Auto-Reportage and the Enlightened User

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Nora Young, The Virtual Self: How Our Digital Lives Are Altering The World Around Us (McClelland & Stewart, 2012).

When I first encountered Nora Young's new book —*The Virtual Self*—I thought, *omg*, another book about *that?!* Don't get me wrong; earlier this year I devoured Julie Cohen's Configuring the Networked Self just as quickly as I did Daniel Solove's *The Digital Person* back when it first came out.

But if I include an exciting new edited volume by Cynthia Carter Ching and Brian Foley released earlier this year, then by my count there are more than a dozen books in the last couple of years about constructing the self in the digital world.

It's a good topic and if I had the jets I would read them all. Eventually. But, as soon as I saw that Nora had a book out in this domain, I immediately bought and read it. And, let me tell you, it jots well!!

This should come as no surprise to any fan of CBC radio. In my view, Nora Young's weekly program, Spark, is probably the smartest show there is on digital culture and 21st century living. On the radio, she has this amazing ability to do deep, hard, careful thinking in a lighthearted and conversational manner. The same is true of her first book.

Academics: don't be fooled by its informal style or paucity of footnotes. This is a meticulously crafted, authoritative investigation of one of the more interesting shifts in digital media—a study of the cultural explosion of self-tracking.

More and more, people track what they eat, or how they move. They register the places they go during the day using their cellphones, record their mood changes, rate the restaurants they've eaten in, track the length and pace of their runs. You can too: you can sign up for any number of online services, many of them free, that let you track the movies you've watched, the purchases you've made, the routes you have walked, or the beverages you've consumed. As the saying goes, there's an app for that. More and more of us are keeping track of the statistical minutiae of daily life, leading lives that are increasingly numerically documented. But why? What is the particular pleasure in seeing daily experience converted into numbers? (P. 1-2)

Young is smart enough to anticipate the response of her more cynical readers: "I can imagine what you are probably thinking right now: that self-tracking is a kind of behavior that neurotics and narcissists engage in, a sort of digital scab-picking that most people wouldn't even dream of." (P. 4).

But Young understands the practice more charitably and, consequently, more profoundly. This isn't just about Weight Watchers or the Running Room gone digital. It is a much broader range of digital culture that includes everyone who has updated his or her status online.

As Young explains, "[w]hat is posting status updates on Facebook if not a sort of ritualized documentary practice that you freely share with others, a way of taking the shifting moments of mood and behavior and preference and activity and staking them to the ground?" (P. 4-5) "I think of the status update as a

sort of *Horton Hears a Who* means of saying 'I am here. I am here! It's a continual registering of presence, and is, in a sense, a way of being 'seen' by others. It's the urge to create the self as a documented, persistent, even curated, object." (P.24-25)

Her insight of the digital self as an intentionally curated object (rather than what Haggerty and Ericson have called the "[surveillant assemblage](#)") extends the subject under investigation beyond online tracking. Hence Young's totally awesome coinage of an intriguing new term: *auto-reportage*.

If I understand Young correctly, an important element of digital technologies and culture is that they permit a radically enhanced ability to create extensive bodies of documentary coverage of the individual— *reportage* in the journalistic sense. But in this case, the "eye witness" report is by the individual him- or herself—*auto,* as in 'autobiography' but also in the sense of 'automatic'.

Auto-reportage is "the continual registering of attitudes, tastes, and whereabouts." (P. 59) Young sees it as fulfilling our human predisposition to *apophenia*: the tendency to see patterns in random data, offering "a sense that life isn't random or arbitrary, that, over time, the trivial acts of our mundane daily life shape a picture of who we are. We see our data bloom into patterns like a kind of emergent intelligence, becoming a self-generated portrait." (P .48) "This sharing self is often dismissed as narcissistic, but I don't think that is it at all." (P. 63)

With this, Young offers us a *very* different take on social media. One of my favorite aspects of this work is that it casts aside the received view that we are all stupid users who are ourselves to blame for the harms of over-sharing. Young treats her readers to a much more nuanced, original, interesting, sympathetic and persuasive account of auto-reportage, tying it back to the American Enlightenment and, before that, the European tradition of keeping diaries and journals.

Her poster-fella is none other than Benjamin Franklin who, in his *Poor Richard's Almanack,* undertakes "the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection", and offers a methodology for achieving it. (P. 32). Franklin's project involved the enumeration of a list if virtues and a paper-based means of tracking lapses and successes. Franklin's goal: "I should be happy in viewing a clean book, after thirteen weeks' daily examination (P. 34). Not surprisingly, Franklin's approach was empirical and scientific. Franklin's ultimate objective was to manage his interior states by making them more objectively observable.

Young tells us that we "share with him an understanding of the self as a project to be undertaken and observed. … To aim for this personal, individual betterment, our self-tracking also shares with Franklin's the drive toward a sort of personal accountancy. This is perhaps what is most familiar to us about Franklin's little book; the drive to document the self, to create a vision of ourselves that we can refer to, track, and evaluate." (P. 37)

By seeing the incredible potential for individual agency in auto-reportage, Young provides a much-needed account of our ability to transcend the superficial, egomaniacal understanding of digital culture. Instead, she thinks we should observe and understand our virtual selves as more enlightened aspirations regarding the potential for moral development through personal accountancy.

Through a series of chapters that very attentively explore of the implications of the 'data-mapped self', the coming age of 'big data', and the pernicious use of legal instruments like standard form contracts to sabotage privacy, Young not only recognizes the perils of auto-reportage but also offers some interesting prescriptions.

Among them, in the final two chapter of the book, she encourages us all to become data activists. "Who

says you ought to list the commodities that you are interested in as a way of describing yourself? … It's our choice where we choose to track our data, and we can choose our tools wisely. … If the goal of these technologies is partly to give us insight into ourselves, we ought to think in a much more open-ended and critically minded way about what they are measuring and tracking." (P. 194-95)

Although much of the book expresses important concerns about how to protect personal privacy in a world where self-tracking is mediated by corporations, Young also expresses great hope in the "potential for us to opt into using self-tracking for the public good." (P. 198) She believes that "we can map our communities, our neighborhoods, and our lives according to the values we articulate." (P. 199)

Part of the problem to date, she thinks, is that we have spent too much time focusing merely on the relationship between individuals and corporations. The exciting thing, she thinks, is that the data maps we create through self-tracking offer feedback loops that afford us a deeper understanding of ourselves, and how we might apply those to the world around us. It is not *just* about stroking consumer preferences. Self-tracking and auto-reportage enable enlightened users to connect with what we truly value as a community while, at the same time, bringing our digital selves "back to the ground, back to the physical." (P. 203)

To the cyberlaw-types reading this review, the issues addressed in Young's book may not appear entirely new, as they might to the uninitiated—arguably the book's target audience. Still, Nora Young offers even the most seasoned cyberians some very fresh perspectives.

For example, her novel and compelling account of enlightened self-tracking provides an exciting counter-narrative to the superficial, ridiculous, reductionist approach adopted more and more by our courts in determining reasonable expectations of privacy. Of course we don't abandon or waive privacy expectations whenever we auto-report. Although this may be a well-entrenched intuition for all those who reflect regularly on privacy or the 4th Amendment, Young offers a robust explanatory account of why this is so. Privacy lawyers should pay attention.

Young also expresses important concerns about the ease with which standard form contracts have displaced our ability to be data activists. According to Young, "we ought to be thinking differently about the sorts of contracts ordinary citizens sign with online companies." (P. 178). Young further prescribes the need for new laws that limit the ability of data collectors and aggregators to use standard form contracts to undermine moral development and treat self-trackers as mere means to corporate ends.

Although law is *not* the primary domain of *The Virtual Self,* this lovely piece of intellectual prose motivates legal thinking. It has inspired me to try to tackle some of these looming social issues. I hope it does the same for you.

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