

## The Virtual, Networked Self

1. As different communication technologies enable different modes of relating, it should be no surprise that they also shape different forms of identity. In an earlier series of videos on the co-evolution of religion and communication technologies I contrasted the communal self, emergent from oral culture with the more autonomous, individual self that arises from literacy. Its not a matter of one replacing the other, after all literate people still talk, and indeed only learn to write after having learned to talk. Rather literate individuality enhances and overlays a more primal and pervasive communal identity. How we are raised and the friends we associate with continue to shape our identities no matter how idiosyncratic our more deliberative thought may become.
2. The internet, with its hypertexts, social media, tracking programs, and big data science is creating yet another level of the self to supplement earlier oral and literate identities. And just as Socrates had argued that literate reason ought to govern earlier oral thought and values, so emergent virtual technologies, for good or ill, are increasing in the driver's seat. In this video we will explore how social media embeds individual identity within wider networks, giving rise to new psychological vulnerabilities.
3. Let's begin with Facebook. (1) As of October 2018 there were 2.3 billion active Facebook users-- fully one third of the planet. And two thirds of these use it daily. (3) In the United States, two thirds have active accounts, (4) 75% of whom check it every day. Among the 18-19 demographic the percentage of Americans using Facebook rises to 80%, even half of those 65 and over have accounts.
  - a. Now what is the relationship between how someone presents themselves in person, face to face, versus over Facebook? Since many of my friends on Facebook do also know me in person or on other sites, there cannot be too wide a discrepancy. On the other hand recognition over Facebook is skewed. I only posts what's worth posting, typically fun and interesting experiences that present me in a positive light and/or items that will score more likes from other users in my network. In that sense recognition is more positive than in the messier world of face to face interaction. On the other hand the same holds true for all my Facebook friends leading to the common paradox that all my Facebook friends seem to have more fun, lead more interesting lives than I do. Thus the overall

effect of facebook use can sometimes be to lower one's self esteem, particularly among heavy users.

- b. Feelings around Facebook use are thus often ambivalent. Over a recent 12 month period, (5) 42% of users reported having taken a break from the site for several weeks or more and (6) 26% claimed to have deleted the app altogether from their phone, though again they can only stand such social deprivation so long before they restore it.
  - c. (7) Instagram is another popular social media site. (8) It is specifically designed for communication among peers. Facebook on the other hand is a more "official" public site. Parents, relatives, old acquaintances as well as current friends are often included within one's Facebook network. Employers will often access the Facebook accounts of job applicants. (9) Instagram content tends to be more experimental and more edgy, less documenting experiences and more expressive of one's personality. (10) Indeed it is not uncommon for people to have multiple Instagram accounts for different audiences. Pictures tend to be even more heavily edited and likes more carefully tracked, as after all my followers are my friends; (11) my reputation among them more immediately critical than my reputation with my relatives. It is no surprise that Instagram is the most heavily used social media site for teens and young adults. While you need to be at least 13 to set up an account, such a term of service is easily hacked. (12) The amount of young adult traffic also leads to marketers to pay those with large numbers of followers, influencers, to promote their products.
4. Snapchat is also popular especially among teens, with 69% being active users. (1) Snapchat posts are automatically removed after 24 hours. (2) This can lead to greater spontaneity, less curation ...or circumspection in what one posts. Snapchat also tends to be more text based. Such differences between Instagram and Snapchat: spontaneous vs curated, visual vs textual, suit different thoughts and experiences, different feelings and desires, different personality traits, to some degree then, different persona.
    - a. (4) Self-presentation on Tinder is different yet. As a dating app, (6) users are trying to sell themselves to strangers who may only look at your picture or if you manage to catch their attention, your profile, for a few seconds as they (7)

browse dozens if not hundreds of others. Hence there is a premium on being able to sell yourself in a quick catchy, maybe quirky way. It's hardly your true self, but you do want to sell yourself to the kind of people you would be interested in going out on a date. So your Tinder persona does relate back to your broader identity at some level. (8) Also people who select you will usually check out your other social media sites to learn more about you, and particularly to assess the coherence of your persona across platforms before ever arranging to meet you in person. Thus, once more, there is the dialectic between highlighting your strengths without the other feeling duped and the date a waste of time and money. Recognition received over Tinder is correspondingly ambivalent and potentially ephemeral. Given the vast number of other choices literally at your fingertips, once difficulties arise in a relationship, as they inevitably will if it goes anywhere, it may be easier to simply cut ties, or (9) "ghost" the other rather than working through them towards a richer, more meaningful relationship on the other side of conflict.

5. Twitter is yet another genre of social media where the (1) content of tweets are sharply restricted but their frequency is correspondingly higher to the extent that they can create an (2) "ambient sociality" in which followers can feel like they know the tweeter personally, without ever having met or even exchanged more than random sentence fragments. For through such random tweets one learns the kind of random facts characteristic of more personal relationships.
  - a. Trump has become the poster child for this platform. He was the first politician to use twitter effectively to circumvent mass media outlets and connect directly with the voters. Followers would often feel an (3) "authentic" connection to Trump as his tweets seemed so spontaneous and unfiltered. (4) Everyone knows that today virtually all politicians hire media consultants to manage their social media accounts and even script their content. But no one doubts that Trump writes many of his own tweets. The very time stamp on many of them, early in the morning or late at night, confer a sense of raw authenticity and so a feeling of easy familiarity. It's like gossip at a sleep over. And so the king of lies among his critics

is regarded by his followers as the ultimate truth teller, someone who says what he thinks and tells it like it is.

- b. (5) And then one has email accounts, both work and school accounts for more official business, and private, free accounts for more personal use. The persona one adopts on work email accounts needs to be professional. Such accounts are closest to the bureaucratic roles inhabited by participants in literate bureaucracies. Yet even here there remains more room for individuality and personality than in older letters and memos, perhaps typewritten by a third party such as a secretary, and often destined to be filed away for later access. Of course increasingly emails are also archived, even passively monitored whereas letters can be thrown away, even burnt to protect oneself from incriminating content.
6. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. (1) There are also my avatars in videogames into which I invest myself and from which mood and attitude can bleed out into other aspects of my life. (2) There are Youtube videos I can create to express myself creatively, vlogs and blogs on which to process my experience. And let's not forget my (3) institutional roles offline, and my (4) face to face relationships with friends (5) and family.
7. To sum up, my Facebook persona differs from my Instagram persona, both of which differ in various degrees from who I am on Snapchat and Tinder, Twitter and over my email accounts email. I engage different facets of my personality in my video game avatars than I do creating Youtube videos or curating vlogs and blogs. And to all of these there remains my literate bureaucratic roles at work and my domestic and romantic identities at home.
  - a. Which one of all of these persona is my true self and which are simply roles that I play, masks that I wear, performances that I enact? I am the author of them all to some degree. Or better I am the designer and content moderator of them all. But I am hardly responsible for whatever appears on my pages. Posts by others can only be removed by me after the fact and all are open to anonymous hacking and malicious viruses. On the other hand, I have more freedom of expression than in literate bureaucratic roles or what family and even some friends would countenance. I can creatively manage of reputation and image more than ever

before. I have unprecedented opportunities to express myself, but never autonomously, never with Sartrean radical freedom.

- b. (25) Can they all be integrated as multiple expressions of an ultimately single, true self? Or would not any such common identity be yet another partial persona, this one abstracted from any concrete connection?
  - c. Is it not better to call my true self my entire network of more or less public personae, with my private personae, who I am in solitude, simply one of the nodes in that network? In other words, the virtual self is not the private individual enabled by literacy but a new, networked self. Or perhaps better put, the virtual self's individuality is its distinctive network of more or less public personae.
8. Such a networked self has a new set of vulnerabilities, different from the threats of earlier oral and literate selves. (1) For the oral self, threats were largely to reputation- (2) shame, (3) leading to ostracism, scapegoating even (4) expulsion, abandonment, and sacrificial execution for the good of the community. (5) For the literate self, additional threats overlay these, in particular (6) neurosis from the repression of sexual and aggressive instincts, (7) guilt for indulging them despite being forbidden, and (8) breakdown from overwork.
- a. (9) Virtual technologies add yet another set of vulnerabilities to oral and literate ones. As a network of personae, (10) fragmentation becomes a principle threat to the self. Rather than repressing instinctual desires, I can safely indulge them anonymously on sites that I then dissociate from the rest of my network. Dissociation replaces repression as the principle threat to a coherent sense of self.
  - b. (11) Furthermore, as also a node in broader networks there arises anxieties over monitoring and manipulation. Anonymity is not privacy. One may be merely a data point for big data, but trip the right keyword or browse the wrong website and tracking can quickly lead to identification. The threat of being "outed" is real even from relationships gone sour or by gaining public attention such as by running for political office.
  - c. Manipulation on the other hand has become very subtle. Contemporary advertising no longer consists in sales pitches for us to then critique or resist, its just a fantasy of fun or success, status or belonging that becomes associated with

the advertised product or brand. For the goal of the marketer is not to convince me but to avoid argument altogether. Don't buy our product because of our argument, buy it because you want to have it—after all you deserve it.

- d. And increasingly online, what is being manipulated above all is simply our attention. For the longer we stay on their site, the more opportunities to market their products or to sell my attention to other marketers. And too often we are only aware of how our attention has been manipulated after the fact, when we look up and realize that we have been browsing Facebook profiles or Youtube videos, for the last couple of hours when we had intended to take just a quick break from the paper we've been writing to check up on someone or something. Or we only recognize it, after we are startled to discover its after midnight and we have been binging a Netflix series ever since dinner. Netflix did not convince us to continue onto the next episode, anymore than Amazon convinced us to buy that second book they recommended after we bought the first one that we went on the site to buy. We were only gently nudged. In fact we hardly chose at all, the second episode started before we had decided whether or not to continue watching. That other book was recommended to us as soon as we clicked on our originally intended purchase.
  - e. (12) Finally, yet another source of vulnerability lies in our dependence upon the very technologies that empower our virtual lifestyle. Social media for example has exponentially enhanced connectivity, but a smart phone lost can lead to our feeling lost. A computer hacked can rob us of our very identity.
9. Finally, just as oral, literate and virtual technologies build upon rather than replace one another, so too (1) the vulnerabilities of the virtual self include threats from all three levels. (2) No wonder then, that as Freud had observed in the industrial age, the advance of civilization (3) correlates with ever greater psychological fragility not in spite of scientific advances but because of them. (4) In gaining greater material control over our world, we are becoming more dependent upon maintaining such control (5) and so more vulnerable to frictions, slippages, and failures.
  10. On the other hand, when evaluating the costs and benefits of our emerging networked virtual selves, I would like to issue some caveats and cautions:

- a. (1) First, we need to resist the temptation to contrast the best of the familiar with the worst of the new. Its not like most literate people read a lot of books. Those that did were as often denigrated as admired. They were bookworms, just as disconnected from “real” life as any video gamer. And while reading may enable deep learning, video streamed series on Netflix and Amazon offer characters and narratives no less complex and insightful as any novel. Fan fiction may not stack up well against Shakespeare, but I doubt its any shallower than harlequin romances and dime store whodunits. And social media ought not be contrasted with profound face to face conversation but with neighborhood gossip
- b. (2) So too we should be wary of criticizing the new by the standards of the old. New wine not only needs new wineskins but new wine is not to be judged as if it were a well aged vintage. A youtube video is not an art film. We will need new measures to evaluate new rituals.
- c. (3) Forth, technology is never neutral, but neither should new technology be condemned or praised wholesale. Different social media may be beneficial or harmful to different personalities. For example, instagram may help someone suffering from social phobia, but only exacerbate a histrionic personality. The anonymity of chat groups can both enable stigmatized people to connect and affirm one another while the same anonymity enables bullies to troll with impunity. Criticism will need to be nuanced and specific, both as regards to medium and message, sender and recipient to be of any effective use or moral relevance.
- d. (4) We must also never forget that the internet is only 25 years old, social media itself, only around 15. Much of what we find harmful about social media may be more a function of its immaturity and our being newbies in its use, rather than inherent to the technology itself. We have hardly begun to discuss how best to regulate social media, let alone develop best practices. After all the impact of the printing press on Christianity was not fully felt until seventy-five years later with the eruption of the Protestant Reformation. And even then, the Catholic Church forbade private reading of the bible to the ordinary laity for another four centuries.

The forced widespread adoption of social media during the coronavirus pandemic will likely accelerate this maturation.

- a. (5) Finally, the very boundary between the virtual and the real is becoming increasingly porous. As we shall see in subsequent video lectures, agency and cognition are increasingly distributed across an ever-growing network of digital media and virtual technologies. Virtual life has become part of real life and those living in “real life” are still almost always accessible online. Is it even possible anymore for anyone today to be fully off the grid? Humanity has always been a technological species; today we are all effectively more or less cyborgs.
- b. (6) Ultimately the question is not, nor has it ever been, whether to embrace virtual technologies but how.

11. As humanity has evolved with its technologies, the nature of the self has evolved alongside, into a nested series of identities all operative in its own sphere. As we have seen, in addition to all the traditional vulnerabilities of the human condition the networked self is beset by a new array of virtual demons. How might religion address these new demons? What kinds of symbols, rituals, and beliefs can reconnect virtual networked selves to what they hold sacred so as to enable lives of meaning and purpose? These questions will be the focus of the next video lecture on the demons of the networked self.