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**The Digital Self: The Construction of Self
and Social Recognition in the Global
Digital Society**

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The Digital Self: The Construction of Self and Social Recognition in the Global Digital Society

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Abstract

The use of digital technologies in contemporary global society has brought about a genuine anthropological and anthropotechnical transformation of the individual, on three interconnected levels: 1) the level of everyday behaviour; 2) the level of cognitive processes; 3) the symbolic level. In this paper, I will analyse these transformations in relation to a specific phenomenon of digital technology which falls within the range of practices of the quantified self, namely the phenomenon of lifelogging. The phenomenon will be analysed on three levels: 1) Processes of subjectification. Why are such data collected? The purpose of lifelogging is no longer "self-knowledge" – as in the modern and contemporary philosophical and cultural tradition – but rather self-motivation and self-optimisation. In terms of processes of subjectification, these practices may be understood as digital technologies of the self, to quote Michel Foucault, which is to say as modes of controlling and transforming one's self by acting upon one's body. 2) Social recognition. The data collected are also shared on social media platforms in order to receive comments and feedback through which to reinforce the construction of self. Can we describe this virtual community as a digital form of social belonging? And what are the implications of this for traditional forms of social recognition? 3) Business. The phenomenon of lifelogging includes not just lifeloggers but also the developers of lifelogging apps, devices, and software. Lifelogs (i.e. databases about individual physical performances) are widespread in many fields, such as those of fitness, healthcare, and education. Given the highly integrated level of the phenomenon and the risks it entails (particularly in terms of privacy policies), a pressing need has emerged to fill a gap in academic knowledge by investigating lifelogging within the context of the global digital society.

Keywords: Digital Technologies, Digitalisation, Lifelogging, Phenomenology, Media Theory

Introduction

In 1998, American economist Don Tapscott introduced the expression "Net Generation" to describe those individuals who – from the 1990s onwards – were born into a world dominated by the digital turn and who established a relationship with digital technologies of a sort quite unknown to their parents. As early as 2001, Marc Prensky noted the lightning development of the Net Generation into the generation of "digital natives", distinguished by their immersion in digital communication technologies from birth and their transparent (i.e. direct and intuitive) use of such technologies. The use of digital technologies in contemporary global society has brought about a genuine anthropological and anthropotechnical transformation of the individual, on three interconnected levels: 1) the level of everyday behaviour; 2) the level of cognitive processes; 3) the symbolic level. In this paper, I will analyse these transformations in relation to a specific phenomenon of digital technology which falls within the range of practices of the quantified self, namely the phenomenon of lifelogging, in order to illustrate its repercussions in terms of the construction of the individual and social self. Lifelogging is an integrated form of self-monitoring and self-tracking which combines the use of wearable computers for measuring physical performances (heartbeat, caloric consumption, distance covered, etc.) through specific apps for the processing, selecting and describing of the data collected, possibly in combination with video recordings (including live streaming). The phenomenon will be analysed on three levels:

- 1) Processes of subjectification. Why are such data collected? The purpose of lifelogging is no longer "self-knowledge" – as in the modern and contemporary philosophical and cultural tradition – but rather self-motivation and self-optimisation. In terms of processes of subjectification, these practices may be understood as digital technologies of the self, to quote Michel Foucault, which is to say as modes of controlling and transforming one's self by acting upon one's body.
- 2) Social recognition. The data collected are also shared on social media platforms in order to receive comments and feedback through which to reinforce the construction of self. In this respect, lifelogging constitutes a meta-technology, which is to say a shared and codified social practice that produces a specific community. Can we describe this virtual community as a digital form of social belonging? And what are the implications of this for traditional forms of social recognition?
- 3) Business. The phenomenon of lifelogging includes not just lifeloggers but also the developers of lifelogging apps, devices, and software. Lifelogs (i.e. databases about individual physical performances) are widespread in many fields, such as those of fitness, healthcare, and education. Given the highly integrated level of the phenomenon and the risks it entails (particularly in terms of privacy policies), a pressing

need has emerged to fill a gap in academic knowledge by investigating lifelogging within the context of the global digital society.

Lifelogging and the Digital Subjectification

Ordinary social intercourse is itself put together as a scene is put together, by the exchange of dramatically inflated actions, counteractions, and terminating replies. Scripts even in the hands of unpractised players can come to life because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing. All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify (Goffman 1959: 72).

This observation made by the American sociologist Ervin Goffman in his 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* describes the age before the mass spread of computer and digital technologies, an age in which digital forms of life had not yet transformed the world into a virtual stage for "unpractised players". In this paper I aim to briefly explore the transformation of the "presentation of self in everyday life", i.e. the modes and features of subjectification processes, in the age of the new media, which is marked by two conditions with no precedents in the history of mankind: **1)** the progressive *incorporation* and integration of digital devices into the human body (let us think of smartphones); **2)** the consequent increase and extension of our performative abilities.

I will analyse a concrete case study that illustrates these two conditions in an exemplary way: the phenomenon of "**lifelogging**" as a form of augmented memory and experience of the world. The "players" of lifelogging resort to practices of self-monitoring and self-sensing through wearable sensors and computing devices (EEG, EEC, video streaming, calories counters etc.), in order to gain information (data) on their "everyday life" – i.e., on their mental, physical and performing activities. Thus, lifelogging is a form of self-tracking and "quantified self" practice that is performed with the help of applications and softwares specifically developed for lifelogging and that is ultimately shared online through social networks. The questions I wish to address here concern the nature of lifelogging activities and the type of subjectification they involve: can lifelogging be understood as a digital form of "care of the self" performed through digital "technologies of the self" in the sense suggested by Michel Foucault? If so, what kind of subjectivity do lifelogging practices create? As a form of life that is shared online, does lifelogging activate processes of recognition – i.e., does the act of sharing information on online social networks represent a form of social recognition?

This paper can be considered a report on my current research, which I am developing from a philosophical point of view by combining the phenomenological method developed by Edmund Husserl (1973) and some of his scholars (such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean Baudrillard), Michel Foucault's late theory of biopolitics and the technologies of the self, and the

methods and tools of content analysis, which allows us to study and retrieve meaningful information from documents that, in our case, are of a digital kind. Depending on the examples taken into account, I focus on:

- 1) recorded and written texts (commentaries, blogs etc.);
- 2) iconic texts (images, diagrams, pictures);
- 3) audio-visual sources (live streaming, videos etc.);

Let us go back to 2011, when the third episode of the first series of "Black Mirror" – a British television series created by Charlie Brooker – was first broadcast on Channel 4. The episode, entitled "The Entire History of You", describes a reality in which most people have a microchip implanted behind their ear that records every action of their "everyday life". This is basically a form of augmented memory that allows memories to be played back either before the person's eyes or on a hologramatic screen: the episode explores the pitfalls of future technology through the neurotic breakdown of the protagonist, Liam, who starts to suspect his wife of having a secret affair with an old friend of hers. He begins to obsess over his memories, searching through them for evidence of an affair – until he finds it.¹

The members of this alternative reality can be considered lifeloggers: by lifelogging we understand those practices of self-monitoring and self-sensing through wearable sensors and computing devices (EEG, EEC, video streaming, calorie counters etc.), aimed at acquiring data on the experiences of people's everyday life – on their mental, physical and performing activities. It is a complex form of self-tracking and "quantified self" practice, performed with the aid of applications specifically developed for lifelogging: these apps can be purchased and downloaded on smartphones and work together with wearable devices such as the Google Glass, the Apple Watch etc. Lifelogging also includes the practice of sharing the results on social networks in order to receive feedback and comments.²

We might ask: is lifelogging to be considered a totally new phenomenon that we can only explain by referring to the practices of the quantified self movement, or may we consider it an expression in the digital age of those practices that Michel Foucault called "technologies of the self"?

I suggest that lifelogging, like practices of self-tracking in general, does not represent an absolutely new phenomenon in the history of mankind: media of some kind have always been used by individuals to track the memory of their lives (keeping diaries, scrapbooks, photo albums and so on). What is new

¹ See the review by Ryan Lambie on "Den of Geek", 19.12.2011. goo.gl/YRJv56.

² Here I can only briefly touch upon the history of lifelogging and of its technologies, starting from the first experiments carried out by Steve Mann in the early 80s with his Wearable Wireless Webcam, followed by the attempts made by Jennifer Ringley, Lisa Batey and others to create integrated platforms for lifelogging (combining live streaming with social networking) in the 90s, the research developed for Microsoft by Gordon Bells and his "MyLifeBits", and finally the creation of specific apps conceived for smartphones and other digital devices in recent years (such as UbiqLog, Moodlytics, and Experience Explorer, among others).

here is the digitilization of media and their use in a highly integrated way; four conditions have changed in the present days, as Jack Schofield notes:

First, new devices such as camera phones and digital recorders have made it much easier to record your life. Second, the use of digital media has allowed all the different types of record to be combined instead of stored separately. Third, the cost of disk storage has fallen to the point where many PC users can afford the terabyte or two of storage needed to keep everything. Finally, the internet has made it easy to share the results (Schofield 2004).

My belief is that lifelogging represents a form of digital technology of the self, in the sense theorized by Michel Foucault. Let us consider Foucault's definition of the technologies of the self. These, he explains, are techniques:

which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault 1988: 18).

In this sense, they are practices of subjectification, i.e. of self-governance, by which the subject (re)produces and transforms himself as a subject. This is precisely what lifeloggers do, and in view of the same purpose. On the website of Moodlytics, one of the most common lifelogging apps, the leading slogan is: "It is not an App, it is companion for happiness". If we navigate the "Dive me in" section, we read: "moodlytics found its way with an ultimate goal to track all the positive moments and factors of life which keeps spreads (sic) happiness and perform a root cause analysis for the negative factors and people directly or indirectly having influence in our life". Happiness and purity are the ultimate goals, as theorized by Foucault: this implies a deep change in the meaning of human practices and behaviour. As the ultimate goal of human beings, philosophy (from Socrates onwards) has traditionally focused on self-knowledge and the improvement of their moral and intellectual abilities; in recent times, i.e. with the rise of biopolitics, the human body has revealed itself as the object of new forms of control, creating new goals for human life. As Peter Sloterdijk (2013) has written in his 2009 book *Du musst dein Leben ändern* (*You Must Change Your Life*, English translation 2013), the new feature characterizing the behaviour of contemporary human beings is *exercise* (*Übung*).

It is time to reveal humans as the beings who result from repetition. Just as the nineteenth century stood cognitively under the sign of production and the twentieth under that of reflexivity, the future should present itself under the sign of the exercise [...] From the start, nature and culture are linked by a broad middle ground of embodied practices – containing

languages, rituals and technical skills, in so far as these factors constitute the universal forms of automatized artificialities. This intermediate zone forms a morphologically rich, variable and stable region that can, for the time being, be referred to sufficiently clearly with such conventional categories as education, etiquette, custom, habit formation, training and exercise (Sloterdijk 2013: 11).

Gymnastic exercises, vegan diets, and ideologies of hygiene are typical of (post)modern exercises according to Sloterdijk. Over the course of the development of their cultural forms and achievements, humans have always performed some kind of "exercise" as a way to gain control over themselves, to modify and improve themselves: asceticism is a good example of this, but we may also think of education in general as such a form of exercise. What is new in digital forms of exercise, such as lifelogging? Two aspects must be underlined here.

- 1) On the one hand, as stated by O'Hara-Tuffield-Shadbolt, a lifelogger pursues the goal of happiness by gaining "sufficient control over his or her information to act as a counterpoint to initiatives by formal authorities – and informal ones, such as families, too – to impose artificial identities". In other words, the lifelogger might be an individual who, by resorting to self-tracking practices of self-governance, refuses to conform to social norms with respect to dress or sexual behaviour etc., and denies imposed identities. In this sense, "The lifelog, for the lifelogger, might constitute the 'real' person" (O'Hara et al. 2008).
- 2) On the other hand, the previous argument assumes that what is created by lifelogging is a(nother) kind of *identity*: however, if we accept that "lifelog is the real person", i.e. if we agree that "we are our information", then it is difficult to understand the complexity of personhood, since the latter "is unlikely to be capturable either by a one-size-fits-all database or biometric" (O'Hara et al. 2008). Even if we follow the Lockean tradition and locate personal identity in consciousness and memory, how do we handle the fact that – just as in the "Black Mirror" episode – self-tracked memories can be selectively deleted? That while, as lifeloggers, we can *store* and *save* all our memories, not all of them are *significant*? Is a lifelog more than a data set? Can it really be *someone* – a subject? Given the limited scope of this paper, these questions remain open to further research and possible answers.

Lifelogging and Social Digital Recognition

In order to be more than a data set, i.e. in order to create a subject, a lifelog should give rise to processes of recognition. Subjectivity cannot arise without

going through "the eyes of the Other" (Lévinas 1961): this is the reason, I suggest, why lifeloggers do not limit themselves to self-tracking but also share their results on social networks. The question here is: can live streaming and social sharing be considered forms of social recognition?

The difficulty that already Foucault had to face is precisely to show how the technologies of the self, which are eminently *individual*, can gain access to a *community* dimension. The examples taken into account by Foucault – from the custom of keeping a diary in the ancient world, through Tertullian's "publicatio sui", to ascetic practices in early Christianity – are practices we could define, with Thomas Macho (2004), as *Techniken der Eimsamkeit* – "techniques of solitude". Diaries were kept private, and ascetism was practised outside the community; the subjects performing these acts were not *seen* by anybody: subjectification is an individual exercise. The question here is: have the development of technology and the advent of digital mass-communication turned the individual exercise of subjectification into a *social one*? Is the Internet community, the panoptical "eye of the other", a mode of mutual subjectification?

My belief is that we must pay attention to two slightly different meanings of "sharing" in this context:

- 1) providing feedback and commentaries about the information shared;
- 2) replaying the same performance/exercise.

In the first case, the act of sharing does not involve the *form of life* but only its (already) processed results; in the second case, the act of sharing does involve the form of life by performing the same exercise/technology of the self (lifelogging). If we accept Foucault's definition of subjectification as a technique of self-governance aimed at the transformation of the self, then only the second way of sharing would authentically be *subjectivating*. This is the reason why the theorists and supporters of lifelogging wish this practice to be extended, sooner or later, to the Internet community as a whole.

Digital processes involve a complex dynamic between the *I* (the subject performing any kind of action) and the *Me* (the product of those actions), which jointly constitute the *Self*, i.e. the individual personality. Psychologists Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham (1955) and Luft (1969) introduced a scheme – the so called "Johari Window" – to explain the transition from I to Me as developed across 4 levels: the first is the *public Self*, which is made by all that the Self knows about itself and that is also known by others; the second level is the *blind Self*, which entails all that others know about the Self, but the Self does not know about itself; as the third level, we have the *private Self*, represented by all that the Self knows about itself, but others ignore; finally, there is the *undiscovered Self*, which is constituted by all that is unknown to the Self as well as to the others. Before the rise and spread of new media, this dynamic had quite fixed temporal and spatial limits: the interaction among subjects mostly happened face-to-face and control over what the Self was aware of and what others knew about it was easier to exercise.

Internet and Web 2.0 have removed most of those limits, giving birth to the new concept of "digital place", which is able to integrate the real world of individuals with their digital reality. Impression management and personal branding, i.e. activities previously performed by companies through marketing strategies, are now everyday skills for digital natives: anyone who has a Facebook account (or any other social media identity) knows that they can shape their identity – by sharing certain contents, such as pictures, information about work, social status and relationship, and so on – in order to give a precise image of themselves.

The result of all this is that the four levels described by the "Johari Window" have now become extremely complicated because of the combination of virtual and real interactions: the construction of social identity and reputation is now virtually performed with the help of apps and software through which we manage and shape our social accounts (our new, digital forms of personal identity), and we can do so by logging-in but also off-line thanks to smartphones, tablets etc. The result is that we are continuously adjusting, modifying and re-shaping our digital identity (online as well as off-line), also by interpreting the feedbacks coming from other users of the same social networks in the form of "likes", "sharings", "commenting" and so on. The augmented reality, we are now living in, means an augmented identity as well: so what is the relationship between our digital social identity and our real one? Is the subject who manages his or her social account the same subject who is shaped through the social account? These questions too must be left open, here, as open problems for further research to investigate.

Lifelogging and Global Business

As a topic, lifelogging has been discussed within lifelogging communities more than it has been scientifically investigated by researchers: although the first attempts to develop lifelogging systems date back to the 1980s, it is only in recent years (since the 2000s) that researchers have started studying the phenomenon. Most discussions took place on the Internet and mainly involved the developers of self-tracking and quantified-self applications and technologies. A first recognition of the phenomenon occurred in 2005, when trendwatching.com introduced the term "life caching" to describe the practices of sharing information about one's every day life on the Internet through social networking activities (http://trendwatching.com/trends/LIFE_CACHING.htm).

The ensuing debate first took place via magazines and newspapers (to mention only the main contributions: L. Beaumont, 2004; J. Schofield, 2004 and 2007; E. Naone, 2007); later on, the topic started being discussed in scientific journals and academic studies (the main contributions: R. Rawassizadeh, 2012; K. O'Hara et al., 2008; S. Selke, 2014 and 2016 – see the core bibliography for further references). It is noteworthy that in many cases the authors of scientific papers about lifelogging are themselves

developers of lifelogging apps and software: this is a rather controversial aspect of the debate on lifelogging, since it may imply a certain conflict of interest on the side of the developers-researchers. For instance, Gordon Bell – one of the first and main developers of lifelog technologies – used to develop his research on lifelogging for the Microsoft corporation. In 2014 Symantec, the worldwide Mountain View-based company producing cyber security software, published an in-depth dossier entitled *How Safe Is Your Quantified Self?* (ed. by M.B. Barcena, C. Wueest, H. Lau)³. Setting out from the observation that "fueled by technological advances and social factors, the quantified self movement has experienced rapid growth", the dossier highlighted the risks of self-tracking practices (identity theft, profiling, locating of user or stalking, embarrassment and extortion, corporate use and misuse).

From this perspective, difficult questions arise, which I can just briefly mention here and which might stand at the core of further research on the topic:

What about privacy concerns? What part of my life violates another person's privacy? What role would the government play? Will it establish laws in order to regulate lifelogging? And how about accuracy and fairness? Am I allowed to delete memories or information that I think are not significant? When is information significant and who decides that it is?

Conclusions

We can consider lifelogging a brand new topic of research and a field of inquiry which remains largely unexplored: with regard to the state of existing research, my aim is to fill a double gap. On the one hand, I wish to contribute to the development of a *philosophical reflection* on the phenomenon, which is still lacking: I believe that phenomenological and Foucaultian categories can fruitfully be applied to lifelogging in order to investigate its theoretical implications concerning subjectification, the theory of self, as well as media theory. On the other hand, I regard lifelogging as a phenomenon that clearly reveals a certain inadequacy in those philosophical categories, which need to be further developed and *revised from a more interdisciplinary perspective*. In particular, lifelogging can be considered an ideal case-study for examining the transformations of the Self in the age of digitalisation: some of the main changes can be listed as following:

- 1) transition to the *digital Self*, which performs itself by digital processes of subjectification (digital technologies of the Self);
- 2) transition to the *digital social identity* living in a cyberspace, which combines elements from the "real" world with elements from the "virtual" world, and enables the subjects to continuously manage, shape

³ Available online at goo.gl/mqk6ax.

and adjust their social accounts (by impression management/personal branding);

- 3) transition to new forms of – and concerns with – privacy, accuracy and fairness (new interactions between governments/legislators and companies/corporates are needed).

All these three topics involve a series of problems I have tried to sketch in this paper, problems which should be scientifically addressed in order to develop some guidelines (to be used by users as well as by institutions) for the understanding and management of the digital Self in the age of global digital society.

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