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The Texts and Subjects of Automediality

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Abstract

Being is an empty fiction. The "apparent" world is the only world: the "true world" is just a lie added on to it…
—Nietzsche.

Anna Poletti: I'm attracted to autobiography in a non-narrative context because I'm very interested in texts that people create that demonstrate their thinking or their fantasies or their processing, generally.
Lauren Berlant: Right, in that sense it's autobiography in your larger sense of what autobiography is: a record of […] processing.
—Anna Poletti and Julie Rak with Lauren Berlant.

The medium is the message.
—Marshall McLuhan

Welcome to the *M/C Journal* issue on automediality. If "automediality" sounds like another academic buzzword to you, you are right. But it is more than a buzzword for scholars interested in exploring the significant role of mediation in auto/biographical engagement. Automediality is, we think, an incredibly useful way of framing and grouping scholarly investigations of the processes and practices that people engage when they mediate their lives and selves in a range of auto/biographical forms.

We are incredibly excited to bring you this vibrant collection of research about what we are calling "automediality," but first it is useful to lay some groundwork in terms of explicitly articulating what we think automediality is and does, and why we think it is necessary.

As life writing scholars exploring contemporary examples of digital auto/biography in our own research, we were both struck by the need for a new definition of auto/biography that expands beyond text, beyond narrative, beyond subject in any complete sense or form, to reflect the multiplicity of ways that lives are lived and recorded using new media today. We each found ourselves limited, at times, by existing assumptions about what auto/biography traditionally is.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in their field defining work *Reading Autobiography*, offer an etymological cue that summarises the prevailing use and perception of autobiographical work: "in Greek, *autos* denotes 'self,' *bios* 'life,' and *graphe* 'writing.' Taken together in this order, the words *self life writing* offer a brief definition of the *autobiography*" (1).

If "autobiography" has denoted a way to *write* the self from the location of the self, automediality points to the range of media forms and technologies through which people engage in digital, visual, filmic, performative, textual, and transmediated forms of documenting, constructing and presenting the self.

Smith and Watson introduce automediality as a possible theoretical framework for "approaching life storytelling in diverse visual and digital media" (*Reading* 168). Originally developed by European scholars such as Jörg Dünne and Christian Moser, the term was introduced in order "to expand the definition of how subjectivity is constructed in writing, image, or new media" (Smith and Watson *Reading* 168).

Conjoining *autos* and media, the concept redresses a tendency in autobiography studies to consider media as "tools" for rendering a pre-existent self. Theorists of automediality emphasize that the choice of medium is determined by self-expression; and the materiality of the medium is constitutive of the subjectivity rendered. Thus media technologies do not simplify or undermine the interiority of the subject but, on the contrary, expand the field of self-representation beyond the literary to cultural and media practices. New media of the self revise notions of identity and the rhetoric and modalities of self-presentation, and they prompt new imaginings of virtual sociality enabled by concepts of community that do not depend on personal encounter. (*Reading* 168)

Looking at auto/biographical practices from a framework of automediality moves away from a conception of texts as able to capture and transmit preexisting selves, lives and identities, and towards an understanding of selves, lives and identities as constructed by and through textual and media practices. It is through creating an autobiographical text that the "self" a person thinks they are comes into being. The mode of creation here, be it a Facebook status update, a memoir, or an alt account, for example, is situated within networks of power, meaning and social capital to shape ways of being a "self" in a particular environment or context. Automedial reading takes all of these formative elements into consideration.

Julie Rak suggests that automedia "describes the enactment of a life story in a new media environment" (155), but we think that the term is even more useful as a framework or approach to studying not only new media life stories, but auto/biographical practices as they are enacted in a range of media forms, analogue and digital alike.

Importantly, our aim here is not simply to introduce another buzzword, but rather to draw attention to the current need to rethink the significant role of mediation in auto/biographical production, performance, and practices. As Rak points out, "it is time not only to rename the practices we study, but also to think critically about online life as life, and not as the texts many of us are more used to studying, which are meant to represent a life" (156). This kind of critical rethinking about how media is embedded in the living of lives, and the scholarly shift that Rak suggests from examining representation in texts to examining "online life *as life*" is crucial to the notion of automediality. And it has us—the editors of this issue—divided.

A Conversation between Editors

Ümit: choosing "subject" and "process" over "text."

I think what automediality is, which is different to auto/biography, is process rather than product. Automediality allows us to explore how our lives intertwine with different mediums and technologies resulting in new subjects, but subjects *in motion*. There is no product, there is no complete narrative, there is no snapshot that captures the subject. The subject is always developing, always in motion, always in the "process of doing" (Rak 156), of being and becoming. It is a "moving target" as Smith and Watson suggest ("Virtually" 71). And therefore, automediality, as Rak suggests, is the process of living: living in relationship with media. Where as an

autobiographical enquiry has usually (not always) involved the study of a subject in a complete form (although susceptible to other "versions")—a text in other words, which *can* be examined by itself—an automedial enquiry has to adapt to the fact that there isn't a product that can be examined in isolation. As Emma has argued elsewhere, we can never hold "a single cohesive version" of automedial subjects in our hands and we never reach "the end" of a subject's self-representation as long as they continue to "post" ("Self-Branding" 75). What we are exploring as scholars of automediality is a process of living. How people live, create and present themselves, participate, narrativise, and simply "be" in different spaces, using different mediums and technologies.

The mediated lives and subjects that we're exploring in this issue require new language, new words and definitions. We are not dealing with "texts," although there are textual components, we are not dealing with "narratives," although one (or many) is (or are) always in formation (see Rak 156), and most importantly, we are not dealing with "products," that hold any significance in isolation. What we are dealing with are processes: processes of being, doing, creating, and distributing the self, in relationship with media and their affordances, limitations and participants.

My objection to language such as "text" is that it implies something tangible, taking for granted the ephemerality of the subjects of automediality. So often in my research I have taken a "snapshot" of a subject (in the form of a YouTube video, for example) and treated it like a text ready for analysis only to find when I revisit it that it has changed, been edited or contradicted, or completely erased (see Kennedy). And when we treat "snapshots" as "texts" for analysis I think we miss the most important point: that is the process through which the subject was and is being formed (in relationship with the medium, its technologies, and the people and things that congregate and participate in that space). We need to expand the way we explore mediated subjects and lives and "automediality" allows us to do this—it gives us a "space" in which to develop new language and methods of enquiry.

Emma: texts are vital to studying automediality.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that textuality is key to a definition of automediality: "The aim of an automedial approach is to discover what texts can tell us about cultural understandings of selfhood and what it means to portray 'real' life and 'real' selves *through media*. The emphasis is on thinking critically about mediation" (*Girls,* 22). However, Ümit's thinking about automedia as process has been instrumental to progressing how I am defining and thinking about automediality. For me, though, (and perhaps my background in literary studies is showing here), framing autobiographical production and performance as *texts* that we can *read* is a useful framework that allows us to disentangle and examine abstract, slippery concepts like being, living, identity, and selfhood *in process* in a way that brings the roles and effects of mediation into sharp focus.

Retaining the terminology around texts and textual practices—specifically that branch that is concerned with cultural production—also means that we can observe the labour of auto/biography, which is important for thinking about the economies in which automediation occurs as well as acknowledging the work that goes into creating these self-presentations or performances. It takes skills, labour, literacies, and—for me—nuanced understanding and facility with crucial modalities of *reading* to participate and "play" in any kind of media form. My definition of reading is broad: people read meaning, identities, lives, media, and the world around them in order to figure out how they fit into any given context, and it is the texts produced in even the most fleeting or participatory automediation that record or hold traces of this work, this process, that we as scholars can then examine.

The spirit in which I apply "text" is deeply influenced by the field of semiotics within Cultural Studies. The work of semioticians like Saussure, Althusser, Derrida and Lotman that I studied during my undergraduate degree leads me, like many literary scholars, to think about not only cultural products like books and media as texts, but also bodies, surfaces, ephemeral and immaterial performances, and a range of autobiographical practices as texts. As agents we create meaning by reading, decoding, interpreting, and negotiating texts. The work of mediation, for me, is deeply connected to textual practices.

I still think that texts—as well as the practices and processes that go into creating, distributing, and reading them—are a productive framework for examining strategies of self-presentation and identity performance. However, Ümit's observations around process (articulated in her short essay "Vulnerability" and developed here) is particularly vital to thinking about the context for the participation of produsers in media economies where automedial production is often fleeting, ephemeral, and in flux. And I think that the importance of process in analysing more (apparently or materially) stable media is important, too.

One way of thinking about a middle ground between text and subject is by considering the concept of *becoming* as central to the conceptual framework of automediality.

Ümit: finding a middle ground.

I agree our difference of opinion about viewing these subjects as texts comes from our different disciplines. For you, Emma, the word "text" is important because it emphasises the agency and labour involved in its creation. As a communications and media scholar, I operate on the assumption that communicating the self involves a huge amount of conscious and unconscious work. I take the agency and labour involved in mediating the self for granted. I still have an issue with "text," however, as taking the process through which it was created for granted. I do concede, though, that we can't completely disregard the products of mediation, because there are products (as long as we agree that they are in motion), and these are worthy of study.

Although mediated subjects and texts can be fleeting and ephemeral, the fact that they are mediated, as you suggest, means that to some extent they are traceable. The mediation of the self means we can see and track its progression, its influencers, its forms, its relationships and dialogues. Although it is changeable and deletable, "doing" (living in relationship with media) leaves a record. On YouTube, for example, I can see the interactions that take place, through comments, likes and subscriptions, and I can therefore trace the subject as it changes. Mediating the self in this way materialises the process of self-formation. Automediality illuminates the process and makes it accessible to us to research.

I think the concept of *becoming* is a perfect middle ground.

"Becoming" as a Middle Ground

We are interested in using the concept of automediality to unpack and examine how selves and lives are brought into being through media forms by examining, simultaneously, both the *process* of mediation and the *product* (i.e. the autobiographical subjects and text). A crucial part of this examination is attending to the process of construction, of the process through which the textual self is mediated. One way of thinking about this in relation to the construction of lives and selves, is by thinking about how the concept of *becoming* is traceable in mediation.

Rob Cover's discussion of becoming in social networking is influential to our thinking here. Cover, drawing on Judith Butler, explains that underlying his approach is "the idea that identity and subjectivity is an ongoing process of becoming, rather than an ontological state of being" (56) and he argues that looking at the practices and artifacts of online identity performance can reveal the intricacies of identity in process. Also important here is the work of Stuart Hall who, in 1989, wrote about becoming in terms of how it is implicated in identity as a cultural practice or process:

> Cultural identity […] is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. […] It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant trans-formation. Far from being eternally fixed […], they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narrative of the past. (70)

Hall's description of becoming as the process by which identity is continually brought into being has parallels to how we are thinking of mediation and life narrative in

this issue. Hall is speaking about reading and representing identity, about the processes and products through which people enact, express, perform, and consume identity categories. Similarly, we are looking at subjectivities and identities in process, and we both agree that automediality as a conceptual tool and classifying label turns our attention to the ways in which people identify themselves and others using media. Media use, here, encompasses practices of engagement in terms of both consumption and creation. And, increasingly, users participate by engaging in both production and consumption simultaneously, becoming *produsers*—a term coined by the editor of this journal, Axel Bruns (2). Bruns's notion of produsers illustrates the complex relationship between consumers, producers and users in the current media economy (2).

One of the significant aspects of an automedial enquiry is the blurring of boundaries between creators and consumers. Automedial subjects are created in dialogue with the other participants in the space. The lives and identities are not only merged with the medium and technologies involved in their creation, but also with the other *produsers* in the space. This is critical when we begin to explore how to research automediality, as an automedial enquiry demands automediation of the researcher. In order to explore these subjects, the researcher must participate, to some extent, in the practice. Exploring subjects on social media, for example, requires the researcher to create an account and therefore participate in the same activity they are observing/consuming/researching.

Questions for Automedial Enquiry

Taking these ideas from theory to practice, from our point of view, reading auto/biographical texts and practices through a framework of automediality involves asking some of the following questions and paying attention to some of the following elements:

- What are the affordances, constraints and features of this medium that have shaped how a subject can inscribe, perform, or construct a self-presentation? As Nancy Baym writes, "our ability to construct an online self-presentation ... is limited and enabled by the communicative tools, or affordances, a platform makes available and our skills at strategically managing them" (124).
- What networks of power traverse this technology, this medium, and thus this mode of self-presentation?
- How does this performance of selfhood engage the different autobiographical "I"s: the narrating self and the narrated self; the subject and its creator; the online self and the offline IRL (in real life) self or selves. Although, as Smith and Watson state, "theorists of media and autobiography […] approach the constructed self not as an essence but as a subject" (*Reading*, 71), we have to acknowledge the person or constructs that exist outside of (and informs) the performance. How do these different facets of the self, and identities, speak to each other in automedia?
- In what networks of production and consumption does the automedia exist? How is the audience positioned in relation to the text or subject?
- Surface reading: the textual elements that form the interface between reader and story can tell us about what forces are shaping the self-presentations within the text, and also how the reader is positioned in relation to the autobiographical narrative. What does a surface reading reveal about how the self is being constructed by both media conventions and cultural meanings?
- The possibility of multiple and fragmented selves. The self that a subject performs or creates in one media platform may be a very different self that they perform in another or that they feel themselves to "be" in "real" life. What is the relationship between these selves? How do they inform and speak to each other?
- Authenticity is always suspect. Rather than a concrete guarantee that the media presentation correlates truthfully or sincerely to the IRL (in real life) identity or life of the narrator, authenticity in automedia is "an *effect* created by the form and style" of an auto/biographical performance (Maguire *Girls*, 11; drawing on Poletti *Intimate*, 28-9; emphasis added). Thus, it is less useful to weigh up how authentic or how real a particular self-presentation or media form is, and more interesting to examine how particular media constructs or creates effects of authenticity, or makes appeals to truth/authenticity.
- And finally, method: How can we develop methods to explore automedia which critically examine the text/subject, as well as the "process of doing" (Rak) through which the text/subject is being and "becoming" (Hall).

Introducing the Articles

Each of these excellent articles responds to technological effects on selfhood. By canvassing a range of media forms and approaches to conceptualising the mediation of lives and selves, our contributors' ideas probe new directions for automediality as a framework for reading and thinking through self-mediation.

The feature article, authored by Anna Poletti and Julie Rak, proposes that RuPaul's Drag Race demonstrates automedia in action and suggests that the reality TV show, by modelling "queer time," presents a challenge to dominant (straight) patterns of temporality in life narratives. This piece presents an argument for considering how identities that have been positioned as marginal are able, through automediality, to reconfigure understandings of what a life and a self can look like.

Wes Hill addresses a key claim that we are making when we talk about autmediality: that media interfaces and contexts shape and construct the forms of selfhood that are brought into being through them. Hill takes the case study of artist and filmmaker Ryan Trecartin and argues that Trecartin's videos demonstrate a fragmented set of identities that are deeply constituted by a style of performance that Hill calls "Internet-era camp." Here, Internet-era camp becomes a mode through which to constitute the self through fragmented sets of intertextual and affective meanings.

Emily van der Nagel highlights the multi-faceted nature of the mediated self through her investigation of Alt (alternative) accounts on Twitter. Her article demonstrates the way people use different accounts on the same platform for different facets of the self, and for different audiences.

Isabel Pederson and Kristen Aspevig extend our discussion of automediality to explore agency and consent in the example of children producing their own automedial subjects and texts on YouTube, in the form of toy reviews.

Kylie Cardell explores the digital self-tracking device many of us wear on our wrists, the Fitbit, and asks whether this wearable technology constitutes a diary. In her article, Cardell examines how a Fitbit can become an almanac for self-improvement, where the constant tracking of our physical behaviour changes the way that we live.

Anu A Harju critically examines the world of "fatshion" blogging to reveal the relational way "fatshionistas" are formed in dialogue with medium, community and market. Harju situates the self as a product of relations, "borne out of them as well as dependent on them."

Chad Habel takes up masculine gender performance in video games by investigating how genre facilitates (or doesn't) particular modes of identification by coaxing aggressive gameplay.

Mick Broderick, Stuart Marshall Bender and Tony McHugh take a look how artificial intelligence technologies are currently being used to create immersive virtual reality experiences. They question the use of trauma in such projects, and suggest that affect—particularly when used to explore suffering within virtual worlds—needs careful thought moving forward with these technologies.

Conclusion

This collection of interdisciplinary scholarship is an exploration of the different ways that people mediate the self. Focusing on mediation as a process that brings the subject into being, these essays explore the connections between lives, selves, identities and media technologies.

The textual constructs that hold selves together become traces or products that can perform social functions, but they also have immense richness as objects of study. By taking apart and examining the processes and effects of mediation on life narratives, as scholars we are able to re-focus the microscope on the *becoming* of lives, selves and identities that are constructed in autobiographical texts.

In seeking contributions for this collection, we were guided by two key questions: How do people mediate their identities, selves and experiences? How do media forms and conventions limit or facilitate the possibilities for particular kinds of selfhood to be articulated?

Scholars of life narrative warn us that "the self" is not a unified and pre-existing entity that can simply be transcribed or translated through media. Rather, the self is brought into being *through* writing—or mediation. Media technologies like the camera, the diary, social media platforms, and books each have conventions, affordances, abilities and limits that both enable and restrict the kinds of self-presentation that are possible. Particular media bring particular subjectivities to life. It is our opinion that examining such sites and modes of automediality can tell us about the ways in which "technologies and subjectivity" are connected (Smith and

Watson "Virtually" 77), and this is what we hope this collection of work offers to scholars of media and life narrative, as well as those working in interrelated fields. But this is only the beginning. The interfaces between life narrative and media technologies remains an exciting space for new ideas and theories to flourish.

Future avenues for investigation of automediality might include examining: the platforms, mediums and technologies of automediality; the affordances of automediality for alternative narratives and identities; the vulnerabilities of mediated narratives and identities; the mediated self as brand/consumable product; cases that explore when automediality is lasting and permanent and when it is ephemeral and shifting; and multiple methodologies for investigating the mediated self, particularly in the context of digital media. An upcoming development that we're particularly excited about is Anna Poletti's forthcoming monograph *Biomediations* which will, we expect, move this thinking forward again.

We hope that this issue of *M/C Journal* inspires more ideas about how media shapes the kinds of selves we think we are, now, in the past, and into the future.

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