I’m Sure I Know Myself from Somewhere: Surveillance and Subjectivity in Social Media

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I'M SURE I KNOW MYSELF FROM SOMEWHERE:
SURVEILLANCE AND SUBJECTIVITY IN SOCIAL MEDIA

by

LUCAS POWER
The warnings are familiar in public discourse. Slurs that seem to be private may not be.¹ A teacher’s former job as a porn actress leads to her dismissal;² a Twitter post makes mocking threats, police descend;³ Reddit misidentifies the Boston Marathon Bomber and the never-was-a-suspect turns up dead.⁴ Is a threat legitimate insofar as it contains the right keywords? Should we know better than to say certain things? Should we expect to lose our job if we are indiscrete with our social media posts? Our activity online is seen as actionable intelligence of the everyday. A local news station asks random people on the street if an individual who loses their job from social media postings has been treated fairly. The first, a male university student, thinks a practical consequence of online activity is to be expected. Blowback from certain social media posts is the reason for his caution on Facebook, stating he “will be looking for a job soon.” The second, a woman in a strip mall, declares: “I think employers should look at The Facebook and see what kind of employees they’re going to be.”⁵ The mandate of social media is to create and manage a personal presentation of one’s self, but this presentation is often handled as if it were something more than an utterance. Responses to and effects from these presentations suggest a relationship between the data from the presentation and the author of the presentation which allows for each to be treated as a constituent element of a disciplinary form.

A flippant post cannot withstand general consensus. We operate under the tacit assumption that there are some things you just shouldn’t say—and if you are going to say them, you shouldn’t say them on social media because social media is fair game. Both the statement of the student and the statement of the shopper can be read as representative of a general public.
The second statement implies that what one posts on “The” Facebook is an accurate measure of the type of person they are in the present and who they will become in the future. The operative assumption is that what we post on the network is true, even if we post fantastic lies. These networks constitute what Michel Foucault characterizes as a regime of truth, a space in which utterances are made true, not a process of altering facts, but a grid of intelligibility producing what can be conceived of as verifiable through discourse.

As a single representative of an average productive user, Library and Information Science Professor Joyce Valenza elucidates her love/hate relationship with her network in what she describes as a “network confession”:

I get scared when I am off the grid, and I feel my Twitter friends have been learning more than I have; I worry that people will discover my stuff on one of the many networks I joined and abandoned. They will be disappointed that I left no great treasures there and they will think I am a network slacker; I worry many days that I will have nothing to contribute to those who count on me for an occasional gem; I worry that from many of my networks, I take far more than I give; I thought I’d take a closer look at my own network habits and peek into the networks of a few colleagues who keep me up to date and make me continually wonder, “How’d they discover that?”

Valenza’s comments indicate a motivation to not just sustain a network presence, but to ensure that it is substantive. Her reaction to participation (or lack thereof) reveals my present interest in such networks. First, there is the motivation to take on a project of self-inspection, e.g. “…take a closer look at my own habits.” Second, there is an expectation that network participation will solicit the judgment of one’s peers, e.g. “They will be disappointed that I have left no great treasures.” Each of these instances points to social media functioning, at least partially, within a disciplinary regime. This is not the sole apparatus of power, as I will come to discuss, but what might be considered its foundational mechanism. The term *apparatus of power* is used in the Foucaultian sense meaning “a certain manipulation of relations.” While what transpires within,
through, and around these networked, digital spaces can be better understood by later apparatuses of power, it is discipline that informs our disposition toward such networks. The potential ubiquity of these networks, alongside the expectation of happiness and success through continued performance serve as the impulse for voluntary regulation of the constitutive, digital self.

The sense that someone is watching is either necessary for a given mode of communication within digital networks (desired) or an unavoidable component of those networks (resigned). Access is thus concurrent with variable forms of surveillance. The mechanism of confession is deployed though participation in digital social networks. On one hand, these networks are disciplinary. Yet, on the other hand, there are aspects of network participation such as ongoing conversation threads in existing network communities that can be better understood as biopolitical. Thus biopower appropriately addresses the mechanisms at play, while at the same time opening the space of the Internet to market circulations unique to neoliberalism. Such an arrangement appears to have several consequences. First, an interarticulation of discursive regimes allows for fields of expression to feel more permissive than is actually possible, since at the limit of expression, users take up the work of folding themselves back into the parameters of acceptable speech. These notions hold in the same moment that digital technologies are being heralded as key components in social justice movements and revolutionary action. At a sort of center, or point of concentration—since these mechanisms tend to defy notions of interior and exterior, and rather find more apt description somewhere in the area of undulation, assemblage, or constellation—sits a digital subject or a data-body. This body comprises all the various connections and layers of data one gathers and generates over the course of a minute, an hour, or a day in life as a neoliberal subject. Biopower
works on individuals and populations in order to build a system of averages against which self-correction can be measured. By using Foucault’s description of this deployment of power-over-life, I will examine disciplinary effects of social media on users and communities. The elements of Web 2.0, exemplified through social media, create a field in which the prior articulations can function in tandem with what would otherwise be a subsequent regime of power. That is, the disciplinary and biopolitical deployments that become less efficient under the shift in rationalities are able to function because of the utopian promises of the medium. This is made possible through compelling confession in users and by modulating affect by constantly shifting between a promise and a threat to that promise.

I will focus on one such promise, but what we might call the general promise of this technology is that finally, once and for all, physical and ideological barriers will be removed, and we will be free to become whoever and whatever we desire once the exchange of information is limited only by bits-per-second. Most importantly, what is lost— the closed, unified control of the means of distribution—will never be regained; however, the claim of democratizing media has preceded new technological developments since the introduction of radio. Yet with radio and video after it, the means slip back into a tightly regulated, corporatist structure. This pattern is perhaps the easiest way to mark the distinction between (what is, to my knowledge, never called) Web 1.0 and its branded, subsequent iteration: Web 2.0.

The history of the internet is variously written. Roy Rosenzweig notes in “Wizards, Bureaucrats, Warriors, and Hackers: Writing the History of the Internet” that this history tends to be articulated through four distinct narratives: biographic, bureaucratic, ideological, or social. He contends that a comprehensive history must bring all of these tendencies together. A brief historical sketch is in order since the development of technologies gathered under the banner of
Web 2.0 can be seen as intensifications of elements already present in the system of the Internet. This also allows for identification of potential points of resistance since countercurrents to those elements are also part of the Internet’s conception and development. Rosenzweig’s overview positions the beginning of the Internet in the 1960s, inspired by equal parts Cold War military research and development (ideological) and the antiwar counterculture (social), developed by engineers who were not exclusively “men of genius” (biographic) nor simply exemplary team managers (bureaucratic), but rather a combination of all preceding.\footnote{9}

This multivalent history begins with the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). In 1957, in reaction to the launch of Soviet satellite Sputnik, ARPA was founded to direct research and development of technology. ARPA extended contracts to universities and computer consulting firms, who in turn supported engineers and scientists whose own goals could be closely associated with the needs of the final recipient of the spoils, the US military. The nature of the systems under development came to reflect a synthesis of the closed, defensive posture of Cold War paranoia and the open, inviting goal of connecting previously incompatible spaces. That the origins of the Internet would comprise such overlapping and at the time contradictory natures can perhaps shed light on present debates surrounding Net Neutrality, peer-to-peer networks, cryptography, and privacy.

Rosenzweig’s account continues by describing the foundational technology of the internet, packet switching, which resulted from solving the problem of communicating between different ARPA sites and the pressure to tie this technology more closely to military applications. Packet switching was developed to allow computers separated by distance and different programming languages to communicate. By the late 60s, it was used to connect satellite, radio, and computer networks without disrupting the discrete systems. This technique was developed
under the title of the “Internetting Project” and resulted in the creation of a more refined protocol for packet switching by the mid-70s. In his book, *Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America*, Paul Edwards attributes the development of digital computers to the prevailing “Cold War discourses” from the 1950s through the 1970s. After ARPANET, but before the World Wide Web, universities were connected through various means that all relied on the fundamental technology of packet switching.

Through the 70s and 80s, computer hobbyists, software developers, and others with similar interests debated the openness of these systems. When ARPA attempted to sell the network in the early 70s, there was little to no interest from major telecommunication companies. Alternately, some of the firms involved with ARPANET’s creation tried to establish their own networks and charge large sums to tie their customers to proprietary hardware and software. Rosenzwieg points out the irony of this since the protocol developed under the “Internetting Project” was maintained under open standards at the Defense Department’s insistence. Thus it was a closed-system military institution’s demand for uniform and open transfer protocols that killed corporate efforts to build a series of digital fiefdoms. ARPANET was subsequently handed over to the National Science Foundation, but by the 1980s, neoliberal logics shifted public goods and services into private ownership.

From this point forward, intensifying in the 90s, privatization of networks and computers was not only accepted, it was vocally supported. This is not to say that an ethic of liberation has not survived, uninterrupted, in communities like those in support of open source or hacking. Rather, it is an indication of popular sentiment surrounding this technology. In the same way that a generational shift might make yesterday’s right wing into moderates, “the liberationism of the many early computer and network enthusiasts had been transformed into libertarianism.”

This
shift was made possible by a cultural imperative to embrace the global marketplace for work and
to spend leisure time immersed in a digital world informed by the counterculture sentiment of the
60s. The Internet of the 90s, according to Rosenzweig, is perhaps “the perfect synthesis of the
anti-hierarchical cultural revolution of the 60s and the anti-statist political revolution of the
80s.”¹² When the dot-com bubble popped in the late 90s, the term Web 2.0 rose from the ashes.

Coined prior to an actual object of reference, Web 2.0 was intended to suggest the future of the
Internet. This future would be ruled by “open-world” ideas such a democracy, participation, and
personalization. These ideas would be propped up, however, by “closed-world” practices such as
online commerce, targeted advertising, and data brokerage. Under this configuration, the user is
consumer-as-producer through both ad-driven user-generated content and supplying the data
brokerage industry with its product.¹³

The networked communities of social media create an incitement to discourse following
the model Foucault describes as the confessional. This disciplinary act is one mechanism in the
process of generating an enterprise of self-administered control. Performance of that subject
position is similarly important to social networks where maintenance of the position is continual.

By making known an unlimited stream of information about the details of one’s life (to say
nothing of automatic location updates), social media creates a space within which a homunculus
emerges from the manufactured subject’s living body, which further allows the self to become a
perpetually observed and narrated entity. The composition of this figure will play into later
discussion, when I turn to the generation, replication, and storage of data. First, I would like to
clarify that, when I refer to social media functioning as a confessional discourse, I have the following description of confession from *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* in mind:

> The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile.¹⁴

In the context of particular social media platforms, the speaking subject is the user. The reportage of experience constitutes the truth of this subject. The interlocutor is represented by other users comprising a given community. The temporal structure of these platforms puts the user in a dual role of speaker and interlocutor as a message is composed, a position which magnifies the sense of self-correction already in play. Each single user is a site of confession through every comment or status update (post)—yet their interlocutor/s are absent at the very moment of confession (composition). As a participant, the same user is a constituent of that particular species body, a general public which acts as interlocutor for any single user’s presence, including her own. A general public is a statistically dominant population; not a representative group, but an ideal grouping, the strongest curve derived from a multitude of smaller, otherwise differentiated populations. *Populations*, broadly speaking, are one site of transfer for knowledge-power, the other being the individual.¹⁵

In an excerpt from their book, *Twentysomething: Why Do Young Adults Seem Stuck?*, Robin Marantz Henig and her daughter, Samantha Henig, describe a “new layer of angst to [an] already-heightened awareness of social ranking…” and the pressure (read as incitement) to maintain a “cyber public image.” Samantha Henig finds that social networks consistently focus one’s attention on “the image [they are] projecting.” She also points out that her actions outside of her social network are either predicated on or linked to her networked self. What we say and
do offline becomes a sort of proving ground for the reality of this digital self. The practical self (us in the geo-spatial world of meat and bone) comes to represent the digital. She goes on to refer to this tendency as “an unwelcome filter through which I view just about everything...” Here we find the expectation of judgment forming an impulse toward self-correction. Finally, she asserts a definitive rationale for continued participation: “The more you talk about yourself on sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr, the more successful you are.” This success can be read in several ways. First, we can think of it as successful in terms of legibility, where reiterating a normative performance renders the subject more clearly. We can also consider the use of the term as referring to accessibility to capital within a series of markets. Success in this sense refers to a transactional value in any number of economies (social, affective, labor, etc.). Repetition of one’s presence, reiteration of the self, in both amplitude and magnitude, amounts to the creation of brand awareness for the product-that-is-me. Participation is thus assumed, insofar as one desires legibility and viability, but only if we also engage in a process of interrogation of both our own and other digital bodies.

The social networks at hand do not function in real-time, but rather in a time interval which has the potential to approximate real time—or by some accounts an interval faster than thought. In the act of confession, that is, composition and submission of a post, the community is absent save for a single representative in the form of the present user. At this moment, the speaker is the only available representative of the interlocutory group since this user is also a member of the larger, digital species body. This position requires judgment of the confession within the same moment that the confession is made. This is not the same process of quizzing or measurement that is taken up as a personal project and balanced against an established norm, but rather a dual state of mind wherein the user is one as speaker and many as the representative of
the interlocutory position. A result of this schizoid dilemma, where a single user performs both confessional roles, is the perpetual judgment of one’s own network participation, and also a magnified urge to submit to the continual discourse. At the other end of this tension is the expectation that what one presents via the network is to some extent a qualitative measure of the person, first as individual sites for judgment, then as an approximation of the user herself.

The engine of these interrogative processes can be found in the dynamic of confession, as described in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. The early, pastoral model of confession was one in which religious leaders tended their parishioners through routine and repetitive invocations of a duty to reveal their innermost secrets. In this deployment, the priest focused on management of desire with a constant eye toward revealing (i.e., constructing) the truth of the parishioner through the admission of deviance. The secularization of this practice saw its intensification. Foucault points out that secular confession developed around “a political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex…in the form of analysis, stock-taking, classification, and specification of quantitative or causal studies.”

There the pastoral model concerned itself with morality, the subsequent form multiplied the categories suitable for confession. This allowed for discourse around sex to multiply through a variety of disciplines, such as biology, demography, ethics, medicine, pedagogy, political criticism, psychiatry, and psychology. It also allowed for the speaking subject to divulge more than just sex.

Various incitements to discourse implicate both speaker and interlocutor in the process of regulation and normalization. These subject positions will be used throughout my discussion to distinguish between those giving (speaker) and those receiving (interlocutor) the confession. Where the speaker is driven to unburden herself, the interlocutor valorizes normative performance. The valorized performance is normative in two senses: first, through acts of
submission to the confessional discourse, and second, through performing a corrective act outside of the confessional space. There is also an element of pleasure for the interlocutor in that hearing confession allows access to forbidden or hidden knowledge. A sort of eroticism develops around the position of judgment. Not just erotic for the interlocutor, but folding back onto the speaker who comes to project esteem for the practice onto her audience. The function of intimacy in the circuit of confession draws on an imbalance, a domination of the interlocutor. The speaker is driven to reveal more and more regardless of any potential deviance because the very act of having this truth drawn from within by “the one who knows and says nothing…the one who questions and is not supposed to know” allows the particular regime of truth—the field in which something can be made true—to take hold.\(^{20}\) This power relation functions through both entities in all such discourses to one degree or another. Sexuality is the transfer point through which a productive theory of power works in a given case—not power in and of sex itself, but rather a point at which the relation of power can be seen to operate. Confession is simply one means for creating and maintaining legibility where the goal is to make oneself known in a manner consistent with what has already been established as knowable, i.e. made true. It is also the case that sexuality represents a point at which the body meets the population. Sexuality informs the legibility of a body and addresses the performative aspect of that body discursively. Sexuality is also corporeal in the procreative sense, “a matter for individualizing disciplinary controls that take the form of permanent surveillance.”\(^{21}\) At the same time, sexuality addresses what Foucault calls “the multiple unity of the population.”\(^{22}\) Thus sexuality can be taken up by both disciplinary and regulatory deployments of power.

In an interview reprinted in *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault describes how power is continually searching for more efficient and comprehensive means of expression. Expressions of
power which remain too “cumbersome” have a diminishing efficacy, perhaps because they become too overt in an era where we are meant to have control over ourselves. Indeed, the lack of self-control is anathema to the liberal subject. The relation of power never deviates from its purpose, but continually evolves and takes on new forms to greater success and opacity. To identify, or merely trace the presumed margins of a current power relation, Foucault suggests “one needs to study what kind of body the current society needs.” It should be understood, however, that as power seeks greater efficiency in its expression, old processes are not discarded. Rather, they become integrated into new systems, or even remain in their bare forms for application on different populations. Thus the question, “what kind of body the current society needs” must be broken into several different pieces. While one articulation of a body might hold for a society defined as, say, a certain concentration of wealth, a society in which no wealth is present will require a different body. Likewise several societies can manifest within the same general space. As it relates to social media, and to the Internet more broadly, stratifications of class and racial or gender hierarchies can be maintained while these same divisions are seen as being overcome. That is, narratives of multiculturalism and populism on the Internet can exist while the medium itself remains differentiated along well-worn lines. Moreover, the repetition of the broad narrative can be deployed against attempts to counter these inconsistencies. This arrangement is paradoxical, but functions nonetheless because bodies and populations are not addressed by a single means.

While bodies can be disciplined in perpetuity, populations become securitized. That is, overt discipline at the population level becomes untenable because it represents an excess of manipulation by the state. This shift of how much and in what ways the state will act on bodies and populations develops and changes with deployments of power. Under the logic of liberalism,
the state can intervene in some things, but not others. Where neoliberalism is the dominant logic, the state is assumed to intervene at all levels, but to what extent in any given case is left to debate. Securitization of populations takes place through the management of risk to the given group. The concern for incidence of disease is one example which reveals an overarching concern with the mitigation of risk to life. This articulation of power that makes use of both discipline and security is what Foucault refers to as biopolitics, which refers to the management of groups of individuals through the establishment of a general normative curve.\(^\text{24}\) This curve is the statistical average occurrence for a given instance. In Foucault’s example, it does not matter how many people have smallpox, it is more important to ensure that the number of people with smallpox at a given point in time does not exceed the level of incidence which has been determined \textit{too many}. This is not to say that maintaining a certain number of people with smallpox is desirable, but rather that loss of productivity or resultant deaths are acceptable so long as they remain manageable. To determine what is manageable, a series of averages must be articulated. The overall incidence of disease might refer to the general normative curve, but that curve is established by the series of curves generated by frequency of the disease in men, in women, in children, and further broken down into age ranges for each. The function of these modes of surveillance is to ensure a strong crop of healthy individuals to engage in established fields of exchange. Biopolitics introduces a corollary function, one which serves to establish sites of modulation for those elements that escape the process of averaging.

Ben Anderson’s “Affect and Biopower: Towards a Politics of Life” surveys a range of literature to produce a concise description of Foucault’s understanding of biopower: the process by which life becomes “the object-target for specific techniques and technologies of power.”\(^\text{25}\) This expression of power seeks to “take control of life in general” by addressing itself to both
individual bodies and populations. Foucault describes biopower as having been first articulated in partial or incomplete deployments, first through a disciplinary apparatus, then through a biopolitical apparatus. This is exemplified by modes of confession and punishment, and later through the explosion of surveillance and demography. In its complete articulation, biopower moves from addressing multiple object-targets to addressing a single target, what Foucault refers to as “life itself.” This requires knowledge at the level of “circulation, exchange and transformation” and through interventions aimed at distinguishing between scaled values of life.\(^\text{26}\) One of the ways by which biopower makes life its object-target is by dividing a population (here meaning only the valued segment) into affective brackets that represent incremental general publics. Anderson identifies two ways this takes place.

First, populations are monitored for overall mood. An example of this is the level of consumer confidence measured through rates of unemployment, “surveys...on past and anticipated patterns of spending and saving,” or rates of industrial profit.\(^\text{27}\) Second, the aggregate opinion of individuals comes to represent a public sentiment. In this case, “customs, fears, prejudices, and requirements” all form what data brokerage firms refer to as “buckets.”\(^\text{28}\) These collections of individuals differ from populations and are instead referred to by Foucault as “publics,” being “the population seen from one direction.”\(^\text{29}\) The separation of individuals (in part) by aforementioned sentiment establishes a variety of averages, and the monitoring of mood at the population level echoes the general normative curve. The distinctions between these multiple curves are informed by monitoring and collecting information from any number of data nodes. This information can be parsed to reveal patterns of behavior, routine, and most importantly, emotional resonances. Once a mood can be predicted, it can be manipulated.
Predictive algorithms are foundational to Web 2.0 generally, and to social media specifically. A comprehensive user experience hinges on being presented with precisely what one expects (desires) just prior to the cognitive realization that it is desired. This is perhaps one reason why (mis)targeted advertising elicits annoyance and ridicule. Meaningless, intrusive ads (assuming there might be any other kind) run counter to the anticipated experience. The notion of anticipating a public mood goes beyond single users and given networks. Once affect is made an object-target, emotional responses can be anticipated and messages can be altered to generate a desired response. Advertising firms and political campaigns (not to suggest a difference) use these techniques to great effect. In another case, a recent study conducted by Facebook intentionally altered the stories in user’s news feeds and then monitored their posts.\textsuperscript{30} As predicted, the emotional tone of the user’s posts shifted in response to positive or negative news stories in their feeds. This experiment was then utilized and expanded through a separate, academic study in that explored the use of emotion as contagion transmittable through networks.\textsuperscript{31} This is not to say that with a strong enough algorithm, affect and performance are necessarily determined. After all, the algorithm can only respond to the terms by which it is defined. The matter at hand is a mode of capture, one that can increase or decrease in efficiency. I am suggesting that where data and bodies mingle, the efficiency of capture increases.

The relationship between data and the user it pertains to is close, as the discussion of an imperative to maintain one’s digital entity has hopefully expressed. Before proceeding to a more thorough discussion of that entity, I would like to make clear that I do not see this entity as apart from the user, nor do I conceive of it as simply an extension of performance already given to the maintenance of an identity. Rather, I would like to use the example of a stereoscopic image. In a stereoscopic image, two identical images are offset by slight degrees, such that when viewed
from the correct focal length, two becomes one and gives the illusion of spatial depth. What we see as three dimensions cannot, in that moment, be identified as two, two-dimensional planes, but rather becomes a different whole while still being composed of two indistinguishable parts. One must suspend knowledge of the parts in order to see the whole and likewise must be able to see the constituent parts in order for depth to come into relief. For a user and the entity of said user’s data, the composite form is an affective object-target of biopower, while each separately becomes the target of discipline (for the digital) and biopolitical (for the user). Digital spaces are disciplinary, in part, because they are hierarchical systems grounded in binary language. While each layer of the system increases in complexity, the essential language is formulated to allow or foreclose flows, in this case flows of electricity. In the case of social media, there are strong confessional mechanisms at play. The compulsion to reiterate and reinforce our digital form constitutes the field in which affect becomes an object-target of biopower—not in total, but in part. On the other side of my discussion of the digital entity, I would like to address how these schemes of anticipatory logic bring in a focus on risk. I will also address how maintenance of varied circulations of risk depend on the process of affective escape and capture.

III. 01101111 01101110 00100000 01100100 01100001 01110100 01100001 00100000 01100001 01101110 01100100 00100000 01100010 01101111 01100100 01101001 01100101 01110011

In proceedings from a conference in Hamburg in 1996 entitled “Utopian Promises—Net Realities,” appended to their 1998 book, *Flesh Machine*, Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) describe the set of circumstances under which the (then) new “multi-directional distribution network” known as the World Wide Web became “the most successful repressive apparatus of all time…represented under a sign of liberation.”32 For CAE, this network’s “most significant” function is “to keep order, to replicate dominant pan-capitalist ideology, and to develop new
markets.” Such a task is met by extending five promises of social change “that seem as if they will occur at any moment, but never actually come into being.” These promises are: Convenience, Community, Democracy, New Body, and New Consciousness. I focus on the utopian promise of the New Body because it is the most direct way to relate the intersections of discipline and security in these erstwhile liberatory technologies.

The action of perpetual anticipation has interesting parallels with Brian Massumi’s discussion of futurity. In his account, a future state affects the present in such a way that, even if the future never comes to pass, that present was justified by the potential of the future’s happening. Past actions are thus justified because, if circumstances could have aligned in an actualization of that future, they would have. A felt future is always real, particularly if it never comes to pass. Massumi’s specific example deals with the large scale threat of terrorism and political manipulation. My theft of his terminology applies to the particular utopian promises of the technological age which remain deferred yet never lose their capacity for possible fulfillment. In order for a promise to be perpetually deferred yet remain potentially satisfied, an exchange must be established in which an affective register, say anticipation, is maintained to its threshold and recaptured at the moment of escape, channeled, so to speak, into a new object-target. This process must take place in such a way as to never foreclose the original promise. An example of such deferment first requires a discussion of one particular promise, the New Body, a discussion of bodies and assemblages, and lastly a conceptualization of bodies-as-assemblages.

The New Body is said to be virtual, a site of unlimited potential where “nothing is fixed and everything is possible” (CAE). The virtual is (figurative) disembodiment taken to its fullest articulation, the atomization and recombination of one’s self at will. Within the context of the utopian promise, a virtual body can be infinitely reinscribed according to individual desires. The
structure of the network within which the virtual emerges also produces a data body. CAE describe this formation as the virtual body’s “fascist sibling.” The activities which configure the virtual as utopian require inputs and exchanges to multiply across networks. From the perspective of hardware and software, in order for nothing to be fixed, everything must be tagged, tracked, directed, routed, and stored. Thus, “the data body is the total collection of files connected to an individual” deployed within a technical apparatus that pushes an age old practice of authoritarian monitoring into its most comprehensive manifestation—since increasing storage and processing power mean no detail is too small to record (CAE 145). According to CAE, the data body has two functions. First, it serves as an apparatus of surveillance. Insofar as an individual must interact with the market, the details of these interactions inform a trajectory of said individual from cradle to grave. Second, the data body is a demographic projection. It is a means of refinement for target populations, consumption habits, and income distributions. Most concerning to CAE, is that this data body “is the center of an individual’s social being.” It presents a record of “cultural identities and roles” to anyone with the technical or bureaucratic skill to seek it. Despite the potential for endless modulation of one’s digital identity, a record of those changes remain. In this configuration, the organic is no longer arbiter of intent or action. Instead, data tells a story which the flesh is powerless to contradict. This might not always be true among individuals, but so far as corporate and government bureaucracies are concerned, our data body is the subject, and we are its shadow.

In thinking through the data body, I apply the concept of embodiment put forth by Gilles Deleuze in his study of Spinozist philosophy. Deleuze notes that “a body can be anything; it can be an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity.” This broad conception of bodies follows from Spinoza’s two-fold definition of a
body as, first, a relation of movements and, second, a capacity to affect and be affected. For a body to affect and be affected implies a circuit between itself and at least one other thing. This relational nature applies to the movement component as well. In the most basic sense, movement is the primary relation between two points. If a body can be anything, so long as this thing is involved in some relational circuit with any-thing else, then it is not too much to say that the collection of electronic information signifying me is a data body. It is simply a specification of a certain kind of body in which I have an established affective circuit. My data exists because I generate it or it is generated through observation of me, a company or government agency then stores it, aggregates it, and then it is related back to me in such a way as I respond, in either a positive or negative valence. There are exchanges and circulations I am unaware of, and although it must remain a matter for separate discussion, it should be understood that I, and consequently we—those whose circumstances allow for involvement with these technologies—are unaware of the majority of such activity. Slight examples of a continuum might be data brokerage firms flatly ignoring Senate inquiries into their business practices, or the fact that, in ten years, Monsanto expects to be an information technology company. Even when we are not conscious of the exchange, it is still taking place. This is rather like a billboard or a bus stop ad; it works even when we don’t notice it. Thus the data body comprises information of which we are both aware and unaware.

For the purposes of this paper, a data body refers to the amorphous assemblage of informational nodes that result from activity with and within electronic networks. This includes individual interactions generating pieces of electronic information, and also the movement of this information beyond the activity or intent of the individual. A data body is perhaps best conceived as a collection of digital information that flows from a user and follows the user, mimicking their
form. Examples of data comprise elements of what are commonly referred to as private and public life. An incomplete continuum of public-to-private might look something like this: social media content, internet search history, “free” internet services, store loyalty cards and frequent-buyer programs, vital statistics (birth/death records, driver services), financial transactions from credit card purchases to banking information, and medical records, all stamped by distinct, alphanumeric markers—IP addresses, log-in credentials, account numbers, and the pedigree stamp, a social security number. This is not to say that each of these collections is networked with all of the others, but many are. Those that aren’t are still identifiable by our interactions with them, such that our own interactions with this data body are sites of possible exploitation. Where the data body constitutes one’s identity, it is immediately subject to the threat of exploitation or theft. This aspect is of particular interest when read against Sara Ahmed’s discussion of fear. For her, a register like fear functions because there is an open circuit between a body and the world. This will be taken up in more detail as I discuss the ways in which we are affected by our data body. First, however, one last clarification should be made regarding the conception of bodies as assemblages.

Paul Patton describes an assemblage as “a multiplicity of heterogeneous objects” whose unity comes solely from the fact that these “items…‘work’ together as a functional entity.” He further divides the assemblage into states of composition, discursive regimes, and relational movements. This last category references the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization that occurs in every assemblage. Deterritorialization is described as “a line of flight along which the assemblage breaks down or becomes transformed into something else.” This is where we find Deleuze and Guattari’s affinity for the notion of *becoming*. Reterritorialization is the constitution of that something else, which itself begins to break down
at the moment of its constitution. If the utopian promise of the new body were true, this process of becoming would unfold continually, unimpeded in its infinite, creative potential. As I briefly mentioned above, however, there is an element of capture.

The process of capture takes place where one form breaks down, at its threshold, and instead of taking a new form, is redirected back into a space of demarcation which Deleuze and Guattari refer to as _striated_, defined by “enclosures, borders, or paths.” As such, the assemblage is impeded in its flow from one form to another. It is important to reiterate here the broad conception of body. In the way Deleuze and Guattari are using it, as it relates to modes of deterritorialization and capture, a body is an assemblage of affects. Thus the assemblage is not a “deterministic form or substance” but a “multiplicity of affects.” Just as they can refer to bodies as being any number of _things_, assemblages might be any number of things, including “part of a day, a season, a life or a social movement.”\(^{40}\) If the utopian promise of a virtual body (becoming-virtual) is a form of deterritorialization, the data body is a mode of capture which restricts us to a striated space, into flows of commodities, commerce, and capital.

The data body, as it relates to the geospatial body, i.e., “us” as sentient meat and bone, constitutes a relation in which a promise—any promise—can remain deferred. Consider the cruelly optimistic work and social relations described by Lauren Berlant wherein the promise of a better life pulls us through time across ever deteriorating circumstances. In these arrangements, the lack of fulfillment is mitigated by the continual circumscription of fantasy (the promise) in ever-dwindling modes of survival until we find ourselves in the living-death of a valueless life(form). The utopian promise of the new body does not require such circumscription, although it does rely on a similar belief that in the future, fulfillment of the original fantasy will take place.
Here, I finally return to the example of how the specific utopian promise can be continually rearticulated.

For Berlant, the present is an affective state, a perpetual *now* that is felt first, then revised and filtered into events on which we can reflect.\(^{41}\) Recall as well Massumi’s point that a future felt is a future validated. The utopian promise that allows the formation and maintenance of a data body takes the promise of becoming-virtual to its threshold by attaching it to objects of technology that appear to fulfill the promise, a feeling which is then captured, reterritorialized, and attached to a technology which, upon reflection, appears to be a step in a developmental process of reaching that original goal. In actuality, these technologies are refinements or rearticulations of the actual promise: in a capitalist system, technology will be utilized to harness economies of desire for the purpose of commodification and consumption.\(^{42}\) This present fact, however, is masked by the felt reality of the future and a construction of the past that validates such a feeling, at least on the surface. It is at this juncture of past and future where we find the self, as a body, and as such, a bundle of affects. And it is also here that we might think about affective attachments in relation to our data as it serves to verify the past and predict the future.

Such temporal markers elicit certain emotional registers that bind us closer to our data body. Drawing on Massumi’s discussion of futurity, I argue that the way the data body situates us between a past and a future generates, for one, an affective relation of threat. As an object-target of threat, the data body becomes the focus of an attention that is both vigilant and distracted. By his account, a threat in the non-specific future is made real by a feeling in the past. That the threat never materializes is meaningless. The activation of fear is based on the possibility of actualized threat. He refers to this as the *double-conditional*—they (ambiguous or specific threat) would have if they could have, but they didn’t only because we acted as if they
were going to.\textsuperscript{43} While threat plays a role in this discussion, in terms of directing the attendant paranoia of biopower, it is not the only register in circulation.

Sara Ahmed reminds us how affects such as fear and vulnerability come to be embodied. For her, these affects involve bodily relations of “openness” that are read as “site[s] of potential danger and as demanding evasive action.” The anticipation of future injury involves a restriction of movement or mobility where danger is felt. These responses are “dependent on particular narratives of what or who is fearsome,” which are culturally constructed.\textsuperscript{44} Her specific examples draw on instances of violence that are decidedly more corporeal than data-as-identity. Yet there is a connection to the sort of openness to the world she discusses and the sort of openings required in the creation and maintenance of our data body. Other feelings generated by the data body might include happiness, depression, anxiety, or hope, or any number of others depending on the individual and the constitution of their data body. That is, a given intensity at the market level combined with given points of contact with the security apparatus determines who our data claims us to be. The extent to which these formulations restrict certain promises about the future determines our affective response to our data body. For example, how much importance I place on building credit or buying a house, or to what extent I present myself in a way that is commiserate with a population I deem to be authentic. These modulations are representative of unique desires, but are also expressions within a field of acceptable parameters, self-selected from a larger apparatus of control.
To recap, power transfers through the most efficient means of expression, either through disciplinary or biopolitical mechanisms, i.e., at the level of the individual and the level of the population. This model operates until the turn to neoliberalism, at which point security (understood in part as the management of risk) and environmentality (understood in part as the systematic modification of permanent variables) become the most efficient means of expression owing to a new set of market ethics. This shift in what Foucault calls the rationality of the market displaces the former, liberal rationality. The shift generates different ways of thinking about processes of the state and the formation of subjects. Under neoliberalism, the state no longer parses the question of what or where to intervene, or to what extent. Rather, the matter of intervention is a foregone conclusion. The question now is how the state will intervene and in what way. This has also been described as the mitigation of effect, as opposed to the regulation of cause. The regulation of cause is concerned with generating a particular set of outcomes, or manipulation toward an effect, where the effect—the end result—should be a state that needs no further regulation. This is a liberal rationality that seeks to produce a subject capable of self-correction in a field where, in some instances, it is unthinkable for the state to intervene overtly. On the other hand, the mitigation of effect leaves ‘cause’ as a contingency and concerns itself with managing the so-called crisis of those variables. This is a neoliberal rationality. The field of exchange under which technologies of surveillance are multiplied across users, magnified by intensities of participation, and commodified by virtue of accuracy, is one massive crisis of contingency.
Thus the variability of expression within this medium of exchange compliments deployments of security and environmentality. At the same time, participation is compelled by the latent disciplinary apparatus of confession. The generation and maintenance of multiple users and communities allow biopolitical elements to find purchase. Stated thus, it might seem as if I am seeking a totalizing, essentialist theory of the Internet, but this is not the case. My interest lies in the composition of a mutable interior and exterior wherein the inside functions under one apparatus, pushing out, so to speak, and the exterior functions under another apparatus, pushing in. That which escapes one apparatus is captured by the other, and vice versa.

Affect enters the equation when we begin to think about the composition of bodies in terms of the user and their avatar (which might be conceptualized as both virtual and datalogical) and the process of escape and capture that informs them. As discussed above, affect can be made an object-target of power. When this occurs, the manipulation (or management, depending on one’s disposition) of affect can be used to form subjects and predict fields of subjectivation. I understand this as aligning with the distinction between regulation of cause/mitigation of effect, mentioned above.

When affect is harnessed in the formation of subjects, it functions by clearing the space into which those subjects will contort themselves. On the other hand, affect recruited in the mitigation of effect becomes a predictive tool. This removes the step of presentation of the ideal and modification of the subject. Instead, the established sentiment generates its subject. No alteration seems necessary, and thus coercion is not simply imperceptible—it is cognitively self-selected, not a choice reduced from a menu of options, but a novel interpretation of being in the world. This state of affairs, coupled with a neoliberal rationality—namely that every transaction become a “formal game of inequalities”—convinces us to participate in a medium that
commodifies us without damaging our sense of independence within given communities. The development of a framework that funnels the reader toward identifying with a position prior to its articulation is a classic rhetorical concept. These technologies materialize precisely such a strategy. If data itself, in raw or aggregate form is a commodity, and this same data comprises a body that is interarticulated with the physical body, then the self is capable of being run as a neoliberal enterprise. Being in the world, in the smallest increments, is an opportunity to engage the ‘formal game.’ Activities which generate and sustain our data body function under the general, informal promise, and several stated utopian promises. This can be made clearer by comparison to a more well-known informal promise, The American Dream.

David Graeber situates this promise as having been more or less established during the post-World War II economic boom. The process of socially subsidized research and development towards war technology, which then returns to be sold back to the public who financed it in the form of consumer goods, establishes a progress narrative by which ‘the future’ of increasing leisure through scientific advancement is perpetually arriving. This promise is continually reinforced even while the means of such technological wonder are carefully and systematically dismantled. Military technology continues to expand, and consumer offshoots of this technology do surface, but the fulfillment of the promise (which Graeber evokes with the life of The Jetsons as a sort of conceptual shorthand) manifests through refinements or embellishments of established technology. By referencing articulations of ‘the future’ from popular culture from the 1950s through the late 1980s, Graeber shows that this promise remained viable through repetitive simulations of what the future was/is supposed to be. He goes on to point out that this promise has always been heavily suggested, though never explicitly stated. Its truth was established by effect. A small window of time proved the illusion true, and that notion
was carried on through proceeding years—namely that if we work hard and follow the rules, we will live comfortable, materially enhanced lives—even as neoliberalism foreclosed any possibility of it remaining so.

Two consequences seem to arise from this. First, those who believed the promise to begin with feel foolish for having ever believed it, and so resign themselves with pride to that rolling carnival of precarity known as ‘the new normal’—typified by working more hours, reduction of benefits, increasing costs of living, and wage stagnation. Second, by opening the illusion to previously excluded populations, the promise continues to masquerade as a possibility. Here we might call on the example of sub-prime borrowers achieving the dream of home-ownership, only to be ultimately used as fodder for a mortgage-backed securities bubble. Homeownership and the good life are coterminous under the auspices of The American Dream. Where this fantasy does not materialize, the cause is located in individual short-comings, as failures of self-regulation. In the first case, a failure of realistic expectation; in the second, a failure of personal and fiscal responsibility. In each case, we find a link back to the issue of deferred promise of liberation in the digital revolution: physical and ideological barriers have been removed and we are all free to be whoever and whatever we want to be. That is, if/when this promise fails to materialize, it is not something intrinsic to the configuration, but rather a consequence of its use. A weak example of this might be the flight from one social network to another. In this cycle, early adopters ride a self-congratulatory wave that crashes on the beach of popular culture. As use of the medium reaches saturation, an alternate iteration emerges to claim a zone of difference. For the standard social network, one might think of how Friendster begat MySpace which begat Facebook. Even now there are supposed alternatives to Facebook that distinguish themselves as being stripped of advertising or marketing intention. All of this amounts to changing the channel to watch the
same program. Regardless of the means, the medium generates profit from a compelled participation. This coercive element is masked by the functional myths of the medium.

I have leaned heavily toward the use of social media as a way of suggesting that data constitutes an extension/replication of the self. It should be assumed by the use of the term *data body* that the key component is personal data, regardless of how it is gathered and stored. It should also be understood that the generation and collection of such identifiable information is not a novel consequence of electronic networks. Authorities exercise control over their subjects by tracking facts of existence (tax records, trade, etc.) and have since the earliest civilizations. What differs for us, in this moment, is the efficacy and nuance of the collection, which Critical Art Ensemble are quick to point out. There also seems to be a measure of acceptance in both the validation of subjectivity through data and the expectation of participation with modes of production for that data. Indeed, a separate inquiry might address how a lack of participation, that is, the lack of a *social media presence*, constitutes abnormality or suggests degeneracy. Since this data can elicit affective attachments, we should attend carefully to how those affects are circulated in popular discourse. The perpetual threat of identity theft and marketing of commodities for guaranteeing its protection present a tangible response to a collection of emotional responses. These affects circulate despite continual evidence that a single point of failure within one network (a line of malicious code) compromises security across multiple networks. Why are unauthorized transactions connected to us so steadfastly assumed to be a liability? Shouldn’t the plethora of surveillance mechanisms make it easy to delineate truth from falsehood? Or is it the case that our data is more than simply a static trail of our corporeal wandering? Does the digital milieu constitute its own regime of truth? It would appear that there is something more to this data and our imbrication with it. If the notion of a data body holds,
then I suggest further that through time, each body—each temporal instance of us as digital subjects—constitutes a multiplication of the self across that field. In that sense, I am a population. Foucault points out that an individual, by and large, is unpredictable. That is why surveillance must be analyzed through population data: statistical averages, normative curves, and so on. If a certain constellation of data can be a body, and this data can be identified as relating to (or being) me, then a collection of temporal instances of me qualifies as a predictable population. Data is thus predictive, representative, and affectively malleable. As such it enhances existing forms of surveillance and control on artificial and organic processes, and opens new sites of subjectivation to those same deployments of power.
2 http://www.salon.com/2013/09/30/fired_for_doing_porn_the_new_employment_discrimination/
11 see n9
12 see n9.
13 Web 2.0 history and intent located in http://www.paulgraham.com/web20.html and http://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html, strongly inferred by Paul Graham's description of a Web 2.0 conference: “The conference itself didn't seem very grassroots. It cost $2800, so the only people who could afford to go were VCs [venture capitalists] and people from big companies. And yet, oddly enough, Ryan Singel's article about the conference in Wired News spoke of 'throngos of geeks.' When a friend of mine asked Ryan about this, it was news to him. He said he'd originally written something like 'throngos of VCs and biz dev guys' but had later shortened it just to 'throngos,' and that this must have in turn been expanded by the editors into 'throngos of geeks.' After all, a Web 2.0 conference would presumably be full of geeks, right? Well, no. There were about 7. Even Tim O'Reilly was wearing a suit, a sight so alien I couldn't parse it at first. I saw him walk by and said to one of the O'Reilly people 'that guy looks just like Tim.' 'Oh, that's Tim. He bought a suit.' I ran after him, and sure enough, it was. He explained that he'd just bought it in Thailand. The 2005 Web 2.0 conference reminded me of Internet trade shows during the Bubble, full of prowling VCs looking for the next hot startup. There was that same odd atmosphere created by a large number of people determined not to miss out. Miss out on what? They didn't know. Whatever was going to happen—whatever Web 2.0 turned out to be."
15 Ibid. 143.
18 see n14; 23.
19 see n14; 33.
20 see n14; 62.
22 Ibid. 251.
23 see n8; 58.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.


Ibid. 143.

Ibid. 144.


see n28.


see n9.


Graeber, David. “Of Flying Cars and the Declining Rate of Profit.” In *The Baffler*. No.19, 2012. url: http://thebaffler.com/past/of_flying_cars. see also: Curtis, Adam, and Lucy Kelsall. 2012. *Love and Power, the Influence of Ayn Rand: All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*. New York: Films Media Group, or perhaps any archival jaunt through tech news from 1996-present. The only qualifier I would make is that the rhetorical leaps seems to become smaller as the years wane, as no one is more “irrationally exuberant” than a techie in the mid-90s.

see n5.


see n25.