‘What’s on your mind?’
Writing on Facebook as a tool for self-formation

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Abstract
In the context of modern western psychologised, techno-social hybrid realities, where individuals are incited constantly to work on themselves and perform their self-development in public, the use of online social networking sites (SNSs) can be conceptualised as what Foucault has described as a ‘technique of self’. This article explores examples of status updates on Facebook to reveal that writing on Facebook is a tool for self-formation with historical roots. Exploring examples of self-writing from the past, and considering some of the continuities and discontinuities between these age-old practices and their modern translations, provides a non-technologically deterministic and historically aware way of thinking about the use of new media technologies in modern societies that understands them to be more than mere tools for communication.

Keywords
Facebook, governance, psychologisation, public, self-formation, social networking sites, technique of self, techno-social, writing

Introduction
In the context of a psychologised modern mindset (Rose, 1999) and a culture of publicity (Marwick and boyd, 2011; see also van Krieken, 2012), people are incited constantly to work on themselves under the scrutiny of a public gaze. They strive to improve, perfect and present themselves and in this way form understandings of their place in the complex realities in which they exist. The increasing technologisation of modern western
life means that day-to-day processes of self-formation are becoming more and more implicated with new digital tools. Computers, smartphones and tablets, social networking sites, ‘apps’ and QR codes – and soon, augmented-reality glasses (Google+, 2012) – are becoming ubiquitous in the everyday activities through which people manage their day-to-day conduct, relate to themselves and others and establish guidelines to live by. One mundane activity people have employed in the past to work on themselves is self-writing. The use of online social networking sites (SNSs) has technologised this age-old practice of self-formation in the context of modern techno-social hybrid ‘celebrity societies’ (Van Krieken, 2012). Self-writing and its history is an example of one practice through which people govern themselves and are governed through technologised mundane daily activities.

**Analysing online self-writing as a research method**

A brief exploration of occasions in history in which people have used writing to relate to themselves and others in the service of governing their conduct will form the basis of this paper. Writing has long been used as a technology of self-formation and confession. There are other modern self-forming activities that could have been historicised. Television talk-shows, self-help groups, student political organisations and senior citizen programmes, for instance, are also practices through which modern individuals constitute understandings of themselves and establish guidelines to live by. However, as the focus of this paper is on SNSs such as Facebook, on which most activity is performed through writing, it is fitting to historicise the practice in order to locate some of the ancestors of online exercises of writing. It should be noted that the historical fragments explored in this paper provide only glimpses into some very specific examples from the past without any pretence at reconstructing a continuous genealogy. On Facebook, people write and update status messages not just as a form of communication, but as a means of shaping understandings of self and establishing normative ways of acting, and sometimes of transgressing them. They figure out how to manage their daily actions and interactions within the context of the complex techno-social hybrid realities they live in, constantly navigating their public appearance and their relation to self and others.

This historical edifice for thinking about the complex interrelations between humans, new media technologies and processes of self-formation has not been explored comprehensively in sociological studies of media and communication technologies. Studying history as a means of understanding the present is a methodological approach grounded in Foucaultian scholarship. Foucault claimed that he provided ‘philosophical fragments put to work in a historical field of problems’ (1991: 74). Similarly, this paper compares and contrasts some continuities and discontinuities between old ways of writing as tools for self-formation and their modern application on SNSs, in order to provide a more theoretically founded and historically aware insight into modern practices that often get taken for granted as completely new technologies and are disregarded as tools for self-formation.

Like the historical examples, the status updates explored in this paper also are chosen for their relevance and effectiveness to illustrate some of the ways in which people
become selves in modern societies. While these singular examples may not be representative of self-writing across cyberspace, they do provide an insight into how SNSs are used as self-forming tools in a democratic western context. It should be noted that I discuss modern western societies from a decidedly western European perspective in this paper. This article does not provide a representative survey of how every single user employs Facebook, or produce an universalisable schema of users and uses. Rather, it teases out some of the similarities and differences between older forms of self-writing and those we see on Facebook. This Foucaultian exploratory approach investigates a multitude of examples and follows promising leads in order to generate ‘surprising stories’ (Kendall and Wickham, 1999: 22, on Foucault’s methods) and refrain from limiting the scope of what may be useful examples from the outset.

Analysing online self-writing can indicate what some modern western social norms are and how they are being followed and transgressed. The public availability of these self-inscriptions provides real-time insights into how people try to make sense of their lives and guide their conduct. Maintaining a non-technologically deterministic outlook, and acknowledging the historical roots of these practices, ensures that observations are made without seeking to judge, generalise or postulate a particular spirit of our times or definition of a modern self, while making use of the insights that they offer into the workings of modern processes of self-formation. As Foucault eloquently stated:

Among the cultural inventions of mankind there is a treasury of devices, techniques, ideas, procedures, and so on, that cannot exactly be reactivated but at least constitute, or help to constitute, a certain point of view which can be very useful as a tool for analyzing what’s going on now – and to change it (1997a: 261).

Trying to understand the historical context and being alert to continuities and discontinuities between older forms of self-formation and their modern applications can be used as a sociological method that provides insights into the complexities of modern techno-social life.

**Expressing self on Facebook: A case of yay or nay?**

Contemporary scholarship that addresses identity and selfhood on SNSs largely relies on a cause and effect-based approach which asserts that new media technologies are either beneficial or detrimental to the ways in which people act, communicate, work, socialise, govern and are governed. It tends to overemphasise the capacity for technologies to revolutionise ways of doing things and to generalise how people use them. ‘Yay-sayers’ conceptualise SNSs as new arenas for developing and expressing identity (Bargh et al., 2002; Livingstone, 2008), or even multiple identities (Hargittai, 2007; McKenna and Seidman, 2008; Shah, 2008; Turkle, 1995). They characterise SNSs as spaces where dormant personality traits can be explored and revealed. Others see SNSs as narcissistic tools that promote self-obsession (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008; Dalsgaard, 2008; Hills, 2008; Rosen, 2007; Turkle, 2011). These ‘nay-sayers’ suggest that technology corrupts the ways in which people socialise and see themselves. Both of these views presume that
a person’s identity is a pre-existing reality that can be expressed, enhanced or impaired by its engagement with online tools. While there are some in both camps who acknowledge that relations with others, and the structural design of SNSs, can influence how identities are expressed on and through these sites (Hills, 2008; Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2011), they still make identity out to be a pre-existing reality.

Foucault has illuminated a way of stepping back from such deterministic understandings of selfhood and instead focusing on the ‘processes of subjectivation’ (Foucault, 1992) or ‘folds’ (Deleuze, 1988) through which selves – multiple and transient entities that can never be fixedly defined – are constituted and reconstituted constantly. Tools and techniques employed in day-to-day life, such as writing about oneself, shape understandings of self. Selfhood is thus a contingent process that is intricately intertwined in complex networks with other actants and entities. Through processes of self-formation, such as self-writing, people establish acceptable ways of acting and demarcate what is to be known (Foucault, 1991: 75).

**Writing as a tool for self-formation**

Writing is one of many mundane ways through which people work on and shape their lives, relations and realities, often in unconscious ways. Writing is thus a technique of self (Foucault, 1997b, 1986) – a way to talk about and reveal oneself, to engage with oneself and others and to present and perform oneself to an audience. Of course this is not a novel phenomenon. For centuries, people have written to manage their daily conduct and form understandings of themselves. I will explore some examples shortly. Writing about self does however presuppose a particular cultural context that recognises the consciousness of self. Gusdorf maintains that ‘autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man’ (1956: 29). Only where people distinguish themselves from others as individual beings can they construct a written understanding of their unique existence. Self-writing is a reflexive engagement with one’s experiences that shapes relations to self and others; a ‘second reading of experience… [that] adds to experience itself consciousness of it’ (Gusdorf, 1956: 38).

Historical examples of self-writing elucidate that technologised self-forming techniques such as self-writing are anchored in age-old practices that have been translated and transformed throughout centuries. Facebook is not just a new way of communicating and enacting self. People in the past have written about themselves and to others to shape their ethics, values, beliefs and understandings, and hence to fold in and unfold their subjectivities. Facebook is one tool through which people do this work today. This short paper can only explore a few examples of historical self-writing that reveal some of its self-forming qualities. While they do not amount to a comprehensive, chronological history, these examples are representative of some of the trails of the past that come together in complex modern techno-social networks that ‘make up people’ (Hacking, 1985). Instances of self-writing in ancient Greece, early Christian contexts, Romanticism, Enlightenment and modern psychologised societies illuminate some interesting stories that show how writing and SNS use have come to constitute tools for self-formation.
Self-writing in the past

Ancient Greek askesis

Foucault showed how the ancient Greeks and Romans utilised different writing techniques in order to work on themselves (1997b: 208) as part of the practice of the care of the self – the epimeleia heautou (Foucault, 1986). Ancient Greeks and Stoics managed their conduct based on the principle of askesis, ‘a training of the self by oneself’ with the goal of self-mastery (Foucault, 1997b: 208). This training was inextricably linked to specific activities – writing, meditating, consuming the right foods at the right time and so forth – through which they aspired to a high-quality existence based on beauty and the management of pleasures (Foucault, 1997b: 208). Ethopoietic writing was one activity that translated truth – a pre-Cartesian understanding of truth based on personal experience and belief – into a code for ethical conduct – a non-religious ethics aimed at living a good life in terms of a beautiful existence (Foucault, 1997b: 209). The Ancients recorded occurrences and reflected on what they read and experienced in specific types of notebooks (hupomnemata). Marcus Aurelius’ Meditations are an example of how the Ancients used writing in their hupomnemata to ensure good conduct and mediate a way of life (see Hadot, 1998).

Letter-writing extended the Ancients’ self-writing activity. They examined their conduct, thoughts and behaviour, and accounted for their actions, by presenting themselves to the gaze of another. Foucault noted that for the ancient Greeks, correspondence was

something more than a training of oneself by means of writing, through the advice and opinions one gives to the other: it also constituted a certain way of manifesting oneself to oneself and to others. … To write [was] thus to ‘show oneself’, to project oneself into view, to make one’s own face appear in the other’s presence (1997b: 216).

Writing a letter was a practice of working on oneself by reflecting on experiences and occurrences and manifesting this self to another. Writing to and about themselves, and reflecting on their daily practices and occurrences, helped the Ancients shape their understandings of self, manage their daily lives, and understand their place within the world.

The Christian confessional

In early Christianity, writing also guided people’s conduct. It was used to confess sins and ask for forgiveness. Christian self-writing laid the self bare to be judged and absolved by God. Contrary to the Greek self-cultivating function of writing, Christian confessional writing was concerned with self-revelation, self-renunciation and self-effacement (Humphries, 1997: 131, 136). Humphries asserts: ‘not only does the writing of one’s confessions incite an ever increasing and penetrating gaze into the self by the self, it also effects a proliferation of confession among others’ (1997: 134). Thus, ‘writing becomes publicatio sui, a confessional strategy by which the self draws itself out of amnestic solitude and lays itself bare to the public gaze’ (Humphries, 1997: 136). Christian self-writers submitted themselves to the judgement of another (God, a priest or a confidant) to confess sins. Rather than to establish personal guidelines to manage their lives, like the
Greeks did, Christians wrote to ensure their abidance by externally determined divine moral standards. It was a way of confessing sins, asking for forgiveness and praising God for His kindness. St. Augustine’s *Confessions* – widely acknowledged as the first autobiography – evidences this devotion of self to God through writing (see McDonald, 1996).

**Romantic autobiography**

The Reformation brought with it the recognition and honouring of individualism. Mid-eighteenth century this evolved into the valorisation of emotions that characterised the Romantic period (Gutman, 1988: 101). Within this context, self-writing was used as a secular way of expressing emotions in the service of self-reflection and self-improvement. According to Gutman, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* exemplifies ‘the emergence of an individuality, a clearly defined self, above the threshold of visibility, and the valorization of the emotive life’ (1988: 101). Rousseau constructed an autobiographical account of his actions and feelings to engage with himself, reveal himself to others and in this way to manage his conduct. Gutman notes that Rousseau wrote ‘to unburden himself of his shame, to reveal himself in his weakness … and to create a “self” which can serve to define himself, to himself and to others, in the face of a hostile social order’ (1988: 103). Rousseau related to himself and others through his writing and thus established guidelines along which to live.

**Liberation and transgression**

In the context of the Enlightenment, the influence of God and the Church as arbiters of right and wrong weakened and more liberated and individualised approaches to daily life developed (Bloch, 2002: 8–9). Some of the self-writing that emerged out of this cultural movement explored and celebrated sinful thoughts and unholy pleasures. It was disruptive, confessional and uninhibited at the same time. This ‘transgressive’ self-writing ‘clear[ed] an ideological space: a space for action, experimentation, chance, freedom, mobility … [and broke] with the notion that writing is the product of a single and simple self’ (During, 1992: 7–8). A more liberal temperament permitted the curious exploration and intensification of extremes. Writers discovered and celebrated their most sinister sexual thoughts and actions to form understandings of themselves.

Samuel Pepys’ diary provides one very early example of this transgressive self-writing. Pepys kept a diary from 1660 to 1669 in which he accounted for his ‘erotic thrills’ (Brome, 1992: 72) and carved out a space where he could engage with himself (Matthews, 1970). Later on, authors like the Marquis de Sade and ‘Walter’, the anonymous author of *My Secret Life* (2007 [1888–1894]), also wrote explicitly about sex, lust and the subversion of norms in the name of satisfying animalistic drives. The awareness of having a public readership influenced the writing of these authors, yet in a more complex and twofold manner than it did previous writers like Rousseau. Pepys, de Sade and ‘Walter’ exposed and celebrated their sinful thoughts and actions, yet were apprehensive about how others would react. They were at the same time excited about, and ashamed to be, sharing their sinful conduct publicly. ‘Transgressive’ writing served as a means for them...
to engage with and manage their thoughts and desires and thus establish ways of acting that they in fact tried to justify as ‘normal’.

**Writing in psychotherapy**

Literacy rates improved at the start of the twentieth century due to social, cultural and economic changes like urban and suburban sprawl, the move from agricultural to industrial to informational production, corporate and global businesses, improved and more demanding educational practices, the technologisation of communication and media and the abundant availability of printed texts (Brandt, 1995: 650). A growing array of disciplinary areas that administer the conduct of modern individuals and function as types of expertise on human subjectivity – commonly ones described with the prefix ‘psy’ (e.g. psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, etc.; Rose, 1999: 3) – foster a concern with personal fulfilment, improvement and perfection in all areas of life. Writing has been institutionalised in psychoanalytic treatment as a therapeutic tool for self-discovery, expression and self-improvement (see Esterling et al., 1999; Pennebaker, 1997; Terpager Rasmussen and Tomm, 1992).

Writing is ‘a cost-effective, mass-oriented medium of expression and communication’ (Mumford et al., 1983, cited in Esterling et al., 1999: 94; see also Bolton, 1998; Terpager Rasmussen and Tomm, 1992). It has gone from being a self-examining and confessional tool for the elite to a universally available medium for understanding and expressing the self. Bolton suggests that in modern times,

> reflective and expressive writing is private and self-directed, and in principle available at any time to anyone with basic writing skills … [I]t can offer access to memories, feelings and experiences. It can help to clarify and organise thoughts. It can encourage development and expansion of understanding because it forms a lasting record which may be worked on later. It can be torn up unread, or form an effective communication with chosen others (1998: 79).

Writing is implicated as a technique of self in psychologised modern western societies where individuals are incited to work on themselves constantly and share the processes of their self-development with a public audience. The ubiquitous use of new media tools like SNSs has contributed to the translation of self-writing into modern techno-social hybrid realities and given it a new shape.

**Technologised self-writing**

Technological tools are becoming involved more and more in people’s everyday conduct. The techno-social hybridity of modern western societies shapes practices of self-formation. Gotved contends that ‘high-speed information and communication technology penetrat[es] every aspect of (western, modern, privileged) everyday life’ (2006: 468). These technologies are intricately involved in the practices that shape relations and understandings of self and others. Self-writing is one activity that has become entwined in these complex networks of humans, technologies and other entities. It still yields a means of navigating social norms, sometimes obeying and sometimes challenging them.
It is a practice of governing conduct and shaping and re-shaping selves in the context of modern psychologised, publicly lived and techno-social hybrid western societies. SNSs such as Facebook provide one modern technological tool for self-revelation, confession, self-management and self-improvement that demonstrates continuities and discontinuities with older forms of self-writing.

**Plugging into new writing tools**

SNSs have neither caused the translation of self-writing practices into modern western ways of life, nor are they the outcome of a particular mode of thinking that characterises modern times. They present one pertinent example of some of the ways in which we are enrolled in digital assemblages in modern techno-social hybrid worlds that shape our understandings of self, relations to others and day-to-day conduct. Online practices are embedded in the everyday reality of modern ‘media life’ – a life ‘lived in, rather than with, media’ (Deuze, 2011: 137; see also Deuze, 2009). The persistently made distinction between virtuality and real-life materiality is in desperate need of deconstruction (Van Doorn, 2011).

Modern technologies afford certain possibilities for action^2 (Gibson, 1977) that humans, in their assemblage with non-human entities, employ in manifold ways. People’s conduct is shaped by the technologies they are entangled with, yet at the same time the way in which they use these tools affects the design and re-design of the technologies. Conceptualising the use of SNSs in processes of self-formation requires a balanced approach that overemphasises neither the power of technology to change processes, nor the capability of humans to control and command technological tools (see Bloomfield et al., 2010; Hutchby, 2001). Modern technologies offer new possibilities for individuals to shape, voice and disseminate their opinions. Yet there are certain continuities and discontinuities between older ways of using writing as a tool for governing self and others and modern online writing.

‘What’s on your mind’…?

The Facebook status update provides a technological affordance through which users can write about themselves on the site. The little box at the top of the Facebook homepage prompts: ‘What’s on your mind?’. Facebook users are incited to record and reflect on their personal experiences, successes, failures and faults and to make these reflections publicly accessible. They navigate complex systems, becoming literate in new ways of behaving and engaging with all involved actants. Technologies shape modern self-writing, yet technology users also find ways to get around constraints or limitations. For instance, SNS users adhere to a convention of brevity in their status posts, expressing themselves in usually no more than a few sentences. Twitter turns this norm into a rule by implementing a 140-character limit for individual posts. Yet users can write several consecutive posts on SNSs in order to circumvent this rule. The assemblage of human users, non-human technologies and hybrid avatars shapes practices, norms and rules to reflect the interests and meet the requirements of all involved actants. The shortness of SNS status updates is not simply a result of technological restrictions but also a reflection...
of new processes of communicating, revealing the self to public audiences and forming understandings of self. In this way, technology and human behaviour come to shape one another in relations of reflexivity and translate and transform older ways of engaging with self and others.

Most current literature on SNS use suggests that the status update is a way for SNS users to express themselves, express an identity and/or show themselves (or show off) to others. A study conducted by The New York Times Customer Insight Group (2011) reveals that 68% of the 2500 surveyed users of online sharing sites share content on the internet to give others a better sense of who they are and what they care about.3 If we acknowledge the historical use of writing as a self-forming tool we can, however, conceptualise the status update as a means for modern techno-social actants to relate to themselves and others, and in this way to shape their conduct and understandings. Consider the following Facebook status updates:4

Cleaned up the house a bit, spent 3 hours riding the horses to, on, and from the beach, did grocery shopping for the next 2 weeks, and now preparing to make BBQ veggie and real chicken. CV updating will follow that, and then hopefully a bath. Good Sunday, if I do say so.

Im [sic] done doing things for others and getting absolutely nothing in return.. You sure learn quick [sic] who your real friends are..

Online self-writers reveal their daily actions to others, portray a sense of efficiency and reflect on daily conduct. They relate to others and make themselves accountable for their actions. Like older self-writers, they (to re-quote Foucault) write to ‘“show [themselves]” to project [themselves] into view, to make [their] own face appear in the other’s presence’ (Foucault, 1997b: 216) and in this way to form guidelines according to which they live their lives.

Translating and extending self-writing

Increasingly, people also integrate visual material such as photos and videos into their online conduct and post links to articles they have read. Modern technology has extended ways in which self-writing is used to relate to self and others. Location-based social networking is another example of how new tools translate and transform the possibilities for modern individuals to write themselves into being. Location-based social networking uses GPS signals to locate a user’s whereabouts through any WiFi-enabled mobile device, such as a mobile phone or tablet, and enables them to broadcast their location to other users of the site. SNSs like Foursquare or Gowalla are specifically built around this type of service. Other SNSs are also beginning to include location check-ins in their design. The Places application on Facebook allows users to ‘check in’ to public places such as restaurants, museums, cultural sites or more general geographic locations. Their location is posted to their contacts’ News Feeds. The new Facebook profile Timeline even documents all past location check-ins on a map that is accessible to others. Once checked in at a location, users can employ the ‘Here Now’ function to find out whether any of their Facebook contacts are currently, or have been, in the same location or nearby.
They can also browse the status updates that friends have posted from and/or about these locations, access information about the place, read comments left by others and access deals offered by businesses at or near the location.

Clearly, this technological affordance greatly expands the reach of the networks in which people are assembled and transforms older practices of self-writing. Techno-social hybrid self-writers are no longer limited to immediate physical proximities and real-time. Rather, SNS users can transgress space and time by accessing an archived account of information about places and people who have visited them in the past. This expansion of the networks in which people circulate can influence their perception of their surroundings and of other actants in their lives, and shape their relations of self to self and to others. SNSs are tools for forming understandings of self and others by providing individuals with an expanding record of information about the world they live in and the people that surround them. They provide a means for people to subject themselves to a public gaze and make their self-forming activities visible to others. SNSs come to guide the conduct of individuals by inciting them to share information about themselves in a public domain, and they facilitate global connections that traverse spatio-temporal boundaries. By becoming intertwined with new technologies, such as location-based social networking, modern individuals are assembled in techno-social machinations that shape new ways for them to become selves.

Marwick and boyd describe the psychologised and publicly lived realities within which modern SNS users manage their engagement with new technologies as ‘publicity culture [which] prizes social skills that encourage performance … people are rewarded with jobs, dates, and attention for displaying themselves in an easily-consumed public way’ (2011: 119). Van Krieken speaks of ‘changing modes of ordering both social relationships and the individual sense of self, as a particular structured distribution of visibility, recognition and esteem’ (2012: 3). Technologies such as Facebook incite this constant reflection by offering possibilities of engaging with oneself and relating to others. Users respond to this technological affordance by creating a permanent record of their actions, which helps them to manage their conduct and establish guidelines to live by. However, technology has not caused this new engagement with self. Age-old practices of self-writing have been translated, transformed and re-established as ways of shaping, reshaping and managing selves.

‘Donuts, Vienna peanuts and Camembert’: Confessing wrongdoings on Facebook

Foucault famously suggested that the proliferation of science and the institutionalisation of the confessional have shaped a society obsessed not only with knowing but also with telling. Accordingly, ‘Western man has become a confessing animal’ (Foucault, 1990: 59). People constantly speak about their thoughts and actions to ensure they abide by social, ethical and moral norms. Rosen (2007) proposes that one of the main objectives of SNS use is self-exposure. She states that ‘the creation and conspicuous consumption of intimate details and images of one’s own and others’ lives is the main activity in the online social networking world. There is no room for reticence; there is only revelation’ (2007: 24). Rather than judging this as a lamentable condition of modern society, as
Rosen and other contemporary scholars do, self-exposure through online self-writing can be framed as a means for people to navigate a path for right and wrong conduct in the context of increasingly complex social realities. Through mundane day-to-day activities such as self-writing, people establish ethical guidelines to live by that address and reflect social norms and expectations.

SNS users employ the sites as confessional self-management tools. Consider the following status update:

Question: I haven’t done my 2010 tax, it appears the only way to do it is to fill out the form and post it (can’t find etax 2010). Do I legally have to do it? Will bad things happen if I don’t?

The user admits to not having completed their tax return for the previous year and asks for advice on whether or not there is a legal obligation to still do this. The user confesses their wrongdoing and makes use of relations to others to guide future conduct. Another user posts:

… there are certain times in my cycle that I should not be trusted to do the shopping. I left with the intention to buy sourdough bread, almond milk and pumpkin, but instead came back with donuts, Vienna peanuts and Camembert!!

These users reflect on their experiences by publicly admitting to their mistakes through a Facebook status post. Their posts reveal what the users perceive to be good, normative ethical conduct (i.e. doing a timely tax return, consuming healthy food) and confess how they have digressed from these norms. The sense of guilt and repentance that characterises their admissions indicates their endeavour to adhere to social norms and documents their failure. They reveal their faults to others, engage with their conduct and thus establish ways of guiding future behaviour. The feedback they receive from others assists them in shaping their selves. The ease of access to these tools for most in the developed world, and the immediacy with which others respond to, and thus provide guidance to, modern self-writers adds a new facet to the age-old practice of self-formation.

Under the gaze: Sharing updates, seeking guidance, shaping selves

Self-writing has always been a relational practice that leads to an ‘intensification of social relations’ (Foucault, 1986: 53). The Ancients used correspondence to provide one another with mutual support and guidance. Christians wrote to glorify God and seek out His help and advice. Later, secularised self-writing by authors such as Rousseau, de Sade and ‘Walter’ addressed larger readerships. Often these writers were caught in oscillation between wanting to share their ‘transgressive’ sentiments and agonising over being judged and condemned for their thoughts and actions.

SNS users similarly weigh up the benefits and drawbacks of making their private lives public by revealing themselves through their semi-public online self-writing. They expose themselves to an expanded and less clearly defined readership, ‘inviting, albeit cautiously, a certain level of surveillance. But it is surveillance driven by desire’
They write to a mediated, invisible audience (boyd, 2008), submitting themselves voluntarily to a panoptic form of constant scrutiny. Modern self-writing has become a more publicly performed and more widespread endeavour. It is no longer just philosophers, authors and intellectuals who manifest themselves and their conduct to an audience; SNSs are technological tools that extend this practice of public self-formation.

Van Krieken suggests that

as social life becomes denser, more competitive, more highly differentiated and more dependent on a variety of means of indirect communication, visibility beyond one’s immediate circle of face-to-face contacts becomes increasingly significant and also increasingly lucrative (2012: 138).

In the context of this celebrity society (Van Krieken, 2012), SNS users manifest themselves to a public readership to seek ways of substantiating themselves, of being recognised and of obtaining help and advice. They grant others an insight into daily occurrences, faults and accomplishments through their public self-writing.

By posing questions to their readership, users simultaneously share details about their lives and seek out help and advice to guide and optimise their behaviour. For example, posts about workplace discrimination and dangerous hip surgery oscillate between self-engagement, self-presentation and the demand for guidance:

Any lawyer friends on here have experience with employment law/workplace discrimination stuff? Anyone gone through something of that nature?

Has anyone had a PAO [periacetabular osteotomy surgery] or know anyone who has had it done? Any experiences would be helpful.

Incited by western liberal politics to self-regulate, self-improve and constantly be available to others, modern subjects employ SNSs as one tool through which to make themselves public, work on themselves, talk about their problems and weigh up costs and benefits of future conduct. The possibility for constant real-time updates and instantaneous feedback from multiple fellow users distinguishes modern technologically mediated self-writing from its predecessors.

Through their status messages, users simultaneously shape and reveal the way in which they understand and relate to themselves and others. SNSs afford users the possibility to share the work they perform on themselves with a vaguely defined mass audience, turning their self-forming activity into a transparent performance. In the following status updates, online self-writers reflect on their conduct and interact with others in order to navigate social norms of acceptable conduct:

Please accept my apology for the bitter and sad-sap moods I’ve been in over the past few months. In the process of renewing, refreshing and being positive, because there’s nothing that wastes the body like worry.—the vision that you glorify in your mind, the ideal that you enthrone in your heart, this is what you will build your life by, this is what you will become.
Apologies to the friends I’ve been meaning to call but haven’t. I’m kind of in a weird rut at the moment and not feeling particularly talkative. Hopefully I’ll be over it soon.:/

In their assemblage with Facebook, these individuals work on themselves in a publicly transparent way. The role of others as listeners and advisors has been opened up to a much greater and less clearly defined mass.

**Folding and unfolding selves: An ongoing public endeavour**

As in the past, self-writers on Facebook inscribe themselves constantly and consistently, making their self-formation an ongoing process. SNS users are encouraged to keep their profile pages up to date and to inscribe and re-inscribe themselves frequently. This ‘giv[es] the sense of a fluid and changing persona, rather than a static description’ (Shah, 2008: 215; see also Livingstone, 2008). Frequently updated profile pictures and status posts on Facebook ‘become a short hand for changing, up-to-the minute performances of self’ (Hills, 2008: 118). In continual processes of folding in outside experiences, reflecting on and trying to make sense of them, SNS users shape their selves – albeit contingent and conditional selves. Extending Deleuze’s terminal understanding of the fold (according to Deleuze (1988: 94ff), the fold disintegrates when it is undone) allows us to consider how users work on what they fold in, in order to then re-expose themselves to the gaze of others. Rather than disappearing, the self that is folded in is made publicly visible as a vital part of modern self-forming activity.

Status updates such as ‘Waiting for someone else to make you happy is the best way to be sad:)’ or ‘On a come down after holiday:(‘ exemplify how modern individuals employ technologies such as SNSs to expose their feelings and experiences in order to interpret and understand the complex realities in which they exist, and situate themselves within them. They relate to themselves and others in ongoing and increasingly public ways and thus come to govern their conduct in accordance with norms and expectations, sometimes transgressing them, sometimes adhering to them. Writing about oneself, now and in the past, serves as one tool that supports, encourages and enhances this process of folding in and again unfolding selves in ongoing reciprocal processes. New technological affordances are changing old ways of doing things – neither improving nor corrupting them, but giving them a new shape that translates and transforms older ways of doing things.

**Conclusion**

This paper has proposed a theoretical and historical approach to thinking about modern processes of self-formation in the context of techno-social hybrid western societies that are characterised by the technologisation of social action and interaction, a psychologised mindset and a publicly transparent way of life. This kind of approach allows for a more critical and comprehensive awareness of the involvement of new media technologies in the ways in which people relate to themselves and others in the service of governing their day-to-day conduct. It acknowledges the historical context and roots of modern practices and avoids technologically deterministic or metanarrative approaches to
explaining social and individual action. Seeking an informed ‘back and forth between theory and material, rather than just extending from one of these directions’ (Röhle, 2005: 405) is a means of doing a ‘mobile sociology’ (Urry, 2000) that accounts for the complex connections between global and local, social and technological, human and non-human practices involved in modern social processes. Approaching the interplay of online use and self-formation from a theoretical angle that extends beyond simplistic descriptions and quantified indications of patterns of usage, encourages more ‘contextually-based and historically sound analyses’ of these tools (Röhle, 2005: 410).

Writing on SNSs is more than an outlet for narcissistic bravado or a means of expressing oneself and communicating with others – a notion proposed by much existing media studies scholarship. Self-writing can be employed as a way for people to understand and work on themselves and their relations to others. It is one particular activity through which individuals today and in the past make meaning of their existence in the world and navigate its complexities. Self-writers do not simply present or perform a self that already exists within them. They form relations to self and others by exposing themselves to others and obtaining their feedback. Conceptualising writing as a technique of self (Foucault, 1988, 1997b) extends ways of theorising selfhood to a more open view that accounts for the practices that shape self as opposed to the characteristics that make it up. This avoids making generalisations and value judgements in favour of an exploratory and context-aware understanding of the processes through which self is formed, folded in and unfolded.

The technologisation of the practice of self-writing has contributed to its translation into modern times and has altered and transformed it. Exploring some specific historical examples of writing as a tool for self-formation, and comparing them with modern parallels on Facebook, showed that there are continuities and discontinuities between older forms of self-writing and its modern instantiation on SNSs. While still a confessional, relational, self-forming tool, self-writing on SNSs is a more public activity in the context of modern techno-social hybrid worlds. Both accessibility to the practice of self-writing and its reach have been greatly extended, while timespans between writing and receiving feedback have been minimised. Technologised self-writing is a widely available tool and a mundane part of ways in which people relate to themselves and others and manage their behaviour and attitudes. The psychologised and public culture of modern life incites people to present their best side to their audience. Tools such as SNSs facilitate and proliferate this attitude, inviting people to constantly share and update their thoughts and actions with others, confess their wrongdoings and document their achievements. Doing so enables people to form understandings of themselves and their existence in complex, multi-networked modern realities. They navigate their way around social norms and expectations, trying to fit in and adhere to them, but also to find ways of challenging and re-establishing them.

From the continuities and discontinuities between online self-writing and its age-old ancestors, it is evident that modern ways of doing things have historical roots. There is a fine line between overstating the translatability of these older practices and underestimating their impact. Using a theoretical, historical and non-technologically deterministic approach to investigate some very specific examples of how people write themselves into being opens up new ways of thinking about the complex interrelations between
humans and technologies in modern hybrid techno-social landscapes. It allows us to consider SNS use not in terms of how identity is staged on these sites but rather in terms of how these sites act as tools through which selves are formed and norms are obeyed and challenged.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Gavin Kendall for his professional advice on drafts of this paper at different stages, and to two anonymous reviewers.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. The term ‘transgressive’ is somewhat problematic as it makes value judgements about the acceptability of certain actions. Also, quite often behaviour that may seem shocking or disruptive becomes normalised to set up a more complex order of normative enactments and expressions. The term is used in this paper to delineate conduct that challenges and reinvents the dimensions within which day-to-day behaviour is played out. It is not used to assert whether the action it describes is socially acceptable or not.

2. Gibson (1977) established that all objects come with ‘affordances’; a certain set of possibilities for how they might be used. Norman (1988) extended this by suggesting that the affordances of an object or entity do not just offer, but in fact suggest, certain ways of employing the object. See also Latour, who has conceptualised affordances as ‘offer[s] of subjectivation’ (2005: 213).

3. The study identifies four further key reasons why people share online:
   • to bring valuable and entertaining content to others
   • to grow and nourish relationships
   • for self-fulfilment
   • to market causes or brands


4. All examples are from the author’s personal use of the site. The identities of featured users have been protected.

References


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