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Digital Media: Life-Changing Online Introduction

Clare Brant and Rob Gallagher

King's College London

clare.brant@kcl.ac.uk

robert.gallagher@kcl.ac.uk

This special issue follows on from the IABA Europe 2017 conference held at King's College London hosted by the Ego-Media research group and the Centre for Life-Writing Research, who thank everyone who contributed. The conference theme was "Life Writing, Europe and New Media": anodyne terms, in the interests of inclusivity, yet their congruence raises some big questions. Is the term life writing sufficiently able to absorb digital and social media as part of its assumed domain? How do offline and online forms of life writing relate to each other? In a global internet age, what if anything is specific to Europe or European practices? And, agonisingly for the hosts in the wake of Brexit, in what ways is it possible for Britain to persist in being European?

A single special issue can hardly answer these questions in full. But it can begin to ask some of them. Possibly the most pressing relate to terminology: bursts of growth in social media and the expansion of digital activity suggest that, perhaps following the withering away of difference between public and private, distinctions between life offline and online are increasingly dubious. Life writing has increasingly less writing in it (as the essays here, which variously address photos, videos and videogames, financial statements and 3D printed objects, show), though even with

an increase in the popularity of shorter forms of text, writing is still a common practice. Language may be shrinking—acronyms stand in for more and more expressions, but the number of acronyms is increasing, so there is not necessarily a shrinkage of vocabulary. Nonetheless, as all the contributors demonstrate in different ways, there is pressure on old concepts, assumed forms of expression and established genres.

In *Updating to Remain the Same*, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun addresses this pressure. Considering the impact of new media on our experience of time, she proposes the formula 'habit + crisis = update'.[1] Chun's equation reflects the paradoxical nature of life under networked capitalism. Tech companies constantly ask us to brace ourselves for the next big thing: augmented reality, artificial intelligence, web 3.0, PlayStation 5. At the same time, Chun notes, 'our media matter most when they seem not to matter at all… when they have moved from the new to the habitual'.[2] It is because we have forgotten what it is like to live without search engines or smartphones that these technologies have come to shape everyday life so profoundly. To some extent, then, digital culture is predicated on our capacity to acclimatize to new ways of doing things. But it also works to ensure we don't get too comfortable. As Chun observes, 'new media, as forms of accelerated capitalism, seek to undermine the habits they must establish.'[3] And nothing shakes users out of their habits like a good crisis. Here, however, we encounter another paradox: because 'neoliberalism thrives on crises'—supposedly exceptional circumstances that justify radical measures like the privatisation of utilities, the curtailment of benefits or the "disruption" of established modes of doing business—it has 'ma[de] crisis ordinary'.[4] It is against this backdrop of habits made to be broken and crises that have become the rule rather than the exception that the update emerges, promising that we won't be left behind as long as we purchase the next upgrade and download the next patch.

What is the upgrade for life writing scholars? And how are life writers updating their practice to reflect these changes? While new media have proved life changing in many ways, there is also a sense in which iPhone upgrades come and iPhone upgrades go and life is little changed, even for iPhone users. We do not want to harp on the newness of new media to the extent that we ignore important continuities or forget pre-digital precedents for contemporary practices and concepts. The articles in this issue address texts and phenomena that ask us to consider the interplay of continuity and change in contemporary life narratives. If the Instagram selfies that make up Amalia Ulman's *Excellences & Perfections* (2014) have quickly become canonical new media artworks, for example, it is partly because of the ease with which they can be slotted into familiar art historical narratives. Transported from the smartphone screen to the

gallery wall, it becomes easier to see how Ulman's images are in dialogue with Vermeer's sumptuous middle-class interiors or Cindy Sherman's play with popular feminine archetypes. But it also becomes harder to see how Ullman is repurposing popular genres of self-presentation pioneered by young women who've never set foot in a *kunsthalle,* and who may be equally credited with making the selfie a powerful genre. Newness may be created as much by new context as by new content—here, relocating to gallery space. Nor do we want to downplay what *is* radically new. Though selfies owe a profound debt to traditional portraiture, they participate in a visual culture that has been accelerated and largely redefined by digital media. Increasingly oriented around forms of machine-led seeing—surveillance, satellite imaging, pixellation, pattern recognition—this culture creates a need for new terms, terms like 'agnotology', or how we are prevented from knowing.[5] It also requires us to reassess the viability of the familiar metaphors which used to orientate epistemological unknowns: as Hal Foster puts it, 'how are we to peel back the screen or open up the box; how are we to stay on the surface of data and at the same time probe its depths? Or is this old surface-depth model overridden in a digital order that appears both ontologically flat and epistemologically obscure?'[6] Meanwhile, digital product developers keep moving ahead (or keep claiming that they are): 'it is safe to say that the introduction of Animoji marks the official start of visual culture 2.0, where interactivity and personalization will reign supreme, gradually replacing the previous ways of UGC creation and consumption.'[7] Academic landscapes are evolving too: thus Matthew Fuller argues for the significance of software studies, as the seemingly opaque processes and structures of modern computer and software technology have a significance nobody should ignore, because they are so much part of everyday life.[8]

These are, we are repeatedly told, difficult times for the humanities—perhaps even times of crisis. Scholars of life writing and auto/biography arguably face particularly testing problems.[9] As Foster suggests, new technologies have altered epistemological assumptions and methodological norms in ways that challenge the validity of close reading and qualitative analysis, and of the hermeneutic frameworks (Marxist, Freudian, post-structuralist) that underpinned much twentieth-century literary criticism.[10] This may seem liberating to some. But these technologies have also, as Rosi Braidotti contends, helped to foster a climate of anti-intellectualism that

is especially hard on the Humanities because it penalizes subtlety of analysis by paying undue allegiance to 'common sense'—the tyranny of doxa—and to economic profit—the banality of self-interest. In this context, 'theory'

> has lost status and is often dismissed as a form of fantasy or narcissistic self-indulgence. Consequently, a shallow version of neo-empiricism—which is often nothing more than data-mining—has become the methodological norm in Humanities research.[11]

In such potentially agnotological contexts, questions of method acquire a new urgency. Some of the articles here embrace or propose new critical frameworks. Others update familiar concepts for transforming contexts. One concept to which several contributors are drawn is that of 'mediatization'—a term which merits a brief explanation here.

 As even its advocates concede, mediatization is something of an 'awkward formulation',[12] and its precise meaning and scope remain open to debate. Some argue that mediatization has been in progress for the entirety of human history,[13] while others would confine it to the period following the emergence of mass media.[14] Some critics see mediatization primarily as a matter of the organisations and institutions that make up 'the media' imposing their 'logic' on other domains so that 'nonmedia actors have to conform to this media logic if they want to be represented in the (mass) media or if they want to act successfully in a media culture and media society.'[15] Others adopt a broader view, considering how technologies of communication and representation (from the Gutenberg press to the "Like" button) inform the sociocultural construction of reality. But mediatization theorists *do* agree as to the term's essential definition: 'generally speaking, mediatization is a concept used to analyze critically the interrelation between changes in media and communications on the one hand, and changes in culture and society on the other.'[16] Addressing the 'spread of mediated communication' and 'the specificity of certain media within sociocultural change', mediatization theory holds that 'it matters what kind of media is used for what kind of communication.'[17] But it also rejects deterministic accounts of media influence, acknowledging the role of other factors (economic, legal, cultural) in informing shifting habits of thought and patterns of behaviour.[18] As this overview suggests, mediatization is not to be confused with mediation, which 'continues to describe a fundamental moment in the development of communication as symbolic interaction: its passing through technologically-based infrastructures of transmission and distribution ("media").'[19] The term media*tiz*ation, in contrast, draws our attention to how the pervasiveness and character of particular modes of mediation inform what gets mediated and how: 'While "mediation" refers to the process of communication in general… "mediatization" is a category designed to describe change.'[20] It is no surprise, then, that so many mediatization theorists have turned their attention to the advent of the internet, an event that they agree has

inaugurated an important new phase in media history.[21] As networked digital devices are increasingly integrated into all areas of everyday life—like getting dressed, going on holiday and mourning the dead, as articles in this issue explore—they are beginning to change the way in which we conceive of and perform all manner of activities.

More familiar concepts also appear in this issue. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital[22] are now more than thirty years old, but they have proven readily applicable to twenty-first century digital culture, obsessed as it is with quantification. As Benjamin Grosser (whose 'demetricator' software removes all statistics from the interfaces of Facebook and Twitter) argues, social networks are stuffed with metrics calibrated to incite a relentless 'desire for more' in users, spurring them to engage more—and thus generate more data that can be sold to advertisers.[23] On platforms like these all activity is evaluated in terms of its capacity to attract clicks, likes, retweets and followers. Building on Bourdieu, scholars have identified various subcategories of social and cultural capital, peculiar to particular cultural 'fields' (another of Bourdieu's concepts). Thus videogame scholar Mia Consalvo talks of 'gaming capital',[24] sociologist Ori Schwarz of the 'corporeal capital' manifested in sexy selfies,[25] and Joan Entwistle and Agnes Roccamora of the reserves of 'fashion capital' possessed by style mavens.[26] But while viewing online culture in terms of the circulation of domain-specific forms of capital is undoubtedly useful, there is a risk that critical analyses can end up reinforcing the idea that all aspects of life should be understood by analogy with money. Critical interest in forms of capital is possibly partnered by capitalism's interest in personal stories: when, as Rong Huang's article discusses, cashless payment apps are turning even the bank statement into a potted biography, is any online transaction able to evade being a formation of capitalism?

Theorising change is necessarily shaped by models of old and new: for digital media, that model might be remodelled as past, present, cutting-edge, in development and futurist. The editors of *Biography*'s 'Online Lives 2.0' special issue (2015), Laurie McNeill and John Zuern, noted its position in an internet of evolving auto/biographical forms and practices: in 2015, Instagram and Pinterest had been going for five years, Snapchat and Vine for two; blogs were getting less popular though they were still a genre where questions of public and private played out, sometimes intensely, and social networking sites were eroding that old binary into a flow of networked activity. McNeill and Zuern noted that 'selfies are the current lightning rod for censure'.[27] Three years on, numerous digital gurus announce we have passed or are passing peak selfie, even entering post-selfie.[28] This may be hard to square with a new product which combines

the selfie with photobombing, though one commentator sees that too in historicist terms: 'Decades, or even centuries from now, future generations will look back on 2018 as the year we hit peak social media obsession. They will observe a gadget introduced this year called *the Hypno Eye*—a mobile photo booth in the form of a selfie-taking ball—and argue that it signified the beginning of the end for real-world interactions.'[29] In the UK, 2015 was also the first time more people got online with smartphones than with laptops.[30] In 2019, life-changing digital markers could include the top seven hashtags for securing likes on Instagram: #love; #instagood; #me; #cute; #tbt; #photooftheday; #instamood.[31] For comparison, in 2010, its first year, the rankings were #cat, #iphone4, #snowpocalypse, #sfgiants, #ivoted, #movember, #tgif, #angrybirds, #blackswan, #madmen, #lunareclipse, #thanksgiving, #nofilter.[32] Where McNeill and Zuern referred to a still crumbling binary of public/private, three years later it seems natural to reach for different metaphors, not ones of solidity breaking up but of fluidity going somewhere. Osmosis is so habitual it has simply dissolved much of the old signification of difference; borderlines matter less than performativity common across sites and the evolution of ironic forms of authenticity. Moreover, historicity seems more of a flow: signifiers of pre- and post- seem fewer; critics' temporising about historicity seems more common. Has life-changing changed its pace or its nature?

The novelty, peak and passing of products, practices and platforms (and for that matter of academic trends) is one way to net digital history. This flux, however, goes hand in hand with a strangely stable rhetoric of alarm. Pundits are always on the lookout for phenomena that might mark "the beginning of the end" for certain ways of online life. In what might be called online's beginning phases, or its early history, catfishing and oversharing were seen as cause for alarm. In 2018 and into 2019 the big alarm has been focused on Facebook, where data scraping for political uses in the US election and in Britain's Brexit referendum (both democratic events of 2016) has revealed manipulative threats to democratic process through illicit profiling and targeting of voters. Alarming to many—though still evolving and often misrepresented—is China's new system of social credit, where commercial and social actions will be monitored and evaluated by an 'ecosystem' of surveillance mechanisms operated by the state, private businesses and civic institutions.[33] Unease is a theme running through this special issue; it underlies more obvious themes of self-fashioning, performance and femininity. The two opening essays pick up different genres—Instagram and videogames—to explore cases in which self-fashionings become performances of femininity with very unsettling effects. Emma Maguire analyses Amalia Ulman's self-construction for deconstructive ends, as expectations—visual and

behavioural—of gender are revealed to be preconceptions also bound in with structures of race, age, class and education. Where the young female artist faces predictable narratives, the young female gamer—Nina Freeman in Rob Gallagher's essay on Freeman's autobiographical game *Cibele*—does too, but with a newer narrative shaped by the particular frictions of Gamergate, a campaign of harassment begun in 2014 against women who make, play and write about videogames. Both case studies show how performing gender can restore some sense of agency to the performer, though exposure of the illusory foundations of gender expectations also leads to disillusioning some viewers and followers, who resent being led into traps of irony and denied agency in making meanings. *Excellences & Perfections* and *Cibele* could be thought of as testing out Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact in relation to slippery femininity in online forms. Or should that be femininity in slippery online forms? Ambiguous irony is now familiar enough to be becoming polysemous, even multistable, in its multiplicities and multiplicitous possible readings. Is this moving us beyond performance, into performance-ness? And why does ambiguous irony seem to cluster around young women?

In some online contexts, life-changing digital media appear to confer agency. The artist and the gamer's performance of life narratives invoke a world of options, where selves can be invented at will and shed at will. There are echoes here of the optimism of 1990s cyberutopians, and of the postmodern playfulness that characterised much third-wave feminism. Yet we can also detect the ghost of a continuous self whose presence is perhaps best traced through pain. Both Ulman and Freeman, in different ways, have been hurt by gendered plots. In the next two essays, the multiplicity of networked selves is tracked across the genres of fashion vlog and the war blog. In the former, selves are constituted and expressed through economies of pleasure; in the other, identities are conferred on subjects negotiating the painful realities of armed conflict. Mark Twain observed that naked people have little or no influence over society; as a wearer of white linen suits (in protest against depressing black clothes) he might have been pleased to see wardrobes become important foci online. Felice McDowell distinguishes between the wardrobe as collection of clothes (wearables, contents), and wardrobe space (the interior of a storage unit for clothes, the closet) to investigate how fashion industry figures mediate interiority and perform fashion for *Vogue*'s YouTube series 'Inside the Wardrobe'. That "performing" is now a gerund rather than an adjective, and one of ambiguous agency, suggests actors and actions are flowing together much more as categories: this is certainly a theme of the whole issue.

Another theme is the (oft frustrated) desire for authority and truth online. This theme comes to the fore in Alisa Miller's account of the

blog's emergence as a genre of war writing. Addressing blogs offering perspectives on the 2003 Iraq war, she provides a closely-detailed case study of different voices and readerships, with ideological frictions mirroring and occasionally diverging from those on the ground. The emergence of 'milblogs' provided readers with access to episodic textual narratives updated by actual combatants in real-time, challenging the hegemony of visual war reportage. An outlet for civilian voices and soldiers alike, in the war blog issues of ethnicity reframe individual identity. Although the spectrum of discourses is nuanced, not least by dissent, critique and censorship, a binary of opposite sides persists. A utopian version of the internet as a means of bringing people closer is put under severe pressure by war's refraction in the war blog.

Questions of power and genre are addressed in the next two articles, which also share a focus on transactionality. Rong Huang's article focuses on the different conceptions of identity expressed in two Chinese mobile payment platforms. Where WeChat Pay locates spenders within social networks sustained by monetary exchange, Alipay rolls up financial transactions into annual auto/biographical portraits, which assume the form of descriptive short verses crediting individual spenders with particular qualities. With its imperfect definitions of types of transactions and imprecise character sketches, this form of transactionality nonetheless appropriates powers of life writing. It also reveals a poetics of time—payment apps promote speedier transactions and easier recall of them, and yet that very speed shrinks their significance in a consumer's day unless it can be expanded back into a loyalty culture of continuous brand-related socialising. Time also slips out of joint in the afterlives tracked by Korina Giaxoglou, where digital memorialising prolongs people's social media presence indefinitely, even eternally, with no closure. The force of small stories in summing up a life supplies life writing with micromaterials; online condolences also show communities as much divided as united in grief, as sharing comes under stress. RIP messages are soliloquys shared with the dead and the world but not with other mourners—is that akin to elegy?

The last two essays take up a theme of imagination, first in theoretical then in material form. Clare Brant's article turns Giaxoglou's life and death forces into alive and inert, or human and machine, to ask what makes imagination a good term to bring to digital lifewriting analysis. If being alive makes us human, what do we do that machines do not do, or cannot do yet? A discussion of artbots raises questions about imaginative agency as something machine learning is approaching, and also a human capacity with distinct possibilities, not to be subsumed into the term "creative". Ursula Hurley's account of a group using 3D printing to make objects meaningful to them shows imaginative agency in action—ironically, in this case claimed hesitantly by human subjects who are very

unsure of their ability to be imaginative agents, to connect with an imaginative capacity which may be unclear in theory yet which is nonetheless recognisable in practice. Similarly, copying the analogue world of print culture, digital reinvents the process of printing to create objects which take on some of the functionality of words in telling stories.

With an online journal there is a strong possibility that readers simply click on articles they are drawn to, moving through in un-linear ways, though print culture of course also allows dipping practices and starting points in the middle or end. Nonetheless, editors persist in thinking through a running order as if readers proceed consecutively. It is an idea reinforced in a special issue, where essays are bound by a concept that acts like a unity of action with a beginning, a middle and an end. It may also be entirely obsolete. We make this observation at the end (of the introduction) and the beginning (of the special issue), to muddle the middle ground of digital media: its virtual version of space disturbs old forms of narrative, text, time, even life. Yet this need not be a fearful process. Even less imaginative agents prove adept at learning new forms of navigation. The *Creative Matters* section extends the special issue, in part as a practical instance of imaginative agency, and to celebrate life-changing digital media in largely positive forms. Contributors were invited to select two sites online which they would like netizens of the future to know about, and to explain a little of why. Mostly but not all relating to the subjects of the special issue articles—there are guest appearances by feminist porn makers and sharks—the creative contributions appear in the same authorial order as the articles. One sign of old order, lasting into digital media? Or was it authorised by bots?

<div align="right">The Editors</div>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1 Chun 2016, 2.
2 Idem 1.
3 Idem 2.

4 Idem 3.
5 A term coined in 1995 by Robert Proctor in relation to the tobacco industry's deceit about the dangers of smoking through the deliberate spreading of doubt.
6 Foster 2018, 41.
7 Yao 2017.
8 Fuller 2017.
9 McNeill 2012.
10 Galloway, 2012, 241–2.
11 Braidotti 2013, 4.
12 Couldry and Hepp 2013, 191.
13 E.g. Krotz 2009.
14 E.g. Lundby 2013.
15 Couldry and Hepp 2013, 196.
16 Idem 197.
17 Idem.
18 Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby 2015, 319–20.
19 Couldry and Hepp 2013, 198.
20 Idem.
21 Livingstone and Lunt 2014, 711.
22 Bourdieu 1986.
23 Grosser 2014.
24 Consalvo 2007, 184.
25 Schwarz 2010.
26 Entwistle and Rocamora 2006, 740.
27 Macneill and Zuern 2015, x.
28 Tinderberg 2018, np.
29 Low 2018.
30 Chester 2015.
31 Forsey 2018.
32 Stampler 2014.
33 Mistreanu 2018.