentations online do. She argues that by this step, the privilege of cis women is foregrounded as always already present.

Korn also argues for attention to privilege in the researcher and participant. Foregrounding how race, gender and sexuality shape self-presentation online, Korn notes that while her research might seem to support the notion of theories of disinhibition, (her illustration of a painful racist encounter in Chatroulette is given as an example) she also asks us to reconsider whether there is such a clear demarcation between online and offline in terms of inhibition, suggesting that racism itself might enable disinhibition:

> In other words, is it possible that the person who engages in overtly sexual or racist behavior online also chooses to act in those ways offline, such that sex and race provide contexts in which disinhibition operates in similar ways to one another, digitally and physically? (Korn, p)

This would suggest that we need to consider methodological innovations to explore the interrelations between online self-presentation and self-representation and the other contexts of everyday life - an argument, then for ethnographic approaches in research in this field.

Whelan and Tiidenberg take up the idea in some earlier work that it is helpful to see self-representation as a genre wherein genre is understood as being constructed through shared understandings by producers and audiences. This suggests that the emphasis on genre allows a conceptualization that asserts '[s]elf-representations are emergent, dialogical, and intertextual, while being recognized by both producers and audiences as flexible, self-referential statements of identification' (Whelan and Tiidenberg p). In this way, they focus on what self-representations are, but at the same time foreground the shifting power relations at work in the texts and practices of self-representation (in a broader sense than it is usually understood) in the context of the platforms on which they appear.

As already noted, Blum Ross and Livingstone, like the other authors in this special issue, highlight how parent blogging forces into the open questions about the ways in which the self is conceptualised in platforms and by users of those platforms and, in

scholarship too. They note that ' it forces a comparison – for researchers, but also for society - of relational versus individualistic conceptions of identity, ethics, privacy and responsibility' (Blum Ross and Livingstone p). At the same time, Blum Ross and Livingstone acknowledge the multiple ways in which the self-representing bloggers are producing capital - for themselves by monetizing their blogs but also by appearing on platforms which profit from their appearance (as exemplified by Hearn's article in this volume). At the same time, they highlight a crucial contradiction at the heart of any understanding of the power relations at work both in self-representation online, and in scholarly understanding of it: 'such a critical reading risks marginalising the very voices and narratives that it accuses the neoliberal project of erasing, highlighting an ambivalence of which our bloggers were acutely aware' (Blum-Ross and Livingstone p).

The range of approaches to self representation/presentation found in this issue suggest that it might be helpful to remind ourselves of the critiques of earlier polarisation in debates about political economy versus cultural studies (see for example, Hesmondhalgh 2012; Morley 2006). This seems a good moment to remember to refuse any binary opposition in our attempts to understand the meanings and uses of appearances of selves online. At the same time it may be useful to return to some earlier questions, in the newer context of contemporary digital culture. For example, are we now seeing an intensification of the power of structures in defining the significance of media technologies and practices? How then can we continue to argue for the importance of attending to what actual people actually do online and what actual representations of selves look like, as well as how they are used in remediated networks? What would our understanding of self-representation, self-presentation and

digital culture and everyday life more broadly look like if we abandoned attending to people's understanding of what they do? The practice of taking, uploading, living, sharing in digital culture still matters for all the authors featured in this special issue, for our understanding of what it means to live in digital culture, but also for our understanding of power and resistance in this context. Chouliaraki takes on the idea of the importance of the network through her frame of remediation and, in so doing, moves towards Hearn's argument that content and intent do not really matter to the value generated because of the ways in which the self-representations - once produced and in circulation -are used. But, Chouliaraki stops short of the not mattering. The images we don't get to see do matter; she implies that we would, ideally, hear migrants voices via their selfies and, in so doing, we would perhaps, be forced to acknowledge that migrants have selves as much as anyone else does. Thus, as she notes, Chouliaraki is requiring us to hold together circulation and semiotics. Even Hearn, in her last, hopeful, sentence wants the content to matter:

> 'But the hope here lies in the always incomplete and unstable project of capitalist appropriation and modes of subjection, and in the thoroughly intractable mystery of reflexive, critical human consciousness, which, in the end, these developments both exploit and enable' (Hearn, p).

Conclusions: the self and digital culture

In keeping with the rich interdisciplinary contribution to the study of self-presentation and self-representation in digital culture, particularly from science and technology studies and media and communication studies, taken together the authors collected

here address both the social technical aspects of self-presentation and the representational aspects. In doing this they lead us to consider how different fields of thought feed into both approaches to and understandings of presentation and representation of self in digital culture. These articles also all remind us that digital cultures are located. And, while the articles in this issue are not all explicitly about the most recent events in the Middle East, Africa, the US, Europe and Russia, nonetheless the issues that the articles address resonate with our engagement with current global affairs, showing that thorny questions about the representation, presentation and performance of selves must be tackled as part of our engagement with those affairs.

Reading these articles together, it becomes clear that in addressing the life of the self in digital culture we are facing the problem confronted in earlier debates on the turn to mediation, where the critique was about the concept of mediation being so broad in its applications that it was simply about 'everything' (Livingstone 2009). If the presentation and representation of the self is at the heart of life in digital culture, it is an object/process/practice that requires scholarly attention from multiple perspectives. Indeed the articles collected here seem to me to make it plain that we need a range of approaches and several of the scholars writing here say as much (Chouliaraki, Whelan and Tiidenberg). This would also seem to suggest that we need scholars from diverse traditions to talk to each other, thus this special issue presents an argument for a renewed interdisciplinarity, most particularly between science and technology studies and media and communication studies, but certainly not limited to those domains. Scholarly collaborations might very well produce innovative methodological combinations as well as challenging theoretical conversations and that, arguably, is what is required for the next stage in scholarly work about the self in digital culture.

The articles collected here taken together suggest that familiar questions remain urgent; all six authors ask how the digital intersects with society and the answer from across the articles is a familiar one; don't generalise. It is clear that the self and the digital and their articulation should remain central to explorations of power and society in a digital era.

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