Conceptualizing Self-Documentation

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Abstract
Purpose: Self-documentation is an increasingly common phenomenon, but it is not yet well understood. This paper provides a philosophical framework for analyzing examples of self-documentation on the dimensions of ontology, epistemology and ethics.
Design/methodology/approach: The framework addresses these three major areas of philosophic thought by operationalizing insights from philosophy, chiefly the work of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger's concepts of authenticity and fallenness inform the poles of each dimension of the framework.
Findings: Ontologically, self-documentation may manifest as document (authentic) or data (fallen); epistemologically, as understanding (authentic) or idle curiosity (fallen); and ethically, as self-care (authentic) or diversion (fallen). These dimensions are presented separately but are understood to be intermingled.
Originality/value: This unified framework offers a lens for examining and comparing cases of self-documentation and self-documents. No such framework has previously been articulated, but given the ubiquity and growing importance of self-documentation, it is needed.
Keywords: self-tracking, autobiography, document, philosophy of information, phenomenology

We humans have painted, carved and written about ourselves for as long as we've been humans. Indeed, this may be what *made us* humans, as the earliest human markings ushered in a new way of being present in the world, allowing us for the first time to reflect on the question of the mankind as something separate from nature (Gusdorf, 1991). Today, creating information about ourselves is requisite for functioning in Western society. We build online profiles for commerce, education, entertainment and socializing; we share selfies and video recordings of our lives; and we are compelled to write resumes and letters. What's more, some of us perform device-based self-tracking or create websites, autobiographies, visual self-portraits and other specialized forms of information about ourselves. Heterogeneous though these forms of information are, they are held together as a category by their reference to the self and their documentary nature; they are *self-documents*.

The internet has increased the visibility of and the possibilities for self-documentation to the extent that self-documenting practices are ubiquitous. As Mark Fischetti (2014, para. 5) has observed, today "we're living to document our lives." Still, we do not yet have a framework for thinking through the issues associated with self-documentation. Thus, in this paper I propose a framework for conceptualizing self-documentation within the philosophical dimensions of ontology, epistemology and ethics—what there is, how it's known, and what should be done. In this framework, each dimension forms a continuum from authenticity to fallenness (as defined by Heidegger, 1927/2010), with cardinal concepts at each pole. This framework can be used for understanding and comparing the meanings of these cultural forms.

The Self and the Document

If self-documents are at issue, then two concepts should be clarified at the outset: what the self is, and what a document is.

The sense of self is one of the defining qualities of being human. Each of us has the experience of being a person set off in some way from other people and the rest of the world. In the words of Rom Harré, "Our experience of the world and of ourselves as part of that world has a 'point of origin', a singularity, which is differentiated from every other, especially as a world-line of locations in space and time" (Harré, 1998, p. 19). The particular manifestation of selfhood has changed throughout history as humans have moved from tribal, tightly collectivist societies to larger, more diverse and globalized societies. Early on, and for most of human history, the self was picked out in religious terms—people understood themselves as fixed, God-given selves. Since the 17th century, however, the self has been understood in scientific, social-constructivist and eventually nihilistic terms (Martin and Baressi, 2006).

Today, no shortage of scholars have commented that information technology plays a critical role in how we construct and conceptualize ourselves. Drawing on this, Luciano Floridi (2011) has proposed a theory of the self consistent with modern biological theory that synthesizes the Lockean and narrative accounts of the self—respectively, that the self is a unity of consciousness and memory, and that the self is a conglomeration of ideas and stories assembled by ourselves and others. For Floridi, the self arises in a three-phased encapsulation of an entity from its environment: first *biological*, formed by the chemical bonds of auto-structuring physical membranes; second *cognitive*, formed by the interdependence of data in perceptual information processing; and third *conscious*, formed by the semantic bonds of narrative and self-awareness. The bodily self, the animal self, and the mind. All of these and any of these *are* the self, depending on why one is asking; and thus documents about the self can refer to and modulate the self on any of these dimensions.

And what is a document? The word stretches back to the Latin *doceo*, which means to teach or evidence, implying that a document is something used in teaching or supplying evidence. Today there are myriad phenomena that we immediately recognize as documents—from Microsoft Word files to marriage certificates—and document theory posits that these and other phenomena (a wedding ring, for example) form a coherent category. Theorization of the document began around the turn of the 20th century with the work of Paul Otlet and has continued to the present day, spanning traditions from communication and media studies to philosophy and information science (Lund, 2009). Document theorists have recognized that documents have physical (technological), mental (informational) and social (cultural) characteristics, and that documents can be analyzed in terms of parts, wholes and networks. In short, a document is a material embodiment of human meaning that provides evidence, indexically referencing something outside itself as part of a broader system (Gorichanaz and Latham, 2016). This is not an objective category; rather, the being of a document is in the way a person or group relates to it (i.e., as meaningful and evidentiary). In this way, phenomena that are not immediately assumed to be documents—such as music and live performance—can be considered as documents (Buckland, 2015). In the parlance of Maurizio Ferraris, documents are

acts that are inscribed—*inscription* here meaning "registration endowed with social significance, which is to say accessible to at least one other person" (Ferraris, 2013, p. 236). For Ferraris, documents thus are the basis of the social world, and as such they point to the act of their creation (a process) rather than themselves as finished, ahistorical products. This was also the viewpoint of Frohmann (2004), who argued that for fruitful inquiry "documents" should not be the focus of investigation, but rather "documentary practices." That is, scholars would encourage a focus on documentation rather than documents, per se.

Self-documentation, then, is a matter of creating indexical material, through inscription, that points to certain aspects of the self. This pointing simultaneously refers to and constructs the self. Georges Gusdorf (1991) argued that all inscriptions are inscriptions of the self, and likewise one might conclude that all documentation is self-documentation. This is trivially true, but it must be recognized that there are different degrees of self-documentation; it seems uncontroversial to say that one's Twitter profile is more a self-document than an essay they wrote on the War of 1812. What is helpful here is Floridi's (2013, pp. 311–312) concept of the reversibility of personal information: the more confidently a document can lead someone back to the person who created it, the more of a self-document it can be said to be. For instance, any number of John Smiths could have written that essay, but the Twitter handle, brief bio, photograph and website URL, more surely converge upon a single individual.

So documentation, even self-documentation, is a relational concept; it is not so much human or technological as it is a way of *human relating to the technological*. As such, it can be understood as a way of human being, an experiential mode. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger (2010) develops a theory of valence to describe the modes of human being; each way of being can be *authentic* on one hand, or *fallen* on the other. Heidegger says that humans tend toward fallenness: we are absorbed by the current of social norms, and we engage in idle talk, ambiguity and distraction. For Heidegger, being fallen is forgetting to take responsibility for oneself, being part of the anonymous *they* of the crowd rather than being a full self (as reflectively picked out as an entity from the flow of existence). If responsibility is taken, however, and one's possibilities are owned, then a person's way of being is said to be authentic, characterized by genuine understanding of one's situation. This general theory, if a bit simplistic, offers offers some coordinates along a continuum for thinking about human being in documental relations.

From these points, a conceptualization of self-documentation begins to emerge. Its ontological, epistemological and ethical dimensions can be discussed each in terms of authenticity and fallenness.

Ontology: Documents and Data

As described above, the document is a conglomeration of physical, mental and social aspects. These aspects can be interpreted as different forms of information that are coordinated at a particular site (Gorichanaz and Latham, 2016). Were the document to lose this coordination, it would dissolve into its constituent data—decontextualized from any template for understanding.

Ron Day (2014) writes of the dissolution of the document into data over the course of the 20th century from a sociopolitical perspective. Where information systems once served books

and other whole artifacts (i.e., documents), which were construed as "friends," today they increasingly serve data. A similar change may happen at the level of the individual. In his later essay "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger (1977) writes of two ways in which humans can relate to technology. The first is *belonging*, or being-in-the-world, which corresponds to the authentic way of being. Here the artifact is part of one's project of life and met as a fellow being. In terms of the document, the person feels that, for all that the document reveals, much more is left unrevealed. The second way is *enframing*, or representational thinking, which corresponds to the fallen way of being. In enframing, that which is revealed is taken as the totality, and the person forgets that there is anything else behind it. That is: eyes on the pork, we lose the pig; and attending to lumber, we forget the forest. In enframing, these representations are stockpiled as commodities. Heidegger argues that modern technology compels enframing; thus we come to see things only for their instrumental resource value, and voraciously we amass these resources as standing-reserve for personal gain. Moreover, says Heidegger, we come to see ourselves and each other as resources as well: in the Facebook page, we lose ourselves. Floridi places this shift at the industrial revolution, which "marked the passage from a nominalist world of unique objects to a Platonist world of types of objects," also saying that "the processes of de-physicalization and typification of individuals as well as unique and irreplaceable entities start eroding our sense of personal identity as well" (Floridi, 2013, pp. 12–13).

Back to the question of self-documentation. Ontologically, it can be said that in authenticity self-documents are (experienced as) documents, characterized by belonging, whereas in fallenness they are data, characterized by enframing. As documents, self-documents facilitate one's taking personal responsibility and embarking on (self-)inquiry. Artistic self-portraits are a good example; scholars in art history and aesthetics have shown that self-portraits have been made to challenge dominant societal paradigms and establish artists as powerful figures in the world (Woods-Marsden, 1998). Moreover, creating a self-portrait is an act of self-care, through which the artist processes their life experiences, engages in experimentation and learning, and finds coherence in their self, facts that have been leveraged in art therapy. These issues bear on the question of ethics and are discussed further below.

As data, on the other hand, self-documents do not nurture the self as a coherent, unique entity, but rather position the self as disconnected bits, or at best as tokens of types (e.g., as members of social groups). In the age of big data, "neoliberal subjects come to understand their *selves* to be aggregated statistically" (Anderson, 2017, p. 17). Think of the Fitbit owner who stockpiles accelerometer data with the hopes that eventually it will "say something." Floridi writes:

> We conceive ourselves as bundles of types, from gender to religion, from family role to working position, from education to social class. So we construct, self-brand, and re-appropriate ourselves in the infosphere by using blogs and Facebook entries, homepages, YouTube videos, and Flickr albums, fashionable clothes, and choices of places we visit, types of holidays we take, and cars we drive, and so forth. (Floridi, 2013, p. 13)

So we engage in these forms of self-documentation in attempt to reclaim our uniqueness and recoup a sense of self. Steve Anderson (2017, p. 12) sees this as "precisely what lies behind the

current trend of self-documentation online … a reassertion of the visible self as a gesture of defiance at having one's identity reduced to abstract metadata."

However, without strong cohering bonds, these efforts fail, and as a result we continue to recognize ourselves only as invisible members of such and such groups rather than as whole, unique individuals. Douglas Rushkoff (2009), in chronicling the rise of corporatism in the West, makes similar remarks in pointing out that the Renaissance notion of the individual self arose along with modern corporate commerce. As a result, we have been severed off from each other as people and linked instead to branded corporations. In short: "The brand was developed to replace the relationship you used to have with the miller" (Rushkoff, 2009, p. 98). Today we see the brands we buy as defining who we are. In like manner, Nora Young (2012) speaks of our preoccupation with self-quantification data, *qua* data, as the erosion of the possibility for coordinated social action.

Recognizing these issues with the fallen relation toward self-documents is a first step in moving toward authenticity. What seems to make the difference between something being document or data is the presence or absence of questioning. Access to technological possibilities for self-documentation does nothing to help a person develop questions. This point is crucial, as data only has meaning (i.e., becomes informative or documentary) in light of a question (Meyriat, 1981).

Epistemology: Understanding and Idle Curiosity

Whether experienced as document or data, all documents play an epistemic role. That is, they contribute to human knowing. It is generally assumed that documents simply provide knowledge; Don Fallis (2006, p. 508), for instance, writes that "helping people to acquire knowledge is the *main* objective of libraries and other information services." So, too, has the study of epistemology in general traditionally upheld knowledge as the premier epistemic aim. However, other epistemic aims are coming to be recognized, most notably understanding (Kvanvig, 2003).

The details of understanding are still under debate, and probably always will be. In general, though, understanding can be said to refer to a conscious entity's grasping of inferential and explanatory relationships among a body of knowledge. As is suggested throughout the recent volume on understanding edited by Grimm *et al.* (2017), understanding is more valuable than knowledge for a number of reasons: it admits of degrees of gradation, rather than the binary of known or unknown; it is transparent, such that a person always knows when they understand something, whereas they may not always know that they know something; whereas knowledge can seemingly be given, understanding must be grasped, and thus it realizes the innate human drive for sense-making; it accommodates subjectivity, allowing for two people's understandings of a phenomenon to be different but for both to be possibly valid; and concomitantly, understanding accounts for how outdated and false information can contribute epistemically, as well as that which cannot be evaluated as either true or false.

There are two kinds of understanding, what can be called ontic and ontological (Gorichanaz, 2017). The distinction of the ontic from the ontological comes from the work of Heidegger (2010). For Heidegger, ontic characteristics are those describing the particular

manifestation of a being, while ontological characteristics are those describing its existence; ontics gives an account of *beings*, while ontology gives an account of *being*. For example, ontic characteristics of human beings include gender and career; ontological characteristics of human being include being-toward-death and mood. Ontic understanding can refer to understanding some phenomena, understanding that some state of affairs is the case, or understanding how something works. Ontological understanding, on the other hand, refers to the underlying human capacity for ontic understanding. This perspective clarifies how different philosophers have conceptualized what they call "understanding" in seemingly incompatible ways. For instance, Heidegger wrote of ontological understanding (which he termed simply *understanding*) when he said: "understanding does not primarily mean staring at a meaning, but understanding oneself in the potentiality-of-being that reveals itself [in possibilities]" (Heidegger, 2010, p. 252) though he does say that the sort of understanding akin to "staring at a meaning" (i.e., ontic understanding) can be built up from this primordial, ontological understanding. This idea was developed further by philosophers after Heidegger, perhaps most notably Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/2013), who discussed understanding as an iterative process wherein multiple interpretations eventually converge.

Philosophers of science and information scientists are beginning to theorize how documentation is involved in understanding (Bawden and Robinson, 2016a, 2016b; Gorichanaz, 2018). And surely self-documentation, as a particular documentary form, may contribute to ontic understanding. Most obviously, understanding is gained about aspects of the self, but self-documentation can lead one to understand other topics as well. An example is Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*. Springing from Montaigne's personal experience, these essays are, to be sure, introspective works, and yet they are tremendously wide-ranging. They chronicle a man's coming to understand not only himself, but also aspects of religion, love, friendship, loneliness, travel, social custom, education and more. Montaigne comes to understand how all these topics impinge on his *self*. Self-documentation may also furnish understanding through one's self-teaching. As an example of this, Whitney Boesel (2012) writes of a woman who taught herself to predict her ovulation more accurately than certain tests after tracking her periods with at-home monitors, a form of self-documentation, for some time. "Teaching" in this case is a matter of waking up and training latent senses.

Ontological understanding is a characteristic of *authentic* human being, and as such it is not a given. When a person cannot make the distinctions relevant for genuine understanding, Heidegger (2010) says, that person is in a state of ambiguity. One characteristic of ambiguity is idle curiosity. (Heidegger makes a point in analyzing the German word for curiosity, *Neugier*, which literally means "lust for the new.") In idle curiosity, a person is trapped in the present, disconnected from the past and future and therefore disconnected also from personally meaningful projects. The idly curious person, for Heidegger, craves constant novelty, flitting always to the latest new thing in a distracted, surface-level way of relating to the world. And so, though self-documents such as Montaigne's essays can certainly contribute to understanding, self-documents may, perhaps just as easily, merely conduce idle curiosity. This is the epistemic stance of the self-tracker as datamonger.

What's more, idle curiosity may pose a danger in certain cases. By now the ability for a person to collect data on their genome and microbiome, for instance, has surpassed our scientific

understanding of these aspects of the body. Thus unwitting people, dazzled by the data, may develop false information and misunderstandings. This may, of course, have grave consequences for one's health to the extent that a person takes particular actions in light of the misinformation.

People tend toward fallenness, as Heidegger (2010) argues. So it may not be surprising that one of the most widely practiced forms of self-documentation today—the selfie—seems most strongly to manifest idle curiosity in its most typical form. To be sure, there are some cases of selfies being taken and shared on a path to genuine understanding, but the scholarship on selfies in their average everydayness emphasizes their present-centricity and serial nature (Lim, 2016). Selfies, generally speaking, are meant to communicate the present in the present; they are disposable—witness the growing popularity of Snapchat—and endlessly multiple because there is always a new present to be communicated, covering over any need to revisit the past or imagine the future.

Ethics: Self-Care and Diversion

Insomuch as we are selves, we have an ethical responsibility to be the best selves we can be. As selfhood is relational and inescapably bound up in the world, being a good self also contributes to the good of the world (Wright, 2016). The goodness of a self can be determined by the extent to which it is coherent as an entity. For a good self, the biological, cognitive and conscious membranes fit well together, and the elements of each individual level are tightly bonded.

This does not necessarily have to do with what leads to "the good life," as discussed in virtue ethics, though some views may be compatible (Floridi, 2013). In other words, the goodness of a self as a self is orthogonal to what particular things the good self does in the world —one self could be a schoolteacher and another a musician, and both could be equally good or bad as selves. However, it seems possible that someone who is utterly evil—a person who practices unrepentant genocide, for instance—is always a bad self because of some incoherence that is necessarily part of a person who does such things. That discussion is outside the scope of this paper, but some insight into that question can be found in the work of H.G. Wright (2016).

The issue of coherence can be conceptualized in terms of metaphysical entropy. This concept comes from Floridi's ethics of information: whereas entropy in thermodynamics and information theory is a quantitative, syntactic measure (which disregards meaning), metaphysical entropy refers to semantic richness. On his account:

> As the infosphere becomes increasingly meaningful and rich in content, the amount of information increases and (what one may call, for the sake of clarity) *metaphysical entropy* decreases; or as entities wear out and finally disappear, metaphysical entropy increases and the amount of information decreases. (Floridi, 2013, pp. 66–67)

From the perspective of information ethics, an action is morally qualifiable as good or evil if it increases or decreases metaphysical entropy. In terms of selfhood, an increase in the coherence of a self denotes a decrease in metaphysical entropy (i.e., it is good); whereas a decrease in coherence denotes an increase in metaphysical entropy (i.e., it is evil).

One way metaphysical entropy is modulated is through technology. As Floridi argues, information and communication technologies are "*egopoietic technologies* or technologies of construction of the self. They significantly affect who we are, who we think we are, who we

might become, and who we think we might become" (Floridi, 2013, p. 210). This is because they interface with any or all of the three membranes that constitute a self (biological, cognitive and conscious, as described above). Self-documentation, understood as a form of technological engagement, is then a prime example of egopoietic technology. And so self-documentation may be good or evil—authentic or fallen—in terms of how it contributes to the construction of the self (or not).

As far as the coherence of the self is concerned, then, morally righteous actions are those that can be called *self-care*. This notion was "one of the main rules for social and personal conduct and for the art of life" in ancient Greece and Rome (Foucault, 1988, p. 19). In some of his last work, Michel Foucault argues that in the modern West we have largely forgotten this ancient call to "care for thyself," remembering only its sibling "know thyself." Thus we have become accustomed to focusing only on intellectual, rational self-knowledge, rather than holistic and active self-care—what amounts to shaky foundations. As a microcosm of this, witness the erosion of the university from the early-modern concept of *Bildung*, or whole-person cultivation, to the commodification of discrete and technical "learning outcomes" (Berg and Seeber, 2016).

In "Technologies of the Self," Foucault (1988) explores how self-care was enacted in antiquity and how those practices changed throughout the transition to modernity. He writes that self-care involved "a set of practices by which once can acquire, assimilate, and transform truth into a permanent principle of action" (Foucault, 1988, p. 35). According to Foucault, these technologies of the self "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). Foucault discusses several such technologies, including personal notebooks. As Foucault writes, many people—not only the elite —in ancient Greece and Rome kept *hypomnemata*, or notebooks to collect things they heard or read as they went about their lives, specifically for their own edification. These were fragmentary notebooks, to be sure, but their result was not merely a disjointed collection; rather, they contributed to a new whole, along with the writer. Importantly, people regularly returned to their hypomnemata for nourishment. Foucault identifies several aspects of hypomnemata-related practices and those of other technologies of the self that make them conducive to self-care: bringing oneself out of the mundane setting (both physically and mentally); allowing oneself to revisit the past and imagine the future; comparing the self to other things, such as God or other people; investigating the interplay between one's public and private lives; and putting an eye to the mundane details of life. All these things are self-constructive: they contribute to the coherence of the self in terms of reducing metaphysical entropy. Research in psychology has validated these philosophical assertions (Hixon and Swann, 1993).

A slightly more recent example in this vein is the self-documentation of Benjamin Franklin. Throughout his life, Franklin tracked many aspects of himself, such as his moral foibles, in diaries that he regularly revisited as a way to improve himself, such as by repaying moral debts. Today's Self Quantification movement often cites Franklin as one of their "founding fathers," an example of the ethical possibilities of self-documentation at its best. To cite a contemporary example in this vein, Deborah Lupton (2014) writes of large-scale self-tracking as a form of citizen science that leads to positive public health outcomes; that is, self-

documentation for the greater good. Such positive moral outcomes, however, are not a given, contrary to the apparent assumption of many in the Quantified Self movement.

If self-care is the ethical directive and outcome of authenticity, its fallen counterpart is diversion. The word *diversion* here has both the everyday sense of fun and the technical sense of diverting attention (away from oneself). As Foucault has shown, self-care requires time and attention; without both, neither the hypomnemata nor any other technology of the self can move a person toward self-care. As in the description of idle curiosity above, the diverted person flits from thing to thing, as if trying a new weight-loss diet every day, and as a result their self is less coherent—more metaphysically entropic. Returning to the selfie, we can see this in scholars' remarks that selfies correspond to a "networked" way of being (Rubinstein, 2016), in which the self is effaced. This is an extreme version of Johan Huizinga's *Homo ludens*, a sort of human manifestation of leisurely playfulness, devoid of ethical responsibility (Huizinga, 1949). Taken further, self-documentation in the spirit of diversion may cause more harm than good.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a conceptualization of self-documentation through a Heideggerian framework of authenticity and fallenness across the dimensions of ontology, epistemology and ethics. Ontologically, self-documentation may manifest as document or data; epistemologically, as understanding or idle curiosity; and ethically, as self-care or diversion.

Though presented separately, these dimensions are intermingled. That is, authenticity in one dimension may pull toward authenticity in the other dimensions, and likewise with fallenness. This does not have to be, however; as in the case of misunderstanding, a self-document may be regarded as a document with the aim of self-care, and yet it may only exemplify idle curiosity.

Considering self-documents in this way, we can begin to better see what is at stake in this ubiquitous phenomenon of modern society. These coordinates can be used as points in analyzing examples of self-documentation online and elsewhere in human life. For, as ubiquitous as the phenomenon is, these issues are not self-evident. Perhaps this is what Montaigne was brushing with when he wrote, "There is no writing so difficult as the writing of myself" (1595/1886, p. 68). Though having a framework such as that described here may only unlock more difficulties, at least these are in the service of deeper understanding.

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