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Title

Autobiography Scholarship 2.0?: Understanding New Forms of Online Life Writing

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5sf452w8

Journal

Biography, 38(2)

ISSN

0162-4962

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Publication Date

2015-03-01

DOI

10.1353/bio.2015.0011

Copyright Information

Peer reviewed

Autobiography Scholarship 2.0?: Understanding New Forms of Online Life Writing

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY SCHOLARSHIP 2.0?:
UNDERSTANDING NEW FORMS
OF ONLINE LIFE WRITING

MADELEINE SORAPURE

Looking back on *Cher écran,* his 2000 examination of French online diaries, Philippe Lejeune writes that it has become "an archaeological study, bearing witness to a world that has disappeared" (252). The same might be said of my 2003 article in *Online Lives.* Of the thirteen online diaries I reference in that article, only four are still online, and only one—Claire Robertson's loobylu. com—has current entries. Of the 20 online diary lists, webrings, 'burbs, and publishing venues I cite, only three are still online; only one of those three sites—livejournal.com—is active, though it has morphed into a social networking site mostly for Russian users. In 2003, Diarist.net, the vibrant online community from which I drew most of my examples, hosted quarterly awards for online diary writing in a range of categories, along with discussion boards, lists of resources, guides and prompts for life writing, and an extensive registry; diarist.net faded from the web in 2008, and since then the domain has been for sale.

But of course, these online diary sites have disappeared because of the intense popularity of other online venues for self-representation, and my 2003 article is, like Lejeune's book, an archaeology of only a certain type of online autobiographical writing. Beginning with the advent of Facebook in 2004, online autobiographical writing has expanded exponentially and changed dramatically. As Laurie McNeill observes, "millions of individuals on a daily basis now produce online selves in interaction with both other people and software applications" (65). The proliferation of social networking platforms—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest—provides a range of venues, genres, mediums, and communities in which to perform acts of self-representation. Indeed, the user-contributed content that characterizes Web

2.0 is often personal, diaristic, self-expressive; a good portion of Web 2.0 is "everyday autobiography," as Smith and Watson define it.

The question facing scholars today is how to study these autobiographical acts. Aimée Morrison comments that "digital life writing maps a realm with no gatekeepers, editors, or canons, producing texts to excess on a scale of production and publication that completely overwhelms the boutique reading practices of literary scholarship" (112). Indeed, in 2003 I could approach the study of online diaries with methods and assumptions quite similar to those that I brought to print diaries: I identified interesting online diaries and made observations about the genre based on a close reading of these artifacts, informed by autobiography theory developed from their print counterparts. Now, with unstable fragments of autobiographical writing spread across different platforms, and shaped and constrained by an array of programs, templates, and interfaces, to what extent do the methods and concepts of traditional autobiography scholarship still apply? The need for *Online Lives 2.0* is clear.

As we consider how autobiography scholars might respond to these new practices, some existing concepts and questions emerge as particularly relevant, and can be rearticulated to provide starting points toward a theoretical framework. In my 2003 article, I identified three key concepts that helped me articulate important aspects of online diary writing and reading. It seems to me that these broad concepts of **interface**, **interactivity**, and **organization** are central to understanding current online autobiographical writing. Studying the **interfaces** for writing and reading reveals how tools and technologies shape the production of life writing. Indeed, to a much greater extent than in 2003, when most online diarists were coding and designing their own websites, the interfaces for contemporary autobiographical writing shape the construction and representation of the self. For instance, through coaxing technologies (Morrison), affordances (Morrison; Poletti and Rak), and the restrictions of its profile template (McNeill), Facebook creates, in McNeill's terms, "an engagement that requires submission of the human subject to the software's imperatives" (67). As Facebooking and similar activities become common practice for millions of people, autobiography theory needs to account for this blended/cyborg model of authorship, where the interfaces of writing strongly influence self-representation.

Interactivity has also become more integral to the production of online autobiographical selves. In 2003, online diarists took advantage of various tools to promote discussion and sharing; they showed awareness of their community of readers, granting and restricting access in various ways and discussing concerns about privacy even as they wrote about real-life people and events. Of course, questions of privacy are more complex today, as writers

have varying degrees of control over the circulation of what they publish online. Moreover, today's readers are much more engaged in a kind of co-production of life writing. Now more than ever, the autobiographical I is socially constructed through a range of interactive features offered by blogs and social networking sites. As McNeill suggests in her analysis of Facebook, scholars need to theorize a "posthuman autobiography" to account for this more collaborative mode of life writing.

Finally, the **organization** of online autobiographical reading and writing is increasingly structured paratactically rather than in a unified narrative. I suggested in 2003 that webrings encouraged a practice in which one read across diaries rather than through them one at a time. This paratactic approach is the very essence of Facebook and other sites where life writing is now collected and aggregated. By default, one reads the most recent postings of one's friends and connections rather than trace a single narrative line through an individual's writings. The most common autobiographical account today is collective rather than individual. Online life writing shows us that narrative is not the only or perhaps even the best way to understand self-representation: as Poletti and Rak observe, "the idea of narrative may not fit what identity formation looks like in digital media" (11).

A fourth concept discussed in my 2003 article has developed in especially interesting ways in the intervening years, and provides provocative challenges to traditional autobiography scholarship. In 2003, I described a "database model of identity" that was apparent in some online diaries. Defining it as "a non-narrative model in which discrete pieces of information are collected and stored" (7), and drawing on Lev Manovich's formulations in *The Language of New Media*, I seconded Manovich's suggestion that we see the database as "a new symbolic form of the computer age . . . a new way to structure our experience of ourselves and of the world" (219). Today data and databases are fully integrated into our everyday experiences. Many of us carry smart phones and use apps and websites that automate the process of tracking our activities, gathering personal data, organizing it, storing it in the cloud or elsewhere, perhaps sharing it with other entities. (As I type this, I'm wearing a Garmin Vivofit wristband that tracks the steps I walk, the calories I burn, my heart rate, sleep patterns, and other variables; it also interfaces with other apps and devices to store and organize other data about me.) In addition to data that we actively collect, data is also passively or inadvertently generated by and about us as we use many digital tools and services (e.g., Amazon, GPS-enabled apps). Indeed, the title of a recent article in *The Guardian* (2013) encapsulates the current interconnection of data and identity: "Your body isn't a temple, it's a data factory emitting digital exhaust" (Mahdawi).

There are certainly many reasons to be concerned with the ownership, access, and use of the data we generate, individually and collectively. But there are also opportunities here for new kinds of autobiographical practice, for people to understand and represent themselves via personal data. Gary Wolf and others have chronicled the "Quantified Self" movement in which self-tracking via various tools and technologies becomes a mode of self-analysis. The tagline for this loose movement is "self knowledge through numbers" (http://quantifiedself.com). People engaged in QS projects use tools and technologies to study an aspect of their lives—e.g., mood, diet, sleep—in order to optimize behavior or resolve a problem. Melanie Swan comments that "Self-trackers have an increasingly intimate relationship with data as it mediates the experience of reality. In self-tracking, individuals are performing studies and then applying results to improve their quality of life" (93). Data becomes something of a mirror in which people see themselves reflected. When they interpret and represent that data, they're doing something very similar to autobiographical practice. As in autobiography, subject and object, measurer and measured, are collapsed. Moreover, measuring and quantifying aspects of their lives via data gives the impression of objectivity; data becomes "fact," which feeds into the presumption of truthfulness of autobiography.

The possibility of data-driven autobiography is beautifully realized in the annual reports of Nicholas Felton, a graphic designer who has become something of a personal infographic guru. Since 2005, Felton has issued visually rich and delightful annual reports representing personal data that he has collected throughout the previous year and visualized in a range of often innovative infographic formats. Felton sells limited quantities of these annual reports through his website; the numbered prints are something of a collector's item (all of the reports are sold out, though they're viewable on the web at http://felton.com). Through the years, we can see Felton experimenting with different possibilities for data-based autobiographical self-representation. From 2005–2008, Felton organizes his data by category (e.g., travel, music, dining, reading). From 2009–2013, Felton takes a range of approaches: for instance, in 2009 he surveyed people with whom he had had "meaningful contact" and created the report from this data, in essence recreating his year based on other people's accounts of their contact with him; the 2013 report focuses on the 94,824 communication records (e.g., conversations, email, texts, phone calls) that Felton kept during the year and analyzed for trends and patterns.

Reading the annual reports, we get a sense of who Felton is: his relationships, his likes and dislikes, how he spends his time, what he values. An identity emerges, even if not in narrative form, via his visualizations of personal data. It's worth noting that Felton helped to design Facebook's 2012 Timeline feature that adds something of a narrative element to Facebook

profiles. It's likely that his own experiments with data-driven autobiographical expression informed his work at Facebook and thus helped to shape the range of autobiographical expression currently available to Facebook users. In a related way, in courses I've taught over the past seven years, I've asked students to use Felton's work as a model for creating their own visualizations of personal data. This assignment effectively remakes the personal, reflective, or autobiographical writing task that is frequently assigned in writing courses. Asking students to access or collect data about themselves and then to represent that data visually is one means of drawing their attention to the expressive possibilities in data analysis and visualization. The personal infographic project also engages students in a very 2.0 version of online life writing by asking them both to produce and to think critically about new forms of online self-representation.

In *The Virtual Self*, Nora Young discusses Felton's work and more broadly examines practices of self-tracking; she offers the term "the computational self" to highlight both the possibilities and the limitations of data-driven self-representation. As Young notes, "the problem is that the computational view of the self doesn't leave room for that which is not reducible to being computed" (193)—for example, introspection or "the fully embodied savouring of simple experience" (193). Young's critique reminds us of the challenges facing autobiography scholars as they consider, now more than ever, the affordances and assumptions built into the technologies that people use to represent themselves and "write" autobiographically. Information graphics that visually represent personal data; collaboratively constructed and template-based self-representations in social media and networking sites; the non-narrative nature of aggregated life writing: in these and other new practices we see selves emerging and being represented through interactions with technologies. In this volume and in the discussions that follow, autobiography scholars can provide insight into the current configurations of the self by examining the everyday autobiographical practices of millions of people.

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