

Auto-biography: On the Immanent Commodification of Personal Information¹

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In the last years, a series of automated self-representational social media sites have emerged that shed light on the information ethics associated with participation in Web 2.0. Sites like Zoominfo.com, Pipl.com, 123People.com and Yasni.com not only continually mine and aggregate personal information and biographic data from the (deep) web and beyond to automatically represent the lives of people, but they also engage algorithmic networking logics to represent connections between them; capturing not only who people are, but whom they are connected to. Indeed, these processes of ‘auto-biography’ are ‘secret’ ones that for the most part escape the user’s attention. This article explores how these sites of auto-biography reveal the complexities of the political economy of Web 2.0, as well as implicate an ethics of exposure concerning how these processes at once participate in the erosion of privacy, and at the same time, in the reinforcement of commodification and surveillance regimes.

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Introduction: The Processes of Auto-Biography

Some years ago, while searching my own name on Google (sometimes referred to as ‘ego-surfing’), I came across the website Zoominfo.com in my top search results. Upon visiting the site, I was surprised to discover that by mining and aggregating a series of strings of personal information and biographic data that I had left across the web, Zomminfo.com had not only automatically generated a curriculum vitae for me, but had also automatically situated me in a network of relations to others. The picture of me that Zoominfo.com continues to paint can be understood as a commodified form of auto-biography; one that involves not only self-representational practices—I generate content and represent myself on one site or platform—but also automated aggregation logics, wherein the self-representational content I produce is transformed into highly parsed and indexed bits of data that are open to endless recursive trajectories of circulation, recombination and commodification across indefinite sites and platforms.

In addition to Zoominfo.com, a variety of other automated self-representational platforms exist that not only aggregate biographic content from mainstream social media sites, like Facebook, Web 2.0, and the Web in general, but also tap into the vast storehouses of personal information contained in more difficult to access (but public) databases that general purpose search engine crawlers like those of Google do not reach (at least with respect to what is available to everyday end-users). The ‘deep web’ or ‘invisible web’ refers to the underlying subterfuge of the entire digital media ecology: the vast databases of the social, political, economic, and governmental infrastructure, including personal information contained in court and legal records, in the credit system, in securities and exchanges public records, in intelligence databases, as well as data from sites like Lexis Nexis, Amazon, Ebay and Date.com that are not

generally captured by traditional search engines. In that regard, the commodified form of auto-biography that these sites produce emerges through a series of ‘secret’ processes that most likely escape the user’s attention and awareness. Sites like Zoominfo.com, Pipl.com, 123people.com and Yasni.com not only continually mine and aggregate personal information from the (deep) web and beyond to represent the lives of people, but they also engage algorithmic networking logics to represent connections between them, increasingly capturing not only who people are, but whom they are connected to. Consider this from Pipl.com, which bills itself as the ‘most comprehensive people search on the web’:

“Unlike a typical search-engine, Pipl is designed to retrieve information from the deep web. Our robots are set to interact with searchable databases and extract facts, contact details and other relevant information from personal profiles, member directories, scientific publications, court records and numerous other deep-web sources. Pipl is not just about finding more results; we are using advanced language-analysis and ranking algorithms to bring you the most relevant bits of information about a person...”²

In that regard, the term ‘biographics’ is deployed here to refer to the bits of personal information and biographic data that are mined and aggregated by these platforms; with the concept of ‘auto-biography’ speaking to how biographics circulate and are harvested as a commodified form in automated self-representational processes. As such, this article considers how sites of auto-biography, like Zoominfo.com, shed light on the complexities of the political economy of digital media in three ways: Firstly, highlighting the back and forth, invisible, or ‘secret’ nature of the processes of auto-biography; of how the act of representing oneself is

² <http://pipl.com/help/deep-web/>

inextricably intertwined with being represented in digital culture. Secondly, revealing the recursive nature of these processes, or how the commodity forms of ‘biographics’ and ‘auto-biography’ are ones that beget more commodities in the cascading processes of ‘immanent commodification’³. And finally, implicating an ethics of exposure concerning how the processes of auto-biography at once participate in the erosion of privacy, and at the same time, in the reinforcement of intense commodification and surveillance regimes.

Back and Forth: The Immanent Commodification of Personal Information

There is a back and forth relationship that marks the processes of auto-biography outlined here: just as users produce and aggregate content to represent themselves, the content they generate and the data they produce are mined and aggregated to represent them. In other words, ‘users are *created* by using’⁴. This is how Chun first described the back and forth transmission of ‘involuntary representations’⁵ that are endemic to participation in digital media. In line with the back and forth nature of such arrangements, Langlois et al. have argued that there is a ‘double logic’ inherent in how users are created by using in Web 2.0 worlds, with the ‘processes of subjectivation’⁶ by which user experience takes shape being marked by ‘the inseparability of finding and being found, of locating ourselves and our personalized network’⁷. This is what Elmer also elaborated as the ‘double articulation of locative media’⁸, or ‘the means by which

³ Mosco, Vincent: *The Political Economy of Communication*. 141

⁴ Chun, Wendy: *Control and Freedom*. 249

⁵ *ibid.* 247

⁶ Langlois, Ganaele, Fenwick McKelvey, Greg Elmer & Kenneth C. Werbin: *Mapping Commercial Web 2.0 Worlds: Towards a Critical Ontogenesis*.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Elmer, Greg: *Locative Networking: Finding and Being Found*. 20

users both locate information on networks and are themselves located⁹. The processes of auto-biography outlined here are consistent with this double logic, where at the most minute level, the act of generating data can be seen as inseparable from being generated as data. Equally, the act of producing content is inseparable from being produced as content. Indeed, in the arrangements of auto-biography, to express is to be expressed, just as to self-represent is to be self-represented.

These double logics are part and parcel of the processes of commodification that underpin Web 2.0. The business model that is at the heart of these arrangements is fundamentally based on transforming the content and data generated by users into the commodity form¹⁰. In that regard, the back and forth, recursive logics associated with the processes of auto-biography align with what Mosco has described as ‘immanent commodification’, or ‘how commodities produce their own new commodities’¹¹. In the processes of auto-biography associated with the cascading nature of immanent commodification, the resources of personal information, self-representational content, and data related to patterns of interaction and communication are transformed into commodities that inherently possess the potential to be further commodified. This means that the biographics that users produce as they generate content and data possess potentials beyond the exchange value established between corporations like Google and Facebook and the advertisers and marketers with whom they do business, but also possess potentials to be commodified by external players, like Zoominfo.com, who scrape and mine the

⁹ *ibid.* 18

¹⁰ See Vaidhyanathan, Siva: *The Googlization of Everything.*; van Dijck, Jose: *Users like you? Theorizing agency in User-Generated Content*; van Dijck, Jose & David Nieborg: *Wikinomics and its Discontents: A Critical Analysis of Web 2.0 Business Manifestos*

¹¹ Mosco, Vincent: *The Political Economy of Communication.* 141

bowels of the (deep) web for these resources that are transformed into the aggregated commodity form of auto-biography.

In that regard, participation in Web 2.0 fundamentally involves a form of labor that is consistent with how Lazzarato has described ‘immaterial labor’, or ‘labor that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity’¹². While there has been dispute over the exact term that should be applied to describe the kind of labor at play in Web 2.0 arrangements—with some applying the term ‘immaterial labor’¹³, others opting for ‘free labor’¹⁴, and some for ‘informational labor’¹⁵—there is nonetheless widespread agreement that corporate user-generated content arrangements involve exploiting users who produce the resources that are transformed into the commodity form. The commodified form of auto-biography that is momentarily stabilized on sites like Zoominfo.com is inextricably linked to these exploitative processes, leveraging the labor of users who produce the biographics that are ultimately assembled and commodified in these arrangements.

The double logic of the back and forth processes through which the form of auto-biography appears also aligns with what Mosco has described as the ‘double mystification’ of the commodity form: ‘how it naturalizes the social relationship between capital and labor’¹⁶, and at

¹² Lazzarato, Maurizio: *Immaterial Labor*. 133

¹³ See Hardt, Michael & Antonio Negri: *Multitude*; Terranova, Tiziana: *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*; Coté, Mark & Jennifer Pybus: *Learning to Immaterial Labour 2.0: MySpace and Social Networks*;

¹⁴ See Andrejevic, Mark: *Surveillance in the Digital Enclosure*; Terranova, Tiziana: *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*; van Dijck, José: *Users like you? Theorizing agency in User-Generated Content*; van Dijck, José & David Nieborg: *Wikinomics and Its Discontents: A Critical Analysis of Web 2.0 Business Manifestos*

¹⁵ See Fuchs, Christian: *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age*; Fuchs, Christian: *Web 2.0, Prosumption, and Surveillance*

¹⁶ Mosco, Vincent: 132

the same time is reified, taking on a life of its own 'that stands against the individual and society and comes to shape both'¹⁷. With regard to the former, it is the commodity form of auto-biography that appears on sites like Zoominfo.com (the curriculum vitae and network of relations) and not the struggle at the point of production over how much (or little, or nothing) user laborers are paid for their scraped information and data. With regard to the latter, the reified form of auto-biography carries credibility and authority to stand in for individuals, speaking to who they are, and whom they know a priori. In that way, the commodified form of auto-biography appears as 'a natural outcome of a production process, rather than the social consequence of a fundamental social struggle'¹⁸ over the exploitative nature of Web 2.0 relations. In these exploitative arrangements, the reified form of auto-biography takes on a life of its own that is severed from the production processes through which it appears. 'The outcome of this double mystification is that the product of a social process is given an existence of its own and the power to mold social life'¹⁹. In that light, the commodified form of auto-biography appears not as the product of the processes of commodification, but as a credible, authoritative and fetishized representation of the individual with the power to mold and shape aspects of that individual's life.

A material analysis of these arrangements thus highlights how 'it is the production of audiences for the general capitalist economy that is central to the commodification process rather than the production of ideology'²⁰. In that light, where those who have emphasized the participatory, active nature of users in these arrangements, arguing that the blurring of the lines

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

between top-down forms of production and bottom-up practices of content generation have resulted in the empowerment of users²¹, such approaches ‘neglect to situate this process within a structure of decision-making that places in the hands of capital most, though not all, of the levers of control over decision-making about what gets produced, how it is distributed, and what it costs.’²² While there is an understandable tendency to emphasize the creative potentials that social media open to individuals through the co-productive nature of Web 2.0, such emphasis also obscures the unevenness of the labor relations inherent in these arrangements. But for opting out of participation, users have very limited control over the production and circulation of biographics, how they are aggregated and commodified in the processes of auto-biography, and what aspects of their lives are monitored and tracked. As such, users are not only the products of these arrangements, but are also the subjects of surveillance that is a necessary condition of the back and forth, recursive logics that mark the appearance of the commodified form of auto-biography. In that regard, commodification and surveillance operate hand-in-hand in the processes of auto-biography: a double articulation of the logic of both.

²¹ See Bruns, Axel: *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Prodsage*; Burgess, Jean & Joshua Green: *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*; Deuze, Mark: *Convergence Cultures in the Creative Industries*; Gillmor, Dan: *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People, For the People*; Howe, Jeff: *Crowdsourcing: Why the Power of the Crowd is Driving the Future of Business*; Jenkins, Henry: *The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence*; Jenkins, Henry: *Convergence Culture*; Shirky, Clay: *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*; Tapscott, Don & Anthony Williams: *Wikinomics: How mass collaboration changes everything*;

²² Mosco, Vincent: 138

An Ethics of Exposure: Where Privacy Meets Auto-Biography

“Immanent commodification not only produces new commodities; it creates powerful surveillance tools that threaten privacy”²³

Clearly, the erosion of privacy inherent in digital culture is of critical concern as evidenced by an increase in scholarship related to how current arrangements, including conjunctions of wireless devices, CCTV, facial recognition technology, biometrics, GPS, cookies, and search engine technologies, pose severe threats to privacy²⁴. Moreover, this increase in scholarship runs in parallel to more and more stories appearing in mainstream media reporting on the unforeseen use of personal information harvested from across the social web²⁵.

In their examination of Canadian privacy policy and discourse, Shade and Shepherd²⁶ have articulated ‘immanent commodification’ with the concept of ‘contextual integrity’ that Nissenbaum advances in her analysis of informational privacy²⁷. Contextual integrity is ‘defined as compatibility with presiding norms of information appropriateness and distribution’²⁸. In Shade and Shepherd’s analysis, the variable nature of digital arrangements means that questions of control over personal information and violations of privacy are ‘situationally dependent’

²³ Mosco, Vincent: 143

²⁴ See Bennett, Colin J.: *The Privacy Advocates*; Mosco, Vincent; Nissenbaum, Helen: *Privacy in Context*; Vaidhyanathan, Siva; Wacks, Raymond: *Privacy: A Very Short Introduction*; Zimmer, Michael: 'The Externalities of Search 2.0: The Emerging Privacy Threats when the Drive for the Perfect Search Engine meets Web 2.0'

²⁵ See Dabu, Nonato: *Employers requesting Facebook password violates privacy*; Dyson, Esther: *How Loss of Privacy May Mean Loss of Security*; El Akkad, Omar & Susan Krashinsky: *The See-Through Society*; Jeffries, Stewart: *G2: Life Through a Lens*; Stolove, Daniel: *Do Social Networks Bring the End of Privacy?*; Rosen, Jeffrey: *The Web Means the End of Forgetting*;

²⁶ Shade, Leslie R. & Tamara Shepherd: *Tracing and Tracking Canadian Privacy Discourses: The Audience as Commodity*

²⁷ Nissenbaum, Helen: *Privacy as Contextual Integrity*

²⁸ *ibid.*: 137

involving ‘the role of agents receiving information; their relationships to information subjects; on what terms the information is shared by the subject; and the terms of further dissemination’²⁹.

The momentarily stabilized and commodified form of auto-biography is the situationally dependent product of just such relations and terms and conditions that for the most part remain invisible to users despite the exploitation of their labor and infringements of their privacy.

Contextual integrity applied as such challenges, ‘whether socio-technical devices, systems, and practices affecting the flow of personal information in a society are morally and politically legitimate’³⁰. In that light, the contextual integrity of the commodified form of auto-biography is a dubious one at best, playing out on a digital terrain that is rife with ethical complications that pivot around privacy, the circulation of personal information, and exposure.

In the broadest sense, the commodified forms of biographics and auto-biography participate in the unsettling of ‘freedom of expression’. Wacks has argued that in digital culture the awareness that one might be watched anytime and anywhere challenges people’s subjective and emotional autonomy, altering what they are (or are not) willing to do or say³¹. In Web 2.0 arrangements, the freedom to express oneself is inextricably intertwined with the production of information that always possesses the potential to be personally identifiable when taken up in commodification and surveillance regimes. Even in instances where information and data produced are considered anonymous, when correlated with other such data, what is thought to be non-identifiable can quickly become personally identifiable. This means that the data people produce, even anonymously, might be leveraged and aggregated at any time to represent their

²⁹ *ibid.*: 137-138

³⁰ Nissenbaum, Helen: *Privacy in Context*: 236

³¹ Wacks, Raymond

lives in unexpected and identifiable ways. Whether people limit what they are willing to do or say with this knowledge, or play up to surveillance by exaggerating their words and behaviors to gain recognition, the awareness that one's expression and data might be aggregated at anytime has profound implications with regards to what people are (or are not) willing to do or say.

The reification of the commodified form of auto-biography, standing in for people a priori and possessing the power to open and close opportunities available to them also presents profound ethical complications. The processes of auto-biography are fundamentally built on the logic of 'social sorting', classifying people according to criteria and sorting them into categories³². As Lyon argues, categories and classes of people are inherently political and call for ethical inspection³³. As Gandy tells it, the ways that people are included and excluded through data-mining and sorting logics 'rationalizes discrimination in the broadest sense...in the 'rational pursuit of profits'³⁴. Moreover, the production of inaccuracies through routine 'dataveillance'³⁵ heightens these ethical quandaries. Both Haggerty & Ericson, and Bennett have concluded that data surveillance inherently produces inaccuracies and errors that can have very real consequences for people's lives, namely their exclusion from opportunities.

Overall, in current digital arrangements, privacy is increasingly transformed from a right into a commodity, where maintaining one's anonymity and managing one's reputation comes at a cost. The processes of auto-biography as such do not merely align with Mosco's notion of 'immanent commodification', but also factor in 'external commodification', or '...a process of expansion that extends commodification to areas that, for a range of social, political, cultural,

³² Lyon, David: Surveillance as Social Sorting: Privacy, Risk and Digital Discrimination

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Gandy, Oscar: Data Mining and Surveillance in the post 9/11 environment: 153

³⁵ Haggerty, Kevin D. & Richard V. Ericson: The New Politics of Surveillance and Visibility

and economic reasons, were historically left outside the process or only lightly affected by it³⁶. Indeed, anonymizing software and reputation management services are privacy commodities that emerge in arrangements where users are created by using, produced by producing, expressed by expressing, and self-represented by self-representing. As such, the processes of auto-biography further reinforce the conjunction and expansion of digital capitalism, commodification and surveillance; a subject that demands vigilant ethical attention.

In short, the ethical complications of the arrangements of auto-biography implicate an ethics of exposure. How deep is too deep with respect to the kinds of personal information that can be aggregated, commodified and exposed by sites and platforms? While the information that is harvested from the deep web is technically in the public domain (e.g. information contained in court and legal records), an ethics of exposure challenges the moral and political legitimacy of the unbridled free flow of personal information contained in the vast databases of our social, political, economic, and governmental infrastructure. This involves asking questions like whether or not the details of a divorce case or lawsuit should circulate with the same ease as the more mundane details of a person's personal and professional life. An ethics of exposure, as such, revolves around considerations of privacy and the circulation, aggregation, and exposure of personal information; interrogating the terms by which sites gather and expose personal information, their relationship to and with the subjects they represent, the terms by which personal information will be further accumulated, disseminated and commodified, and how they have acquired, or at the very least, sought to acquire informed consent from their subjects about the self-representations that are being made on their behalf.

³⁶ Mosco, Vincent: 143

In conclusion, sites of auto-biography, like Zoominfo.com, highlight the complexities of the political economy of Web 2.0 in three ways: Firstly, these sites exemplify the back and forth logic of these arrangements, wherein the act of representing oneself is inextricably intertwined with being represented. Secondly, these sites reveal the recursive nature of these arrangements, or how the commodity forms of ‘biographics’ and ‘auto-biography’ are ones that are part and parcel of the cascading processes of ‘immanent commodification’. Finally, these sites illuminate the ethical complications of the processes of auto-biography, that at once participate in the erosion of privacy, and at the same time, in the reinforcement of commodification and surveillance regimes. Indeed, the processes and sites of auto-biography outlined here implicate an ethics of exposure that must be grappled with if we are to come to terms with how our lives (and how they are told) are increasingly both the products of commodification and the subjects of surveillance.

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