

## Self-Representation in Social Media

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*SAGE Handbook of Social Media*,  
edited by Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick, and Thomas Poell.  
Sage, forthcoming (2017)

For millennia, humans have used media to represent ourselves. Children draw stick figures with a stick in the sand. Stone age Australians blew ochre dust around their hands to leave marks in a cave. Vikings carved runes on sticks to tell the world their names. Our grandparents kept diaries hidden in drawers. Today we post selfies to Instagram or Snapchat and write updates on Facebook or Tumblr. With social media, ordinary people share their self-representations with a larger audience than ever before.

In this chapter, I will discuss three modes of self-representation in social media: visual, written and quantitative, building upon my book *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs, and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves* (Rettberg 2014b). Visual self-representation includes selfies, of course, but also other images and icons that we use to express ourselves, such as the photos we choose to share on Facebook or the layout we choose for a Tumblr log. Written self-representations can be blogs or online diaries, but also the many written status updates we share on sites like Facebook, Twitter or in comments on Instagram. The third mode I will discuss is quantified self-representation, which is becoming increasingly common as phones become step-counters and apps give us more and more opportunities to represent our lives through numbers and graphs. Quantified self-representation can mean extensive and deliberate self-tracking, as we see in the quantified self movement, or it can be

something as simple as swiping right to add a filter to a Snapchat image showing the temperature where we are or the speed at which we are moving. Often the three modes overlap in social media, as with a Snapchat image that includes numerical information. A selfie with overlaid text uses both the visual and written modes of self-representation, and emoji can be understood both as part of an alphabet and as visual communication.

In social media, the social and communicative aspects of self-representations become very clear. But self-representations have always been social. When we see a self-portrait like Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1524) hanging in a gallery or shown on a website, we see it outside of its original social context, and so it seems natural to understand it primarily as an object rather than as part of a conversation. In fact, Parmigianino used his self-portrait as an advertisement for his painting services, bringing it along when he spoke to potential patrons. Kings and Queens used the paintings they commissioned of themselves to show their subjects their magnificent riches and power. The child of today who draws her mother a picture of the two of them together is creating a love letter, a charm to keep her mother close to her and to express her love. Even a private diary is written to an imagined reader: "dear diary," we write, always imagining a recipient to whatever we write, even if that recipient is only a future version of our self (Lejeune 2000).

Although self-representations are always about communication, they are frequently personal media, to use Marika Lüders' useful term (Lüders 2008), and are often intended to be seen by only a few. Some forms of personal self-representation are intended to be shared with a limited audience, like the family photo album, which is a collective self-representation of a family that is kept in

the home and shown to some but by no means all guests. Historically, personal letters and diaries were not necessarily kept completely private, but were often passed around or read aloud to family and friends (Humphreys et al. 2013). Sometimes personal self-representations become shared more widely than originally intended. Anne Frank kept her diary private during her lifetime, but it became very widely read once published after her death.

### **Representations or Presentations?**

Before discussing visual, written and quantitative kinds of self-representation in social media, we need to think about the term representation. Why are these forms of self-expression representations and not presentations? The short answer is that they can be seen as either, because the two terms provide two different ways of looking at this phenomenon. A representation is an object, a sign that is seen as constructed in some way, and that stands instead of an object to which it refers. Talking about representations lets us analyse the selfie, the tweet or the graph of a run. A presentation is an act, something that a person does, so talking about presentations allows us to analyse the way that the person acts to present themselves.

It's a little more complicated than this, unfortunately. The terms representation and presentation are used differently in different disciplines, making their use quite complicated in an interdisciplinary field such as internet studies.

Twentieth century linguistics, with influential scholars like Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, led to the semiotic understanding of representation as a system of signs, that is, sounds, words, images or objects that

stand instead of a concept or a thing. For instance, the word 'tree' is a sign that refers to an actual tree. In his textbook *Representation* (1997), Stuart Hall describes three theories of representation: reflective, intentional and constructive. In the reflective approach, the sign or the representation is thought of as a reflection of reality: 'language functions like a mirror, to *reflect* the true meaning as it already exists in the world' (24). In the intentional approach, one assumes that 'Words mean what the author intends they should mean' (25). However, both these theories are seen as flawed by most contemporary scholars. Most scholars today, including Hall, see representation as *constructed*. A representation cannot mirror reality because we all have different experiences and interpretations of 'reality'. Also, words and images and other representations can be interpreted very differently in different contexts or cultures. A suggestive message sent to a lover means something very different within that relationship than it means if it is displayed to work colleagues or tweeted to the world. When representations are shared out of context, their meaning is often constructed differently by the new audience. For instance, many media reports on police shootings of African American use very informal photos of the victims. A teenager may think it's fun to show a silly or embarrassing party photo to friends, but this kind of image is interpreted quite differently when used by a newspaper to represent the victim in a police shooting. The #iftheygunnedmedown campaign on Twitter and Tumblr was a response to this. Participants posted two photos of themselves to Twitter, or to the *If They Gunned Me Down* Tumblr, where one photo was from a party or another informal setting, and the other photo was taken in a more formal or socially approved situation: a college graduation, or wearing a suit and smiling. The rhetorical question accompanying all the posts was which photo the

media would publish if 'they gunned me down', and the implied answer was of course that the media would use the less respectable-looking photo, making the African American victim look less worthy of our respect than if a more formal photograph had been used (Korn 2015; Jackson 2016).

Semiotics, the study of signs, provides a large vocabulary for analysing images. The most liked image on Instagram in 2015 was a photo of Kendall Jenner lying on the floor in a white, lacy dress with her hair spread around her arranged into seven heart-shapes (Jenner 2015). The caption published with the image has no words, and consists of a single emoji, a rotated black heart:

🖤, which is also treated as the title of the image in the web browser.

In semiotic terms this short description of the image and its caption is the *denotation* of the image and its caption. A denotation simply describes what is shown or the literal meaning of the sign without interpretation. Jenner's photo is obviously not a selfie, as her hands are visible in the frame, folded over her stomach as though she is laid out like a corpse. She couldn't have arranged her hair herself, either. The image can still be seen as a self-representation: deliberately staged, photographed, and posted to her Instagram account, where it gained over 3.3 million likes.

The most interesting semiotic analysis is not in the descriptive analysis of the denotation of the signs, but an analysis of their *connotations*. Connotations are common associations connected to a sign, not private associations that only one individual might have, but associations and references that are shared by larger cultures or groups. Jenner's image has some very obvious signs with well-established meanings or connotations in our culture. The hearts that her hair has

been shaped into connote love, and are echoed in the rotated black heart emoji in the caption. The choice of a black heart rotated sideways rather than the far more common upright red heart may suggest that though the image is about love, it is a darker, more complicated love than that signified by a red heart. The white lacy dress signifies a bride, which again signifies love, and, in a traditional sense, new, virginal but soon-to-be-consummated love in particular. The traditional wedding dress is white because white stands for innocence in Western culture. Jenner is laid out like a corpse, with her hands folded as is traditional in Western funerals, and her eyes are closed. The floor is white with a black graphic pattern that could be interpreted as suggesting a river, although this is not an interpretation I would have arrived at had not the dead maiden with her outswept hair made me think of Ophelia, the girl who loved Hamlet and drowned herself. Paintings of the drowned Ophelia always show her hair floating out in the water she lies in, and her dress is often shown as white. Jenner's photo is an example of the way that death is frequently aestheticized in Western visual culture, and we could certainly take the analysis of the image much further by thinking about why a photo showing Jenner as a dead virgin is the most liked photograph on Instagram. Gender and power relationships might be a place to start. A semiotic analysis always begins, though, by studying the image or the text itself and considering what signs it consists of and what those signs signify.

Seeing selfies and blogposts as representations is something that makes sense if you are considering them as texts to be interpreted or from the point of view of media studies. Another important theoretical tradition has its roots with the sociologist Erving Goffman, whose influential book *The Presentation of Self in*

*Everyday Life* (1959) is heavily referenced in scholarship about social media. Writing well before social media, Goffman describes how we perform and present ourselves differently in face to face interactions with different groups of people. On Facebook, a typical user will be friends with quite different groups of people: such as close family, high school classmates, co-workers and distant relatives. Social media theorists have used Goffman to talk about how we try to manage these different audiences. It is often impossible to keep those contexts separate from each other, a phenomenon called 'context collision' by danah boyd (2011).

If we were to analyse Jenner's image as a presentation, rather than as a representation, we would focus less on its status as a set of signs, and more on the role Jenner was performing by posting this image, perhaps considering questions such as who the image was intended for, where and when it was posted, what responses it was met with and Jenner's motivations for creating and sharing the image. One approach would be to interview Jenner herself and perhaps also people who had seen, commented on or reposted the image, but it would also be possible to learn a lot from the image itself, from studying Jenner's other posts and from examining the comments and the contexts in which the image was republished or discussed. We might compare the image to other images posted by non-celebrities, or perhaps we might find a surge of homage images copying or playing upon the Jenner image. Often ethnographers and sociologists want to learn about practice across a group of people, and so a study of self-presentation rather than self-representation on Instagram might explore how users typically create and share images rather than focusing on individual examples like Jenner's image. Other scholars simply don't use the terms

representation and presentation, like Katie Warfield, who prefers a phenomenological approach, arguing that focusing on the visual artifact of a selfie often means ‘neglecting the fleshy producer of the image, who in the case of selfies, is also the heart of the image’ (Warfield 2015).

Presentation and representation are also used in different ways than those I have just described. Aristotle wrote about representation as *mimesis*, that is, an attempt to realistically mimic the world. This is similar to what Stuart Hall calls the ‘reflective approach’ to representation, as discussed earlier in this chapter. In theatre, some critics use the term representational acting to describe the ‘naturalistic’ form of theatre where actors do not acknowledge the presence of the audience. In this style of acting, there is an imagined ‘fourth wall’ between the actors on stage and the audience, and audience members are like flies on the wall observing the action. In presentational acting, on the other hand, actors acknowledge the audience and speak directly to them (Bakshy 1923, 12). Often these modes of acting overlap, as in literature, where the narrator may invoke the ‘dear reader’ at times while at other times telling the story with no overt acknowledgement of any reader. Another use of the terms is found in the field of interpersonal communication, where John Fiske explains that representational codes produce a text that can stand alone, whereas presentational codes are ‘indexical: they cannot stand for something apart from themselves and their encoder,’ that is, the person who spoke or communicated (Fiske 2010, 63).

Ultimately there isn’t necessarily any strict difference between the terms representation and presentation as they are used in scholarship on social media. In practice, most analyses will really view the material from both perspectives. In

this chapter, I will primarily consider expressions of the self in social media as representations, but I use the term fairly broadly.

In the next sections of this chapter, I will discuss each of the three main modes of self-representation in social media, beginning with written self-representations as seen in blogs, followed by visual and quantitative self-representations.

### **Blogs and Writing About the Self**

The first online diaries appeared around 1994, and were hand-coded by people who had taught themselves to create websites. One of the earliest online diaries was Justin Hall's *Justin's Links*, which is still active at links.net, though the style and content have changed considerably over the years. At first, the website took the form of a meandering hypertextual story about Hall's life, but in 1996 Hall began posting dated diary entries that still linked and intermingled with his hypertextual autobiography. Hall didn't call his site a weblog until much later, because 'web log' at that time was used to refer to the statistics available to website administrators showing the number of visitors to a website. In 1997, Jorn Barger proposed that the term weblog be used to refer to websites that post links to interesting material with commentary (Rettberg 2014a, 8), and a number of hand-coded weblogs became popular. The style of these early weblogs was brief and although the comments usually had a clear individual voice and offered personal opinions, the content was not usually autobiographical. Weblogs were often seen as being different from online diaries, which were more confessional. In 1998, Open Diary became one of the first sites to provide easy web publication without users needing to know how to code or edit HTML (Rettberg 2014a, 9).

Instead, users picked a layout from a set of templates, and wrote their entries into text boxes. 1999 saw the launch of sites for easily publishing weblogs, or blogs as they became known, including Pitas and Blogger. Within a few years, the once quite separate genres of online diaries and blogs merged. Blog posts became longer and more essayistic, often using a more personal voice, and online diaries came to include more essayistic material and commentary in addition to the autobiographical content.

By 2004 blogs were so popular that 'blog' was named word of the year by the Merriam-Webster, much as 'selfie' was named word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries in 2013, and both declarations were much discussed in the mainstream media. Around this time, commercial blogging took off, and we saw corporate blogging as well as individuals who created their own profitable businesses by blogging about their lives or about products. Today microcelebrities (Senft 2013; Marwick 2013) and influencers (Abidin 2015) tend to use multiple platforms rather than a single blog, as early bloggers did. A popular contemporary fashion blogger may have hundreds of thousands of readers a day, but often spread across platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat and a blog.

Although much interesting work has been done researching people who have built their own careers online and become Instagram or blog celebrities or, to use Crystal Abidin's more general term, influencers, this chapter is primarily about the ways in which ordinary people represent themselves in social media. And yet the line can be difficult to draw. Abidin emphasises that influencers *are* ordinary people: 'Influencers are everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the

textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetise their following by integrating “advertorials” into their blog or social media posts’ (2015). The main thing that differentiates influencers from the majority of social media users is that influencers monetise their activity. They use advertising, sponsorship and advertorials to make money in social media, heavily using their online identities to make their message personal and intimate, and using emotions and designing empathetic communication (Lövheim 2013) with their readers in order to establish strong, lasting relationships. Other celebrities may not directly monetize their self-representations in social media, but use them as platforms to increase their influence and money-making potential in other channels, for instance driving interest for their books, TV-shows, music, Etsy store or political cause.

Although it can be argued that social media forces or at least encourages users to promote themselves as brands (Marwick 2013), most people do not monetize their social media use. Today people write about their lives on sites like Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr, as well as on traditional blogs, and use these platforms to express themselves and to build and foster connections with others.

Bloggers themselves have long recognised that blogging, over time, can be a way of becoming more sure of oneself and more aware of one's preferences and opinions. Rebecca Blood, a very early blogger, described her experience like this in an influential early essay:

Shortly after I began producing *Rebecca’s Pocket* I noticed two side effects I had not expected. First, I discovered my own interests. I thought I knew what I was interested in, but after linking stories for a few months I could see that I was much more interested in science, archaeology, and issues of injustice than I had realized. More importantly, I began to value more highly my own point of view.

In composing my link text every day I carefully considered my own opinions and ideas, and I began to feel that my perspective was unique and important. (Blood 2000)

A couple of years later, Steven Johnson, an author of popular science books, described blogging as being like a mental visit to the gym:

I've actually been about twice as productive as normal since I started maintaining the blog. The more I keep at it, the more it seems to me like a kind of intellectual version of going to the gym: having to post responses and ideas on a semi-regular basis, and having those ideas sharpened or shot down by such smart people, flexes the thinking/writing muscles in a great way. (Johnson 2002)

Viviane Serfaty's 2004 study of blogging connects blogs to the traditions of the English Puritans, who used diaries as "a requirement of religious self-discipline", recounting "a spiritual journey towards personal salvation" (Serfaty 2004, 5). During the same period the Libertines developed the idea of "an inner space devoted to internal deliberation" (5), which may be said to be one of the sources of the modern divide between the private and the public. Serfaty writes that both blogs and diaries are usually written more for the sake of the writer than for the sake of the reader. They are used as mirrors, she argues, to reflect upon the self, more than they are used to project a particular image to the public, as might for instance be the case in an autobiography intended for publication.

Serfaty's book was published in 2004, before the commercialization of blogs (Rettberg 2014a, Chapter 5) really began, and before social media went mainstream. While much of what she writes is still true of today's blogs, clearly many blogs are now much more about branding, monetization or constructing a particular image of the self, while much other use of social media is more about keeping in touch with friends or sharing quick jokes or observations than about self-improvement or developing ideas. A lot of the discussion that previously happened in self-hosted blogs has shifted to corporate-owned spaces like Twitter

and Facebook, where the space to write is far more limited than in a traditional blog. Another shift is the increased emphasis on metrics: how many likes, shares or recommends did your post get? In the early days of blogging this was not visible to readers. You could see where discussions were taking place, but you couldn't calculate how important a blogger was based on numbers at the bottom of each post. Perhaps one of the reasons why Snapchat has gained influence is that people are relieved not to have to see how many likes and shares each snap they view has received. There are some metrics in Snapchat, for instance you can see who viewed your own story, or who opened a private snap you sent, but you can't like or share somebody else's story, and you can't see how many views or likes somebody else's story has.

### **Selfies and Visual Self-Representations**

As we approached 2010, smartphones with built in cameras, good screens and cheap data plans became common, and images became increasingly important in social media. At the same time, platforms such as Facebook became mainstream forms of communication. It is easy to forget how recent these shifts are. The term 'social media' itself was not in popular usage until 2008. Before that, people talked about Web 2.0 and social networking sites, and before that, people simply talked simply about the web or the internet. Smartphones make taking, sharing and looking at images easier than typing or reading lengthy blog posts, and increasingly self-representation in social media has become visual.

Of course there were visual forms of self-representation well before smart phones. ASCII graphics were used in discussion groups in the 1970s and 1980s, photos and animated gifs were used on early websites, bloggers and Myspace-

users chose graphical templates and fonts that they felt represented them, icons and visual avatars were used in chatrooms (Thomas 2004), 'camgirls' of the early 2000s used webcams to stream their lives online (Senft 2008), and photo-sharing sites like Flickr (created in 2004) were specifically created for image-sharing. In today's social media, users have less control of the overall look of the page, and visual control is generally limited to the choice of cover photos, profile pictures and other images shared. However, the images that are shared are given prominence and are the main point of many social media platforms.

Visual self-portraits are an age-old genre, and though there are many examples in art museums, the most interesting examples in the context of social media, namely those created by ordinary people and intended for the moment rather than posterity, are probably lost to us. It wasn't until the late fifteenth century, with Albrecht Dürer, that self-portraits became their own genre, rather than the slightly furtive insertion of the self into images that had other purposes (Borzello 1998, 21). Self-portraits became promotional objects for artists, allowing a prospective client to assess the likeness between the painter and the self-portrait. They were also done for practice: even without access to a model, if an artist has a mirror available, they can always paint their own face.

Access to technology that would allow you to create a lasting self-portrait is a fairly recent development. A child can draw her face in the sand on a beach, but it will wash away with the next waves. To create a lasting image usually requires a material such as paper or marble or canvas and the tools to make marks on it, such as paints or pencils or tools for sculpture, and these things were not cheap until quite recently. Some artists have managed with much less, such as the stone age people who placed their hands on cave walls and blew ochre

dust over them to make a hand print. But most of the self-portraits we have preserved, up until the last century or so, were created by professional artists.

Some of the first photographs ever taken were self-portraits. An early example is Hippolyte Bayard's *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man* (1840), which is a carefully staged self-portrait showing the photographer slumped against a wall as though dead. Bayard claimed to have discovered photography before Daguerre, but was not recognized for this, and this photograph was presented as a criticism of the French Academy's failure to acknowledge Bayard's work. It was as though they had killed him, the image seems to say, thrown him, dead, into the gutters, and the words he scrawled on the back of the photograph confirm this: "The Government which has been only too generous to Monsieur Daguerre, has said it can do nothing for Monsieur Bayard, and the poor wretch has drowned himself".

This is not only one of the first photographic self-portraits, it is also a staged photograph, deliberately showing a scene that did not happen. As such the photograph is a useful reminder that self-representations are often staged and not always intended to be taken as truth, or at least not as literal truth. Bayard did not drown. But taking this photograph not only allowed others to see him as drowned, it allowed him to see himself as drowned. It allowed him to see himself as he could never see himself without technology that recorded and displayed a frozen image. We cannot see ourselves in a mirror with our eyes closed. Self-portraits can be a way to communicate with others, but they can also be a way for the photographer to imagine how he or she could be different.

When Kodak started marketing relatively cheap and easy-to-use cameras to amateurs in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, family photographs and photo albums

became personal media found in many homes. Photobooths also became popular as early as the 1910s or 1920s, first as amusement park attractions and later as fixtures in train stations and public spaces, where they were used to take the standardised portraits that had become necessary for identity papers, but also for fun (Pellicer 2010). Photobooths allowed ordinary people to take photographs for themselves, and without a photographer being involved. If you search online, you will easily find many examples of old photos taken in photobooths, both of ordinary people and of celebrities, and it is fascinating to see how similar many of these images are to selfies taken today (Rettberg 2014b, 42–44). People have a tendency to ham it up in photobooths, and as with selfies, group portraits are common.

Twentieth century photographers' self-portraits were often taken in mirrors, and often positioned the camera as a barrier between the viewer and the photographer (Borzello 1998, 142). In their self-portraits, professional photographers like Kate Matthews (c. 1900) and Margaret Bourke-White (c. 1933) seem to hide behind their large cameras.

The great shift from these mirror self-portraits to today's selfies is that selfies are usually taken on a smartphone where the front-facing camera combined with the screen allows the photographer to simultaneously see and record herself (Warfield 2014). The smartphone is a mirror that can capture our reflection, at any moment. Once you own a digital camera, you can take as many photos as you like without worrying about using up the film or having to pay to have the photographs developed. Perhaps it is almost as important that you can take photographs with the assumption that nobody else need ever see that photo. This assumption may not in fact be true, as we know from scandals where

phones or private photo sharing networks have been hacked and photographs posted publicly. But we can still take these photos in private, much as teenagers gaze into a mirror when nobody is looking to wonder who they are and who they might become.

A lot of interesting research on selfies has been published in the last few years. Anne Burns discusses the ways in which selfies are used to discipline young women in particular, using Foucault in her analyses (Burns 2015). Katie Warfield interviewed women who take selfies and found that they use selfies as cameras, stages and mirrors: 'young women mediate between these various subjectivities at once trying to find a balance between an image that presents them as conventionally beautiful (the model), while also being an image that others would want to see (the self-conscious thespian) and finally an image that somehow represents a felt connection to the body and one's authentic sense of self' (Warfield 2015). Katrin Tiidenberg has analysed Tumblr communities that share erotic selfies (K. Tiidenberg and Gomez Cruz 2015; Katrin Tiidenberg 2014), while Crystal Abidin has written about the "subversive frivolity" of influencers' selfies (Abidin 2016).

Much of the research on selfies as visual artifacts or representations focuses on what Paul Frosh calls nonrepresentational changes: 'innovations in distribution, storage, and metadata that are not directly concerned with the production or aesthetic design of images' (Frosh 2015, 1607). Frosh instead uses concepts from the theory of photography to argue that selfies are gestures, arguing that while photographs have previously been indexical primarily because they are traces of a material reality, selfies are indexical in that they point to a communicative action. The selfie 'says not only "see this, here, now," but

also “see me showing you me.” It points to the performance of a communicative action rather than to an object, and is a trace of that performance’ (Frosh 2015).

### **Quantified and Automated Self-Representations**

While written and visual self-representations have long, well-studied, pre-digital histories, quantitative self-representation was less common until personal computers became ubiquitous and powerful enough to make personal data collection easy. ‘Self knowledge through numbers,’ is the slogan of the quantified self (QS) movement. The idea of self-improvement through self knowledge is a recurrent theme in self-tracking (Lupton 2016, 64–69; Rettberg 2014b, 62–68), as in social media in general. In *Status Update*, Alice Marwick writes that ‘social media allows people to strategically construct an identity in ways that are deeply rooted in contemporary ideas that the self is autonomous and constantly improving’ (Marwick 2013, loc. 3091).

Benjamin Franklin’s habit tracking, described in his autobiography, is an early, pre-digital example of the idea of self-improvement through self-tracking. To become a better person, he decided to track how well he adhered to thirteen virtues he had set out as especially important to him: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, chastity, tranquility and humility. He drew up a chart with a column for each day of the week and a row for each of the virtues, and gave himself a black mark for each day he felt he hadn’t lived up to a virtue, and two black marks if he had done very badly. Looking at the chart in his autobiography, silence seems to have been a virtue he struggled with in particular, with two black marks on Sunday and

one on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Order was difficult for him too, but he did quite well at resolution (Franklin 2007 orig. 1791).

Today's technology makes it easier both to track your personal data and to analyse it. You might track how many cups of coffee you drink each day and compare that to how easily you fall asleep at night, or how many productive work hours you have, or how often you have a headache, and then use your findings to try to optimize your sleep, productivity or wellbeing by changing your coffee-drinking habits. This kind of analysis is made much easier by computers. Self-tracking has gone mainstream largely because it is built into many devices. Smartphones now have built-in step tracking, and apps like Runkeeper, Strava and Endomondo let you track runs or other workouts, showing you how far and how fast you run as well as offering specific workout plans. Dedicated devices can measure how well you sleep, how good your posture is or how often you take deep breaths.

Several scholars have likened the increased quantification and measurement we see in social media to neo-liberalism, pointing out that using metrics to measure every aspect of our lives can make us cogs in a machine we do not control (Marwick 2013, loc. 105; Lupton 2013, 28; Grosser 2014). Workplaces are increasingly requiring or expecting self-tracking of various kinds. Warehouses like Amazon's fulfilment centres track workers' every move. Other companies give health insurance discounts if workers log a million steps a day on their company-issued Fitbits. Sometimes tracking is required or encouraged by employers to document that a worker is getting enough exercise in order to be a healthy, productive worker (Till 2014). Coerced quantified representations of ourselves may be required or expected by employers or

schools. They are also generated and often displayed to others when we use social media: the number of likes a selfie posted to Facebook or the number of retweets we get on Twitter are displayed both to the person who posted the material and to anyone else who views it. In other cases, medical conditions such as diabetes require constant self-monitoring. Self-tracking is not always optional.

Quantified self-representations also include automated diaries, which are generated by apps you can install on your phone, or the algorithmic self-representations generated as summaries of your activities on various services (Rettberg 2014b, 45–60). Often, these are generated without your having realized that your actions were being tracked as data that could represent you. For instance, at the end of each year, customized infographics are sent to users of Goodreads and Spotify showing an overview of the books the user read or the music they listened to. For the last few years, Facebook has generated “Year in Review” videos and photo collages from posts from each user in the last year. Google Photos automatically stitches together videos and animations from users’ photos and videos, using facial recognition, image search algorithms and metadata about time and location to automatically create, for instance, a video of a user’s “Christmas 2016” or of their “Trip to Paris”. These sorts of representations are not necessarily seen as part of the quantified self movement, but they are quantified self-representations because they represent an aspect of an individual using quantifiable data.

These algorithmically created diaries are usually presented to the individual with a question: Would you like to share this? Services we use thus collect our data and present it back to us as a possible self-representation. Sometimes, you might not even be aware that data about you is being added to

your social media profiles. When Spotify posts a song you are listening to to your Facebook newsfeed, that becomes part of what others see as your self-representation on Facebook – but you might not have wanted the song to show up, and you might not even notice that it showed up (Kant 2015). Sharing an infographic of the music you listen to can feel like quite a personal form of self-representation, but for the service that generated it (Spotify, GoodReaders, Facebook or another company) it is also a mode of advertisement.

### **Abundant Self-Representations**

In the time of one-to-many communication, media was scarce. It was very expensive to write, edit, print and distribute books or newspapers, to make and distribute movies, or to create and broadcast television and radio, so gatekeepers like publishers and production companies made sure that only material that was either commercially viable or seen as aesthetically or ideologically important was published or broadcast. This meant that we could assume a certain level of quality when we picked up a book or a newspaper, or turned on the television. Before the internet, individuals' production of personal media was also limited. While paper and pens for writing a personal diary were easily available in the twentieth century, it was expensive to buy film and to have it developed, so people were quite selective about what photographs they chose to take. That is why home photography generally centred around certain rituals, as Pierre Bourdieu described in his book on amateur photography, originally published in 1965 (Bourdieu 1990). We took photos at birthdays and weddings, and of happy families in the sunshine at the beach, but not of our laundry or of walking the kids to school. We didn't often take photographs of ourselves.

With digital technology, media is no longer scarce. When everyone can create and distribute as much media content as they please, there will obviously be a lot of material available that is not particularly high quality and that will never be of interest to most of the world. That's OK, many bloggers argued in the early 2000s (Mortensen and Walker 2002). You don't have to read or look at blogs and photos you're not interested in. We all have a vast amount of media at our disposal. Of course, this also means that despite the potential for a huge audience, most social media content creators will never have very many people reading or looking at the material they publish. Andy Warhol famously said in the sixties that everyone has their fifteen minutes of fame. On the internet, Dave Weinberger and others have argued that it's more correct to say, 'Everyone is famous to fifteen people'.

And yet the accusation of shallow vapidness is one that recurs with every new form of self-representation online. Blogs and selfies have both been accused of being shallow, of being expressions of narcissism, of being boring. Back in 2002 when the first awards were established for blogs, bloggers Dave Linabury and Leia Scofield founded the 'Anti-Bloggies', an award created to ridicule bad blogs. They explained in an interview with *Wired* magazine:

One of the things I don't like is the blog where someone says something like, 'Today I had a cheese sandwich.' That's the kind of thing you see in most of these blogs. You know, fascinating. I don't give a flying ... whatever what you ate. Don't tell me you have a flat tire. And if this is how boring their writing is, I can't imagine how boring they must be to talk to in general. (Manjoo 2002)

Similar criticisms have been levied at Twitter and Facebook as well. Much of our social interaction, whether online or offline, is banal. Perhaps more accurately, it is *phatic*: more about maintaining connections than about conveying information (Miller 2008).

The quantified self movement has not received the level of ridicule that blogs and selfies suffered when new. Perhaps its numerical basis gives it a sheen of objectivity, a sense of seriousness that blogs and selfies will never have. Perhaps selfies are dismissed because they are often seen as 'feminine' (Burns 2015), whereas quantified self is seen as masculine and therefore more serious and worthy of attention.

Quantitative self data may appear objective, but we know that people negotiate with their data, retelling the stories of their days to make their own experience match up with the data. Researcher Minna Ruckenstein gave nurses heart-rate variation monitors, but didn't show them their data until after they had already told the researchers about their subjective experiences of the days they had worn the monitors. Heart-rate variation is an indicator of stress, and when the nurses were shown the data, they changed their stories to fit (Ruckenstein 2014). Data is always something that needs to be interpreted. It is not an objective window on truth, any more than visual or written self-representations are reflections of 'the true meaning as it exists in the world,' to quote Stuart Hall again (1997, 24). Viviane Serfaty titled her 2004 book on personal blogs *The Mirror and the Veil*, arguing that bloggers use their blogs both as mirrors to reflect themselves and see themselves better, and as veils to hide behind. Self-representations are rarely about trying to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth about ourselves. They are as much about constructing a truth or many truths about who we are and could be.

As objective as it may seem, even detailed counting does not necessarily tell you very much about a person's life. Sometimes the thing measured is not

very interesting, as when Samuel Beckett mockingly let his character Molloy count farts in the novel *Molloy*:

Three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours, or an average of over sixteen farts an hour. After all it's not excessive. Four farts every fifteen minutes. It's nothing. Not even one fart every four minutes. It's unbelievable. Damn it, I hardly fart at all. (Beckett 1994, 39)

Tracking farts is of course used as a mockery of obsessive self-tracking, or of excessive attention to oneself, and the idea of this useless obsession is echoed in the 2003 project *Statistics are Hot Air*, in which artist Ellie Harrison tracked her 'daily gaseous emission output' for a year (2003). Harrison not only counted all her farts from January to June 2003, she visualised them both as a bar chart on a paper timeline hanging on her studio wall, and as a physical installation at Moor Street Station in Birmingham. The physical installation is a large, colourful bar chart on a glass window, and the vinyl stickers look like a purely decorative border at the bottom of the window. Visualisations of quantified self-representations do tend to have a decorative aesthetics that sometimes distracts from the data itself, or that perhaps is ultimately more interesting to us than the data. We are driven by our desire for patterns and completed sequences: a gold star on every square on the star chart, or a graph showing we have gone for a run three times a week, every week.

The ultimately empty or purely decorative function of Harrison's chart of her farts can certainly be read as a critique of quantitative measurements in general. The title *Statistics are Hot Air* equates statistics to farts. Both are hot air, nothing at all, or worse, following the colloquial meaning of 'hot air', which the Oxford English Dictionary explains is 'Empty or boastful talk, pretentious or insubstantial statements or claims.'

The construction of meaning in quantified self-representations can also be seen in Molloy's fart-counting. He has counted exactly how many times he has farted that day, but is capable of interpreting that number as either high or low. The sentences immediately before the quote cited above read: 'I can't help it, gas escapes from my fundament on the least pretext, it's hard not to mention it now and then, however great my distaste. One day I counted them.'

Despite having arrived at the figure of three hundred and fifteen farts in nineteen hours, Molloy manages to conclude that this is 'nothing,' adding 'Damn it, I hardly fart at all.' Like the nurses in Minna Ruckenstein's study, Molloy is skilled at interpreting data in a way that suits him. Of course, knowing that the author of *Molloy* was Samuel Beckett, we can see that this is about a lot more than simply a critique of self-measurements. In her book *Narratives of Nothing in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Literature*, Meghan Vicks notes that 'Even when Molloy attempts to tabulate the most mundane facts about himself, he arrives at an ambiguity suggesting nothing' (Vicks 2015, 123). The idea of nothingness and emptiness is important in Beckett's work.

Twelve years after Harrison's project, the CH4, an automated, wearable fart monitor that you slip into the back pocket of your jeans and that connects to an app on your smartphone, was pitched on Kickstarter, but failed to attract sufficient funding (Narciso 2015). CH4 had a completely serious goal, and was apparently developed with no sense of irony or existential anxiety: the project aims to help people emit less gas by measuring how often they fart, comparing this to what they eat, and finding correlations between their diets and farts so as to help users to cut back on the foods that increase wind. The interface of the app that shows the users' results contains more information than Harrison's colourful

bar chart, but is still visually pleasing. The website and the device itself conform to contemporary tech startup aesthetics: the website has large, high-quality photographs, and responsive, scrolling design. The prototypes of the device itself are shown as square with rounded edges, and come in white as well as pink, blue and green. CH4 fits perfectly into the rhetoric of quantified self and tech startup cultures – except it is about something embarrassing: farts. Of course, farts are not simply embarrassing, as we have seen, they are also rich metaphors for nothingness, for meaninglessness, for pretentiousness.

Self-representations in social media are often mocked as vapid, self-obsessed, frivolous – or simply boring. This is perhaps where seeing them as *representations* can trip us up. Our everyday and scholarly tools for understanding representations carry with them a 20<sup>th</sup> century world view where we expect media to be professionally created by the few for the many. We expect a representation to be carefully crafted and packed with meaning. Social media self-representations, on the other hand, are personal, social and often made for the moment, not for eternity. When I share a selfie or post a Snapchat story about my day, I am not usually trying to create immortal art or literature. Sometimes I may aim to impress or entertain an audience, or to put something deeply significant into words or images, but more often often I am narrating or visualizing my experiences so as to remember them better, or understand them better, or to strengthen a connection with my friends, or to ask for support, or simply to pass the time.

On the other hand, a self-representation is precisely a *representation*. It shows a certain aspect of ourselves, a certain way of seeing ourselves. A representation does not and never can share everything. We negotiate with our

self-representations, whether like the nurses in Minna Ruckenberg's study, retelling their days to suit the data, or by taking dozens of selfies before choosing the one we want to share. We choose what to share, which self-representations are appropriate, but we share far more than the rituals and the happy family situations that Bourdieu wrote about in the sixties. The social contract for what is photographable or sharable or representable is changing. New apps and devices and social media services are constantly being offered to us, and many fail. Others change our ideas of how to tell our stories. There will surely be more changes in years to come.

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