There Is No "I" in Network: Social Networking Sites and Posthuman Auto/Biography

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THERE IS NO "I" IN NETWORK: 
SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND 
POSTHUMAN AUTO/BIOGRAPHY 

LAURIE MCNEILL 

The digital era complicates definitions of the self and its boundaries, both dismantling and sustaining the humanist subject in practices of personal narrative. As Katherine Hayles has argued, moving the "technologies of inscription" from the realm of the material world to the electronic "fundamentally alter[s] the relation of signified to signifier" (25, 30). Such a change has the potential to significantly trouble, if not totally destabilize, dominant conceptions of "autobiography," and in particular Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact, which insists on the stability of the "I" and its verifiability, the synonymity of the signifier and the signified. Initial considerations of virtual reality focused on the potential disruption of that stability, imagining the Internet as a realm for Dionysian excesses of identity play, where selves could be put on and off with a few keystrokes (e.g., Bolter, Jones, Robins, Turkle). Though in the twenty years since the World Wide Web debuted, more nuanced understandings of identity in cyberspace have emerged, suggesting close connections between "real" and "virtual" selves, questions of what identity entails online have implications for rethinking the limits of the human in and through auto/biographical practices. Such limits both come into view and become obscured as we shift more and more of our everyday lives online. From routine errands of banking and shopping to more complex acts of self-representation in blogs, videos, and social networking sites, millions of individuals on a daily basis now produce online selves in interaction with both other people and software applications.

If we accept Donna Haraway’s premise that what we understand as human is indeed a product of cultural and technological innovations in combination, making us cyborgs (149–50), then what kinds of auto/biographical
subjects emerge from these interfaces of selves and software? In many applications, where users fill in blanks or check boxes as mandated by the site’s program, it may be difficult to determine where the human leaves off and the software begins. Can we understand these narratives as auto/biographical acts? Given the personal and commercial investments at these sites, to what extent do they challenge long-held concepts of auto/biography as narratives of or by individuals, and about auto/biographers as autonomous agents? We can no longer think of the autobiographical as an individual narrative generated by an autonomous subject. At the same time, however, social constructions of the “I” continue to support that fiction, with millions of people now taking advantage of the democratization of the Internet to publish and read life narratives that represent selves as individuals, and indeed insist upon the singularity, agency, and accessibility of lives, experiences, and subjects.

Such insistent practices of self-construction, Carolyn Miller and Dawn Shepherd argue, resist the Web’s apparent destabilizing of subjectivity. This seeming paradox invites a rethinking of critical and popular assumptions about how, and by what or whom, lives are produced and consumed in a digital context. Similarly paradoxical is the concept of “posthuman auto/biography” if one considers the “posthuman” in the sense of “anti-human,” a perspective that would seem to make “auto/biography” impossible by negating the human it purports to inscribe. Technology’s potential role in supplanting the human makes cyber-narratives particularly suspect sites. But if we take posthuman in Hayles’s sense as, in part, a project of rethinking subjectivity as a construct that emerges in concert with technology rather than as a product of liberal humanism (3), then the posthuman becomes a potentially very useful way to account for the subjects of digital life narratives.

Life narrative itself is both heavily invested in the humanist subject and often employed to explore, push, and reject the limitations of that subjectivity, another apparent paradox, but one that perfectly positions auto/biography for considerations of the posthuman. Online lives in particular therefore provide rich sites for thinking through concepts of the posthuman, and trying out theories of “posthuman auto/biography.” One of the central sources of online auto/biographical production has become the now-ubiquitous social networking site (SNS). Modeled in part on online dating and professional networking sites (boyd and Ellison), SNSs now connect families, classmates, friends, coworkers, and even lurkers in a digital community. The popularity of these pages demonstrates that they clearly address—and create—user demands for social connection and self-performance, enabling individuals to participate in “everyday autobiography” (Smith and Watson, Getting 3). The design of these sites, however, means that at the same time users are reading the sites, the users themselves are being written and “read” by the network,
which consists of both other site members and the site itself. To what extent, then, can users be considered as autobiographical subjects?

The interface of the individual with the technological and corporate institution of the social networking site, an engagement that requires submission of the human subject to the software’s imperatives, constructs lives and narratives that complicate concepts of “posthuman auto/biography” in intriguing ways. What is the subject of the social networking site? Does the machine-human coproduction make the digital subject inherently posthuman, as cybernetics theory might suggest (Hayles 1–24)? Or do the humanist principles of those who design the machines and the software embed these ideologies into our cyber-selves?

In taking up such questions, I will focus on Facebook, which has emerged as the overwhelmingly predominant social network, drawing on users from all age groups around the globe (“Statistics”). Since launching exclusively for Harvard students in 2004 (boyd and Ellison), the site has opened membership to all comers, and now hosts over 850 million users, 50 percent of whom log in every day (“Statistics”). Its influence on how individuals represent themselves and others online is therefore considerable; its global and pervasive reach enables it to shape cultural practices of selves and communities in significant ways. Moreover, Facebook offers a compelling case study for the apparently posthuman subject that emerges in cyberspace because it has been designed to become part of users’ daily lives, and to shape their offline narratives and selves in Facebooked ways. These designs, based on software platforms and algorithmic data-crunching, show us Haraway’s cyborg in action, producing selves from a human-machine interface. At the same time, however, these programs reenact highly traditional concepts of selves and narratives, and thus throw into relief the boundaries of “old” and “new.” Facebook builds on both human and posthuman concepts of the human subject in compelling, and arguably posthuman, life narratives, as its users produce and are produced by accounts of digital life. If, as Neil Badmington suggests, “the task of posthumanism is to uncover those uncanny moments when things start to drift,” when “boundaries” become “uncertain” (19), then posthuman concepts can be a productive tool for charting the shifts and drifts of the autobiographical in cyberspace.

(POST)HUMAN PORTRAITS: THE FACEBOOK PROFILE

On the surface, the Facebook framework for selves is made of humanist materials, imagining identity in ways that echo Enlightenment assumptions about individuality, authenticity, agency, and indeed “auto/biography” in its most traditional forms. The company’s mission, “to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (“About”), shares
with conventional auto/biography a moralistic program of (self-)improvement through narrative, and invests in the “power” of life stories to create change. Facebook draws upon a belief in the authenticating credential of the proper name, the foundation of Lejeune’s pact: users must sign up using their real names, verified by birth date and e-mail address, creating a “nonymous” environment that distinguished this site from original competitors such as MySpace, and aligning “real” and “virtual” identities (Zhao et al. 1820). The corporate spin on this requirement is surprisingly moralistic, aligning verifiability with personal and communal ideals. “You have one identity,” company founder Mark Zuckerberg declares: “Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity” (qtd. in Kirkpatrick 199). Taking up this tone, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg proclaims, “You can’t be on Facebook without being your authentic self” (qtd. in Kirkpatrick 210). Insisting on identity as singular and “authentic,” Facebook fails to question the limitations of that concept or its foundations (who determines “authenticity”? Who has access to it?), and instead reproduces its ideologies.

So who is this “authentic” self? We see this subject emerge through the autobiographical self-inscriptions of the “Profile,” the human-software interface that members are invited to fill out upon joining the social network community. Unlike the relatively unstructured nature of blogs, for example, the auto/biographical act of creating a Profile follows particular company guidelines and establishes community norms for participation. Reading these fields as the outlines for autobiographical acts, we see a programmatic, corporate vision of ideal users, indicating the particular social values that Facebook both promotes and reflects, as well as a potentially homogenized model of subjectivity. The Profile combines templates, drop-down menus (for relationship status, for instance), and fill-in-the-blank fields in a range of topics (e.g., lists of favorite music, sports teams, books; familial relations; political and religious views). It thus asks users to provide both what it identifies as “basic” information (sex, geographical location, email address, place of work) and more substantive autobiographical performances.

Users are also encouraged to include a photograph or image that will appear beside their name in their member listing and any posts they make, and further encouraged to add pictures and videos to their personal page. While all aspects of the Profile beyond one’s proper name, e-mail address, and birthdate are optional, the existence of the provided fields sets up self conceptualizations in particular Facebooked ways, in keeping with the site’s idea of its imagined and ideal members. Many users accept this invitation to disclose, to fill in the outlines of the template self with the suggested material. Zhao et al. note that not only did site members evaluated in their study “select these options for their Profiles but also they elaborated each category considerably”
In asking after your tastes in music and books, Facebook insists such things matter in constructions of identity. Certainly these categories reflect the information most relevant to the concept of social networking, with those seeking professional contacts, for instance, relying on the education and work fields. They also indicate SNSs’ roots in dating sites, with their persistent interest in the kinds of relationships you might seek online, and the kind of information relevant to such intimate pursuits (boyd and Ellison). Moreover, in what it asks—and doesn’t ask—the Profile privileges certain aspects of experience and identity. Should members choose to comply with these particular requests for information, the templates offer little room to negotiate or complicate identity. Noting that “communications technologies” “embody and enforce new social relations,” Haraway reminds us of the way that technologies are interested, bearing the values of their producers, and thus should “be viewed as instruments for enforcing meanings” (164). These meanings may well be largely conservative, constructing and reinforcing offline norms for identity. Joseph Walther et al.’s study of impression management on Facebook, examining the perception of physical attractiveness based on posts and Profile information, shows how some such offline meanings become part of digital lives as well. Their research concluded that male and female site members were judged by differing, highly traditional standards for sexual behavior and alcohol consumption. When study participants viewed sample posts about binge drinking and
implied sexual conduct, for instance, they rated the subject more attractive when male, but less so when the subject was female. Such responses reflect not only the conventional “sexual double standard,” but “also reinforce concerns over the potential for Facebook dynamics to reinforce stereotypes and behaviors that are potentially harmful” (45). Given Facebook’s reach into many users’ daily lives, it is certainly likely that this influence carries over into offline performances, with members learning to think about and live their lives in Faceooked ways.

The fields for self-expression construct the ideal Facebook member’s “cultural self,” as Zhao et al. argue, creating a “consumer/taste identity, defined as much by what the market offers as by individual or character traits” (1826). In the Profile, “Facebook users engage in enumerative cultural self-description when they simply list a set of cultural preferences that they think define them” (1825). The fields position Faceooked subjects as cultural consumers with particular tastes, and thus suggest the kinds of material appropriate for sharing in this community. Certainly the Profile’s auto/biographical template and the selves it produces reflect the site’s corporate mandates. As Zuckerberg points out, “if you look at someone’s Profile, almost all the fields that define them are in some way commercial. . . . It’s part of our identity as people that we like something, but it also has commercial value” (qtd. in Kirkpatrick 260). The Profile’s constituent categories reflect Facebook’s origins in the early twenty-first century interests of its founders, young American men attending Harvard, even as the site has expanded both its membership and, more recently, its options for information. What the site assumes as necessary or interesting information for Facebook members therefore reveals cultural values in action that construct the Profiled individual as a subject of late capitalist society, a figure far more human than posthuman.

Such regularizing of identity might well be designed for ease of use, but it also promotes particular homogenizing impulses, and of course, designs the self in ways that it can then easily access for data mining. The template—ongoing, perpetually in-process, open to elaboration—remains the foundation for Facebook selves, the skeleton for the informational selves users produce. But the Profile, I am reminded, is a two-dimensional portrait that shows only part of the face. It is designed to engender the most basic of autobiographical renderings, no more complex than a simple statement. Since the Profile is literally, in the technological sense, a platform for auto/biographical performances, it limits how users conceive of the possibilities for telling their lives in this particular context. So we must look at the Profile in the context of the network and its activities, in which the individual life/narrative engages with others in a collaborative enterprise.
In September 2011, Facebook began a slow rollout of Timeline, its “new kind of Profile” (Lessin). The new interface is a highly visual collection of network activity, combining the original Profile information, Newsfeed, and Wall, and foregrounding additional elements such as applications—Ticker, for more “lightweight” updates, and Reports, a summary of your activities grouped by type (Zuckerberg). Timeline, Zuckerberg declares, gives users “the ability to highlight and curate all your stories so that you can express who you really are.” Organized in such a way that old stories are searchable instead of lost, photos gain more prominence, and users’ experiences are geared towards network engagement, the revamped Profile, Zuckerberg proclaims, “is the story of your life.” Facebook’s framing of the Profile as a narrative act signals its positioning as a meaning-making mode for members, one that the site makes possible on its terms. Not simply a way to identify oneself to others and attract “friends,” the Timeline Profile shifts life itself as well as its “story” onto the social network.

This latest reenvisioning of the Profile followed overhauls in 2008 and 2010 (Zuckerberg) that significantly expanded the original categories and applications. Now users can fill in that outline with their own activities as well as those of their friends. Explaining the social aspects of Timeline in the Facebook blog, Samuel Lessin notes, “Now, you and your friends will finally be able to tell all the different parts of your story—from the small things you do each day to your biggest moments” (emphasis added). Acting not only as producers of life stories, Facebook users also by necessity consume the autobiographical acts of others, and in so doing, contribute to them: the network structure of the site demands the persistent, symbiotic generation of narratives. These activities position the subject in a networked auto/biography. Lives/stories on the site are collaborations between individual users and their networks, whose presence and activities add and inspire content. Through more active engagements—such actions as sharing (giving credit when reposting material) and liking—“friends” express their approval of members’ SNS performances, and encourage the production of more such material. They intervene more explicitly in their network’s life/narrative through tagging (in photos or notes), hailing (hyperlinking users’ names when they mention them in posts), and commenting or posting on Walls. These individual sites of connection overlap with contributions from other friends, who may represent a totally distinct relation, like different nodes on the network, and together these actions form a composite portrait of a member. Significantly, users have little control over the material these networked co-authors produce.
about them, reflecting a drastic change from offline, and even other digital, auto/biographical practices. As Walther et al. point out, members are “at the mercy of their social networks” (32).

While the original Profile focused on the individual in relation to the network, Timeline foregrounds the network, giving the individual identity and significance only in relation to that web of connectedness, emphasizing the social of the social network. In so doing, it departs from a strictly humanist understanding of the self as autonomous, and invites us to consider how the network can be a posthuman practice even with humanist foundations. The private, interior life of the humanist subject, for instance, is thrown over for the networked self, one collaboratively produced through shared Facebook activities in ways that suggest a “posthuman collectivity” in which the “I” is transformed into the “we” of autonomous agents operating together to make a self” (Hayles 6). This collaborative subject, Jay Bolter argues, is a product of cyberspace, and reconceptualizes identity in the shift from print to virtual self-inscriptions, echoing Hayles’s readings of the digital shift (25–49). “A networked self,” Bolter explains, “is displacing Cartesian printed self as a cultural paradigm. This networked self is organized like the Web itself, as a constantly changing set of affiliations or links. At any given moment the individual is defined by the connections that she chooses to establish with other individuals, activity groups, and religious and secular organizations” (26).

One way the networked self is produced is, as Lessin signals, through the cooperation of one’s “friends.” On Facebook, users can articulate levels of friendship, identifying family members and designating “featured” friends, organizing them into sub-communities within the blanket network (so not just “friends,” but “co-workers,” “graduate school,” and so on). Facebook also encourages members to discover and capitalize on commonalities: “discover common interests,” it suggests (“Profile”). In the Profile, as everywhere on Facebook, members are constructed as individuals in context: the “I” becomes significant only through its network connections. Users rely on their network of friends to verify their identity, as Judith Donath and danah boyd have argued (72–73), and are then also encouraged to continuously produce their own and others’ lives by actively participating in the online community. Members’ “network of connections,” Donath and boyd note, are “displayed as an integral piece of their self-presentation” (72)—the identity-defining group membership in Bolter’s terms—and it’s this group of connections that is integral to the network experience (boyd and Ellison).

Walther et al. similarly note that users’ identities emerge in relation to those of their friends, with the activities and appearance of those friends affecting users’ impressions of them (36). They conclude that not only does
“[i]t behoove one to have good-looking friends in Facebook,” because attractive friends make one seem more attractive, but it also helps when they are “complimentary” in their remarks on one’s Wall (44). Because these responses, as textual or visual data, have permanence and are public, and because they invite response from the subject, they significantly shape the subject’s identity, and the stories she tells about herself and others. Their public nature means that they also teach or model “appropriate” interactions for other members of the network. One’s network thus contributes to the auto/biographical presentation and community norms Facebook facilitates. As Donath and boyd note, “ Appearing on a networking site with a full network of acquaintances is a relatively reliable signal that one’s participation on the site is within the boundaries of acceptable behaviour within that network” (74).

Such articulated networks embody what Zuckerberg champions as the site’s “social graph,” or “the web of relationships articulated within Facebook as a result of users connecting with their friends” (Kirkpatrick 157). In so doing, this networked self emphasizes the collective nature of subjectivity, challenging the perceived autonomy of the human subject as championed by liberal humanism (Hayles 3). It makes manifest concepts of relationality that have revised contemporary theories of auto/biography to argue that life narratives are not produced by individuals in some sort of social vacuum, but that identities and the stories that shape them are intertwined with others (e.g., Eakin). But the network model of coproduction further develops relationality by giving those “others” explicit opportunities to add to the story that is in perpetual progress, never finished. In such aspects, does the collaborative action this technology enables suggest a posthuman process of identity formation? At the very least, it shows the close relation of the humanist and posthuman processes that SNSs embody.

Applications further bring friends into each other’s narratives, inviting them to see and share activities that are then publicized on Facebook. For instance, one can now broadcast where one is and with whom (“Laurie is at the Cactus Club with . . .”), alerting other friends to this particular relationship and its members’ particular lifestyle, again in ways that anticipate a narrative of cultural and literal consumption. Social applications make more subtle networked narratives for members, at least in how Facebook promotes them. In the site’s tutorial on Timeline, social apps act almost virally: one user is shown listening to music, or going for a run, or cooking rainbow chard, and advertising that activity using social apps linked to their Timeline. Another friend is shown reading this update and then also engaging in the activity, thus “infecting” another friend, and so on (Lessin). This life-by-example revivifies the most traditional functions of auto/biographical narratives, which
featured exemplary lives and fostered both self-surveillance and self-improvement. In this digital context, however, these social actions assume anyone can be exemplary, highlighting the Web-enabled democratization of auto/biography and its subjects.

These networked activities that encourage mutual and ongoing production of narrative “news” stories to share about ourselves and others complicate the conventional autobiographical model Profiles produce by changing the traditional writer-reader/producer-consumer relationship that auto/biographers have been used to in print culture: I write, you read. Now, I write, you read, you respond, you write, I respond. . . . Should users fail to reciprocate, they risk alienating network members and violating the social norms of this particular SNS community, actions that, as I discuss below, Facebook polices. Members act as mutual “coaxers, coaches, and coercers” (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 64) ensuring that the stories, and the network itself, continue. This coproduction of lives on SNSs embodies a new model of cultural production that Axel Bruns argues has arisen with Web 2.0, and that also suggests the productive potentialities of the posthuman for rethinking digital forms of auto/biography. Bruns’s formulation recognizes that the online context has altered the industrial model of production that shipped goods from producer to consumer via a distributor (9). No longer do consumers sit in a passive position, awaiting delivery of goods; now they are “produsers” (21), participants who collaborate via social software to create shared content (23). While sites such as Wikipedia best capture produsage in action, it is also an element of blogs and other personal pages, including social networking sites in which, Bruns argues, “the produsage of sociality” itself turns out to be the underlying mission of the produsage environment,” with the “more or less overt evaluation of peers by peers in the community become[ing] a core practice” (316, emphasis in original). The networked subject, then, is “prodused” in such an environment, and developed in ongoing interaction with “friends.” In this sense, we might consider whether the activities of Facebook and other SNSs appear to move away from the industrial model of autonomous subjectivity, the replicable self the Profile template sets up. Is Facebook then a posthuman *experience*? The social production of these “everyday” auto/biographical practices, and the collective consciousness that they call into being—the “Hive mind”—move the SNS subject closer to the posthuman end of the theoretical spectrum.

**THE ALGORITHM IS GONNA GET YOU: TECHNOLOGIES FOR SELVES**

The posthumanist potentialities of Facebook become most prominent as we consider the third key contributor to Facebooked life narratives and their subjects: the series of algorithms the company has written to track, direct, and
disseminate information about its members’ activities. These programs act as shadow biographers, telling users about themselves while telling the site and its advertisers about the users. This algorithmic auto/biography is collaboratively, if not consensually, coproduced in ways that suggest that the subject of Facebook is the product of a posthuman process that results in a corporate subject that is simultaneously deeply embedded in humanist and industrial ideologies. In *Getting a Life*, their 1996 exploration of “everyday autobiography,” Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson presciently pointed to the “Profile”—“the medical history, the work history, the credit history,” etc.—as autobiographical “data bank[s]” that “provide various occasions and versions of our story/ies” that are “there for the taking” (8). These encoded entries in our life/narratives, Smith and Watson argue, provide rich material for constituting subjects and stories about them by corporate as well as governmental agents. “Collecting autobiographical data,” they explain, “is, perversely, a central instrument in the othering machinery of modern technological culture” (9, emphasis in original).

Facebook’s interest in getting its users to know more about each other is part of that search for data its technology both produces and mines. Like cyberneticists, Facebook is invested in the self as information in a very literal sense. SNSs are set up for ease of (corporate) data mining, a strategy that demonstrates Haraway’s point that, in an information society, “[h]uman beings, like any other component or subsystem, must be localized in a system architecture whose basic modes of operation are probabilistic, statistical.” Once such a system is in place, she explains, “any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language” (163). Once coded, “all heterogeneity can be submitted to disassembly, reassembly, investment, and exchange” (164). Rendering our personal bits into bytes, work that the Profile initiates and the site’s overall design continues, Facebook turns the collective desire for autobiographical representations into an information harvest.

For Facebook, its members’ autobiographical data is, indeed, big business. One way Facebook has profited—enormously—from its membership is through the harnessing and selling of data about it to advertisers. That commercial value manifests itself in “engagement ads” (Kirkpatrick 261)—ads that get users to comment on videos, for instance, or “like” a product. Unique to Facebook, these ads can be targeted to particular users through algorithms based on the data they provide about themselves. The ads perpetuate the commercial self that emerges from the Profile: they “generate,” not just respond to, consumer “demand,” which according to Zuckerberg, was a key feature differentiating Facebook from its competitors. Ads on Google “helped people find the things they had already decided they wanted to buy,” he explains, but those on “Facebook would help them decide what they wanted”
These software programs therefore shape the consumer self Facebook produces in highly individual ways, so that members see ads only relevant to themselves, that reflect and also produce their life experiences, their very desires. In a network environment meant to capture life stories—or even lives themselves, as Zuckerberg insists—the close embrace of the corporate, technological, and autobiographical enables the software to play a significant role in directing who users imagine themselves to be. In this instance, the SNS carries on offline and humanist traditions, but the scope of both the membership (850 million and counting) and of the algorithmic pur-view marks a change that may well have posthumanist elements.

As corporate-designed software, Facebook’s algorithms reflect the interests and needs of the company. But their processes have profound implications for how users see and understand themselves and their networks. Eli Pariser raises concerns about the “invisible algorithmic editing of the Web” that means that online searches and interactions are becoming exclusively “tailored” for individuals (TEDtalksDirector). What this means, he argues, is that our web experiences are too personalized, reflecting back only what the software thinks we want to see, rather than what we might need to see. On Facebook, algorithms suggest friends, prod participation, and decide what goes in users’ News Feeds, the list of posts Facebook thinks each user will find most interesting, based on the previous activities and interests of both the user and his or her network. When News Feed was launched in 2006, Zuckerberg explained its value: “A squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa” (qtd. in Kirkpatrick 181). Even with new categories of friends introduced in September 2011 (close friends, family, work associates, and so on—and these groupings are in fact suggested by Facebook), members’ “news” is filtered in ways that clearly influence their interactions with others as well as their own posts. By determining what stories individuals will find interesting, these algorithms encourage certain activities and value some experiences over others. Significantly, posts that contain photos or links to videos, which are more data-rich than textual notes, will be more highly ranked by algorithms (Miousse). In determining whose posts users read, and how they read them, these programs significantly influence the networked self.

In a more explicit demonstration of algorithmic auto/biography, the new Timeline feature highlights only the most “interesting” material. While current activities will be seen in entirety, older content is “summarize[d] and surface[d]” to reflect “only the most important things from your life” (Zuckerberg). While users can “teach” Timeline by adding back in material it has determined as unimportant, it makes the first cuts using criteria that are, again, unknown to most members; the member is not the primary editor of
his or her own life story. Algorithms are loaded with the assumptions and values of their producers, and Facebook’s will be no different, so what Timeline recognizes as “major life events” (Zuckerberg) must, like the Profile, reflect a particular vision of what a significant and successful life contains. We get some glimpses of that ideal life and its experiences in the Timeline tutorial, which shows a drop-down menu for such moments as “moved” or “bought a home,” and suggests that members “add a roommate” or “a vehicle” (Lessin). Given that Zuckerberg repeatedly announces that “Timeline is the story of your life,” this computational collaboration has significant implications for understanding the subject of social networking sites.

Facebook isn’t just selling external products and services to its users: it’s also selling Facebook itself, developing its user base and entrenching itself into users’ relationships and sense of communal decorum. As users navigate Facebook, clicking links, posting on Walls, uploading photos and tagging friends in them, “liking” comments, and so on, they are writing themselves and others. At the same time, each keystroke and mouse click contributes to another life narrative, a collaborative shadow auto/biography that Facebook writes for and with us using its algorithmic software. These algorithms perform a number of functions. They suggest “friends” for members, based on friends-in-common or whether a member has made his or her address book available for Facebook to use, for instance. But they also track performances, encouraging a certain level of activity and connection in the community. Fall behind, in Facebook terms, and your friends might see messages to help you: “make Facebook better for him,” it counsels, or “suggest friends for her.” Fail to keep up a social connection and you might be encouraged to “share the latest news” with a particular Facebook friend, or, more seriously, “reconnect with” him or her.

These injunctions demonstrate that the networked subject cannot be complacent or “selfish”: it isn’t enough to produce material, posting media and status updates on your own page, you must consume and, more importantly, respond to the acts, and perceived desires, of others. By “making Facebook better,” we might deduce, we make ourselves better. But “better” in what sense? Better “friends”? Certainly, better consumers. The networked subject

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Figure 2. Facebook Help a Friend Prompt.
of Facebook must be connected and responsive, updated and interesting, “generating demand” in itself and in the site in general. If no one updates, the site fails. Its autonomy is therefore entirely entangled with the network, which prefers a collective story to the individual. But the site is also subject to the corporate and technological mandate for information, of particular kinds and in particular forms. We cannot forget Facebook’s very corporate interest in community (and individual) growth: more members, and more member activity, mean more opportunities for the site to increase its market share and global dominance, and sell data and spaces to advertisers.

Rendered into searchable data—the disembodied information that first-wave cyberneticists imagined (Hayles 50–67)—we generate the material that helps Facebook groom and grow its own site and profit margins. Our actions and proclivities shape our own experience of Facebook on all fronts: they determine which posts we see in our News Feeds, what ads appear beside our Walls, and what actions we “need” to take to improve Facebook for ourselves and others. As Zuckerberg reveals, they tell us what we want. Ultimately, this algorithmic narrative must shape the identity performances of members, in effect telling them what they are or can be, and to whom. The Facebook narrative is one of consumption, of lives, products, services, and software—and the self that emerges is a corporate one. The subject of social networking sites, at least in Facebook’s case, is positioned as consumer and product-to-be-consumed.

“STICKY SELVES”

The Facebook self is thus constructed in ways that highlight several aspects unique to digital auto/biography and its subjects. I argue that what emerges online is a particularly networked narrative, one suited to cyberspace and its capabilities. The networked auto/biography—of SNSs, but also, to different degrees, of the Web in general—is a life narrative told serially, even in fragments, inscribing the moment (as captured in Facebook’s status update prompt, “What’s on your mind?”). As part of a series, rather than a definitive take on a whole life or even an experience, it is concisely told, with the expectation that it will be regularly updated to keep the network experience going. In corporate terms, networked narratives need to be “sticky,” to attract and retain engaged readerships. But the self produced by the networked auto/biography isn’t the sole focus: that self is positioned in a complex web of production and consumption, part of a community of life narrators writing themselves and others in ways that make them identifiable to each other and to the network itself.
The networked self must be searchable, able to be found on the network. Facebook’s new Profile emphasizes this aspect in encouraging members to “discover common interests,” but in a larger framework, networked narrators are encouraged to identify themselves in ways that make them visible, traceable, and public—see, for example, Facebook’s polite but repeated recommendation that your privacy settings be turned to “everyone” so that “friends can find and connect with you” (“Privacy Settings”). In so doing, users enable themselves to be connected, to grow their own network (and by extension, the corporate one as well), and to perform the “public displays of connection” Donath and boyd argue are integral to the selves we produce on these sites. Finally, the networked self is responsive, both in the sense that you are meant to comment on and contribute to an ongoing collaborative narrative by “showing up” in others’ narratives (through comments or “likes,” for example), and that what you say will encourage such response (retweets, for instance), encouraging the “produsage” of these narratives. In these aspects, the networked subject of SNSs troubles conventional models of auto/biography and the autobiographical subject, models that persist in public expectations even while they have been challenged by theorists and the technological and cultural shifts of the digital age.

But, when we log on to Facebook, are we producing “posthuman auto/biography”? The simultaneous making and unmaking of the humanist subject that Facebook enacts demonstrates that, to take a page from one of Facebook’s drop-down options for relationship status, “it’s complicated.” While site membership and the Profile seem predicated on the humanist subject, the networked self that emerges from the Facebook experience may well be posthuman. Hayles’s history of the posthuman reminds us that it is marked by the simultaneous championing of old ideas even as new concepts emerge (6, 24, 279). But the implications of this duality for understanding selves and life narratives, online and off, need exploration. The cyborg self of social networks has tremendous potential for rethinking the human, but also, as Facebook’s templates and mandates suggest, the capacity to reproduce its traditional limits. It creates opportunities for new ways of thinking and creating selves and stories, but also reinscribes conventional categories and values of human experience. In particular, the incorporated self suggests that agency, seen as so key to the humanist subject, has been transferred to the software that reads and produces users. Where, indeed, do we end and Facebook begins? Paraphrasing C. B. Macpherson on postmodernism, Katherine Hayles argues that the foundational concept of the liberal humanist subject is “possessive individualism, the idea that subjects are individuals first and foremost because they own themselves” (145). Can we say that individuals own anything about
themselves on Facebook? Recent dust-ups in the press over Facebook’s ownership disclaimers, for instance, suggest they do not. Networking, Haraway notes, is “both a feminist practice and a multinational corporate strategy” (170), a key reminder echoed by Zadie Smith, who in her review of the film The Social Network suggests that “networked selves don’t look more free, they just look more owned.” Even though Facebook trumpets that the site is “free and always will be,” Facebook members—and their “stories”—may not be. Is such ownership even relevant to the digital posthuman, in the midst of file-sharing, mash-ups, social software, and hyperlinks, the age of “produsage”? But given the close ties between capitalism and humanism, can the corporate self ever be posthuman? Further, just as Haraway suggests that the cyborg renders the public-private boundary and other such constructs untenable (151), so too may social networking sites undermine the self-other border that auto/biography studies, for one, has long recognized as porous and unstable, as captured in the slash of “auto/biography.”

The mutual (and coercive) production of networked lives invites a reconsideration of how we read and create lives in an online context. Perhaps one contribution the posthuman could make to auto/biography studies would be a “posthuman pact,” an updating of Lejeune’s theory to reimagine the new understanding the reader and writer of life narrative enter into in the digital age, and the new roles played by humans and technology in generating these texts. In these and other aspects, the posthuman could help account for elements of digital life writing, and their implications for understanding subjectivity, that do depart significantly from offline traditions. The Web is rife with the “drift[ing]” and unstable “boundaries” that Badmington characterizes as posthumanism’s specialty, and online auto/biographical acts in particular contain the points of contact and collision that throw ideologies, practices, and expectations into relief. Auto/biography, in its myriad forms, is a meaning-making process, one that seeks to understand the nature of subjectivity and experience in a cultural context. Similarly, posthumanism, in its broadest sense, is engaged in a process of “opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means” (Hayles 285). Perhaps personal narrative, then, to borrow Katherine Hayles’s description of humans, “has always been posthuman” (291), a prospect that makes the apparently paradoxical a productive frame for rethinking how we craft and consume selves.

NOTES

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1. See, for example, “Facebook Stories,” a page of the site’s “About” section dedicated to uplifting tales of lives affected (positively, of course) by Facebook. “What’s your Facebook story?” it asks.

2. Certainly the model isn’t foolproof: people can and do create fake Profiles, or set up multiple identities. But in so doing, they violate community and corporate norms for participation.

3. See, for example, Strano’s work on peer-pressure and Profile pictures.

4. Even after members die, their “friends” can and do continue to post on their Walls, in a sense coproducing their memorials. See, for example, Elaine Kasket’s discussion of mourning on Facebook (Facebook Follies).

WORKS CITED


