



## What Does the Selfie Say? Investigating a Global Phenomenon

### *Introduction*

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*Keywords: selfie, self-portrait, social media, photography, autobiography, moral panic, meme, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat*

Selfies are suddenly ubiquitous. In declaring *selfie* Oxford Dictionaries' 2013 Word of the Year, Editorial Director Judy Pearsall explained that their big data analyses of English words in use showed "a phenomenal upward trend" in mentions of selfies (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013, para. 3). "Are you sick of reading about selfies?" asks an article in *The Atlantic* (Garber, 2014, para. 1), announcing that selfies are now boring and thus finally interesting. "Are you tired of hearing about how those pictures you took of yourself on vacation last month are evidence of narcissism, but also maybe of empowerment, but also probably of the click-by-click erosion of Culture at Large?" Indeed, for all its usage, the term—and more so the practice(s)—remain fundamentally ambiguous, fraught, and caught in a stubborn and morally loaded hype cycle.

This special section brings together diverse scholars working from varied locations and perspectives to break through this hype and lay groundwork for treating the selfie phenomenon with the nuanced attention it deserves. Asked to explain why the production and circulation of self-generated digital photographic portraiture, spread primarily via social media, has grown so popular of late, economists and technologists tend to point to the global saturation of camera phones (especially but not exclusively the smart phone); the aggressive marketing and adoption of the front-facing phone camera; and the growing popularity of online photo-sharing platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, SnapChat, Tumblr, WeChat, and Tinder. Certainly, numbers bear this explanation out. In the last quarter of 2014, worldwide smart-phone subscriptions were up 20%, with fastest growth in underpenetrated markets such as China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, and Russia (Gartner, 2014). As to what people are doing with those phones, Google reports that, in 2014, people took approximately 93 million selfies per day on just Android models alone (Brandt, 2014).

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Although there is no denying the role technology has played in the rise of the selfie phenomenon, as communications theorists, we are more interested in the selfie as cultural artifact and social practice. A selfie is a way of speaking and an object to which actors (both human and nonhuman) respond. Our inquiry can be thought of as threefold. First, we ask, what does the selfie say about what different cultures value, dismiss, or contest at the levels of ontology, evidence, epistemology, affect, ethics, and politics? Next, how is this saying figured by factors such as age, race, gender, sexuality, class, power, access, language, faith, nation, and history? Finally, how do selfies flow, and, in so doing, how do they facilitate flows and debates around meaning, affect, and representation in easily digestible bits?

### **Defining Selfie**

Before proceeding, a more fundamental question still: What precisely *is* a selfie? First and foremost, a selfie is a photographic *object* that initiates the transmission of human feeling in the form of a relationship (between photographer and photographed, between image and filtering software, between viewer and viewed, between individuals circulating images, between users and social software architectures, etc.). A selfie is also a practice—a *gesture* that can send (and is often intended to send) different messages to different individuals, communities, and audiences. This gesture may be dampened, amplified, or modified by social media censorship, social censure, misreading of the sender's original intent, or adding additional gestures to the mix, such as likes, comments, and remixes.

Although the selfie signifies a sense of human agency (i.e., it is a photograph one knowingly takes of oneself, often shown to other humans), selfies are created, displayed, distributed, tracked, and monetized through an *assemblage* of nonhuman agents. The politics of this assemblage renders the selfie—generally considered merely a quotidian gesture of immediacy and co-presence—into a constant reminder that once anything enters digital space, it instantly becomes part of the infrastructure of the *digital superpublic*, outliving the time and place in which it was originally produced, viewed, or circulated. It is perhaps for this reason that selfies function both as a practice of everyday life and as the object of politicizing discourses about how people ought to represent, document, and share their behaviors.

### **Against Pathology**

To date, discourses about the cultural meanings of selfies have tended to extremes. For understandable reasons, marketers deploy selfies as an indicator that one is young, fun, and connected: A quick look through any advertisement for digital imaging equipment these days seems to feature a happy consumer snapping a selfie. Yet in news stories, it is almost impossible to encounter a discussion of selfies that doesn't dabble in discourses of pathology. Each month or so, a news article appears linking taking selfies to harmful mental states such as narcissism (Nauert, 2015), body dysmorphia (McKay, 2014), or even psychosis (Gregoire, 2015). Selfies have even been blamed for harm to others, such as accidents caused by a preoccupation with the camera over one's surroundings (Hughes, 2015). Even likeable selfie enthusiasts are portrayed as vacuous and self-absorbed: Witness ABC's recently cancelled sitcom *Selfie*, an updated Pygmalion story (Burns, 2014) featuring an Instagram-obsessed woman named Liza who requires an analog civilizing by a male coworker named—wait for it—Henry.

Perhaps the most obvious argument to be made against conceptualizing selfies as only acts of vanity or narcissism is the fact that as a genre, selfies consist of far more than stereotypical young girls making duck faces in their bathrooms. When people pose for political selfies, joke selfies, sports-related selfies, fan-related selfies, illness-related selfies, soldier selfies, crime-related selfies, selfies at funerals, or selfies at places like museums, we need more accurate language than that afforded by 19th-century psychoanalysis to speak about what people believe themselves to be doing, and what response they are hoping to elicit.

We are fortunate to have 18 contributions to this special section. The authors hail from around the globe, employ a range of methodological approaches, and study many different types of selfies, some of which are, in fact, duck faces produced by teenage girls. What readers will not find in this special section is contemporaneous theorizing on mental health. Our reasons for this are both scholarly and activist.

We speak daily with reporters and students who are frustrated by our resistance to explaining selfie culture through language that turns on notions such as self-esteem and narcissism. Part of their frustration, we think, derives from the popular belief that science has weighed in on these matters already. Yet, to date, we have not seen a single peer-reviewed piece of scientific literature that convincingly demonstrates that selfie production and mental illness are correlated. We include in this assessment the recent Ohio State study (Fox & Rooney, 2015) that evaluated men and selfies in terms of the "dark triad" of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism, a subclinical group of personality traits notable throughout all sectors of society, deemed within a normal range of functioning and not cause for alarm.

Far more alarming, as *Vice* writer Martin Robbins argues, are the individual cases of selfie use and abuse "being reported by private doctors who make money from treating the conditions they describe" (Robbins, 2014, para. 12). These diagnoses of individual cases quickly turn into indictments of culture at large. As cultural theorists, this is a worrying move, if only because it marginalizes and maligns the same groups of people over and over again.

Consider a news story like "Science Links Selfies to Narcissism, Addiction and Low Self Esteem." That piece, published in *Adweek* online (Barakat, 2014) and circulated around social media venues, began by name-checking Danny Bowman, an aspiring UK teen model. Bowman gained the attention of British tabloid *The Daily Mail* when he attempted suicide, purportedly because he wasn't satisfied with the quality of his selfies. A quick look through *The Daily Mail* article in question shows that the diagnosis of "selfie addiction" came from his psychiatrist, David Vale, who seems to have led *The Daily Mail* to believe that "-addiction to taking selfies is becoming so widespread it is now is a recognised mental illness" (Aldridge & Harden, 2014, para. 7). If selfie addiction were, in fact, as widespread as Vale claims it is, it would seem possible for *Adweek* to interview more psychologists, but instead a *Time* magazine article is referenced as authoritative source. A quick click on the *Time* article (Grossman, 2014) reveals that it is a simple sidebar/opinion piece by a technology journalist, essentially summarizing *The Daily Mail* coverage.

Continuing the media circularity, the next part of the *Adweek* article essentially summarizes a chunk of a *Mercury News* piece, published earlier in that year. A Pew Report on teen photo sharing is mentioned (where the finding seems to be that teens are storytellers), but by the end of the paragraph, the message seems to be that teens need to learn to practice something it calls “selfie control.” This term apparently comes from “Lucie Hemmen, a Santa Cruz clinical psychologist and author of *Parenting a Teen Girl: A Crash Course on Conflict, Communication and Connection with Your Teenage Daughter*” (Yadegaren, 2013, para. 9).

For an article that claimed to report on what science says about selfies, it is worth noting that, in total, the *Adweek* piece names only one scientific report coming from a university. That study and an as-yet-unpublished analysis conducted by the Birmingham Business School on social norms of picture posting on Facebook, dealt not with photo posters, but with the perceptions of viewers (Houghton, Joison, Caudwell, & Marder, 2013).

In her contribution to this special section, “Self(ie)-Discipline: Social Regulation as Enacted Through the Discussion of Photographic Practice,” Anne Burns argues that this charge of narcissism functions more as accusation than diagnosis. After explaining that accusing someone of narcissism because they take or distribute selfies “reflects a poor understanding of narcissism itself,” she explains the real reason for the charge: It acts as “shorthand to chastise those whose photographic self-depiction is perceived as self-absorbed or crass.” To make her argument, Burns analyzes a range of online memes that focus on the act of selfie taking, using a Foucault-inspired lens. She investigates a range of selfie tutorial material, noting that “Once the selfie is established as connoting narcissism and vanity, it perpetuates a vicious circle in which women are vain because they take selfies, and selfies connote vanity because women take them.”

As feminist media scholars, we’ve been down this road before. Burns’ words echo those of the only expert featured in *Adweek* article whose tone did not match the rest of the piece: Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychology Research Center and occasional columnist at *Psychology Today*. “Selfies frequently trigger perceptions of self-indulgence or attention-seeking social dependence that raises the damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don’t spectre of either narcissism or very low self-esteem,” explains Rutledge (Barakat, 2014, para. 10).

Having written on this double-bind ourselves (Senft, 2013a), we were again reminded of its cost: the preventable suicide of Canadian teen Amanda Todd three years ago, the many preventable suicides that have occurred since then, and the horrible events that may well be on the horizon. To the detractors who bullied her, Amanda Todd’s sexually explicit photographs—selfies that were circulated in public—seemed clear evidence of her poor “selfie control,” and low self-esteem, her narcissism and slutty proclivities, or all of these.

To anyone who wanted to hear her side of the story (a story she told through selfies on YouTube as a cry for help prior to her suicide), those photos came about because she was trying to respond to online requests to be less uptight and more expressive (Todd, 2012). They were taken under circumstances she assumed would be private, but were later part of a blackmail and harassment campaign

conducted by an anonymous older man, who reached out to Amanda's classmates, encouraging their physical violence (Grenoble, 2012).

Although there is no available information to support the claim that selfie addiction is a social problem writ large, more than enough data exist to support the argument that "damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don't" rules of visual display apply more to some social groups than others. On balance, images of women and queers of all genders tend to be more socially policed than those of heterosexual men (with the rare exception of straight male politicians such as former U.S. Congressman Anthony Weiner.) Similarly, people of color find themselves under surveillance of all sorts more frequently than Whites, and young people have fewer legal claims to privacy than older people. Given these realities, it's worth asking what really is at stake in casting the act of taking and circulating multiple photos of oneself as a primary pathology of our time.

### **Moral Panics**

In the language of sociology, pathology-based rhetoric about selfies tends to resemble what Stanley Cohen (2002) calls "moral panic." As Cohen points out, moral panic tends to heighten when a particular media form or practice is adopted by young people, women, or people of color. Kate Miltner and Nancy Baym make a similar argument in their transnational media analysis of "Selfiegate"—the scandal that broke out after a photo was published showing Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt taking a selfie with U.S. President Barack Obama and UK Prime Minister David Cameron during Nelson Mandela's memorial service. In "The Selfie of the Year of the Selfie: Reflections on a Media Scandal," the authors compare news coverage in the United States, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, arguing that one reason Selfiegate resonated internationally was that it raised questions about "who takes selfies and under what circumstances." More importantly, they argue, Selfiegate also "speaks to shifts in the social fabric that led to a man of color being president and a woman being prime minister."

The anxious intersection of race and gender likewise haunts Apryl Williams and Betty Aldana Marquez's contribution to this issue. In "The Lonely Selfie King: Selfies and the Conspicuous Prosumption of Gender and Race," the authors share the results of conversations with viewers of male and female selfies in New York and Texas. They find that Black and Latino women were relatively comfortable with men of any race taking selfies of any stripe. But "for White women, the 'man selfie' must adhere to very strict expectations." These include the demand that a man's performance of masculinity seem entirely effortless, natural, and unstaged, lest he come across as less-than-truly-male (or, we might add, less-than-truly-White).

According to Stuart Hall (1978), media panics almost always act as smoke screens deflecting conversations that would be more dangerous to those in authority. Katrin Tiidenberg implies the sorts of conversations these might be in her article, "Odes to Heteronormativity—Presentations of Femininity in Russian-Speaking Pregnant Women's Instagram Accounts." While analyzing representations of pregnancy among Russian speakers on Instagram, Tiidenberg found it difficult to locate examples that didn't emphasize the major normative notions of what a "proper" Russian woman needs to be today: "the idealized female appearance, the celebration of the heterosexual nuclear family, and a staging of opposite-

sex relationships that bespeaks traditional romantic values." A frustrated Tiidenberg ends by asking, "[How] could one Instagram one's pregnancy in a less normative tone?"

Even in purportedly less sexually repressive political regimes than Russia's, panic over nonnormative selfies abound, argue Sonja Boon and Beth Pentney. In "Virtual Lactivism: Breast-feeding Selfies and the Performance of Motherhood," the authors point out that even the most conventional breast-feeding selfies occupy a liminal space, making visible the "often taken-for-granted sexualization of the breast." Boon and Pentney argue that, given such a restrictive view of the breast-feeding body, alternative breast-feeding selfies (e.g., those that feature toddlers, tandem breast-feeding, transgendered breast-feeding, supplemental breast-feeding devices, etc.) "implicitly push at the boundaries of maternal roles" and are thus doubly troubling.

Whereas popular pundits and comedians seem to have plenty to say about selfie culture, academics in the fields of media and cultural studies have been slower to weigh in. Certainly, there is excellent work to be found on the social aspects of mobile photography (Gye, 2007; Hjorth, 2007; Kindberg, Spasojevic, Fleck, & Sellen, 2005; Lee, 2005; May & Hearn, 2005; Steenson, 2006; van House & Davis, 2005), documentation of the self through digital photography (Ardévol & Gómez-Cruz, 2012; Durrant, Frohlich, Sellen, & Uzzell, 2011; Lasén & Gómez-Cruz, 2009; Schwarz, 2010; Rettberg, 2014; Van Dijck, 2008; Vivienne & Burgess, 2013; Yoo & Kwon, 2011), and the history of artistic and vernacular self-portraiture leading up to the advent of selfies (Hall, 2014; Jones, 2002; Roberts, 2011; Rugg, 2014). Yet in the United States, the most well-known text discussing selfies as an indicator of a cultural shift of sorts remains Sherry Turkle's 2012 *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*. Consisting of interviews and observations, *Alone Together* warns readers that younger Internet users especially seem dangerously preoccupied with the "self as avatar," a condition Turkle sees evidenced in part by selfie culture.

In this collection, several authors working with teens came away with very different conclusions about selfie culture than Turkle. In the favelas (urban slums) of Vitória, Brazil, David Nemer and Guo Freeman found that teens posted selfies "to speak about violence in their area, to self-document their lives, and let their parents know they were safe during the day." In their article, "Empowering the Marginalized: Rethinking Selfies in the Slums of Brazil," the authors argue that, "for marginalized users who are suffering in a relatively severe living environment, selfies are not a shallow way to show narcissism, fashion, and self-promotion and seek attention; selfies, rather, empower the users to exercise free speech, practice self-reflection, express spiritual purity, improve literacy skills, and form strong interpersonal connections."

In Australia, Kath Albury found that, although many of the 16- to 17-year-olds she interviewed engaged in the sort of gender policing that often leads to the production of "ideal image" photos, they also talked about producing selfies as jokes. In "Selfies, Sexts, and Sneaky Hats: Young People's Understandings of Gendered Practices of Self-Representation," Albury explains that, while researching young people's attitudes toward sexting (i.e., sending texts and images intended to be exchanged within flirtations and intimate relationships), she noticed that the teens she spoke with generally resisted that

word, associating it with the adult-driven moral panics discussed above. Instead, they chose to categorize their images as selfies intended for private, semiprivate, or public consumption. These included a subgenre known as "sneaky hats," in which teens post nude or seminude photos with hats (or other objects) placed strategically over breasts and/or genital regions, mimicking popular films such as *The Full Monty* and *Austin Powers*.

### **Control and Meaning**

Unless one is wedded to the notion that the teens discussed above are suffering from a false sense of agency, these examples raise the question: Why is it that selfies are so frequently featured in the public imagination not as sites of control but as places where control is lost? One answer might be that these have been predominant themes of mediated images for a very long time.

In the 1970s, critic John Berger argued that in the history of Western art, women have had little control over the representation of their bodies and subjectivities. A Marxist, Berger believed the reason for this was because male patrons and male-dominated institutions have long socially and financially rewarded representations of men as ideal subjects and spectators. To this day, from fine art to contemporary advertising, a representational dynamic dominates in which "men act, and women appear" (1973, p. 47), generally as ideal objects of desire or as muses that inspire men. As he infamously put it, "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (p. 47).

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, psychoanalytically trained film theorists were pointing out that, even for men, images are sites where control is at risk. For instance, Christian Metz (1977), argued that the darkened cinema experience is powerful because it replicates for all viewers the childhood sexual dynamic of scopophilia, a primal form of voyeurism in which we find ourselves staring at a world of images, delighted, dumbfounded, and essentially powerless to change what we are viewing.

In 1975, feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey published a landmark essay called "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which argued that spectators of any gender viewing traditional Hollywood films wound up looking at the screen in ways best understood in terms of male voyeurism. To ground her argument, Mulvey explained how a director's camera encourages the viewer to take its point of view only; how male actors in films tend to do the looking (while female actors tend to remain the ones looked at); and how viewers are always secure in the knowledge that they can stare as long as they like, never to be caught themselves in the camera's gaze.

These days, most theorists (including Mulvey herself) concede that a purely voyeuristic model of image spectatorship needs updating: Certainly, sexuality, race, class, education, ability, and nationality may all alter spectators' identifications with the look of the camera, making it impossible to say what a viewing experience "means" for every viewer. When considering images that circulate online, this multiplicity of perspectives tends to be even more obvious. Today, we may produce material, distribute it in many-to-many fashion (rather than one-way, as is the case for film and television), and court (rather than silence) viewer interaction. Who is the object in these scenarios? Who is the subject?

In "The Gestural Image: The Selfie, Photography Theory, and Kinesthetic Sociability," photography theorist Paul Frosh rejects a voyeuristic model of the selfie spectatorship. He points out that, while classical photography has indeed emphasized a sort of spatial evacuation, with photographers "shooing unwanted objects off frame as potential interferences," selfies are different in that they signal first and foremost the body of the photographer (the outstretched arm, the craned neck, the work to get it all in the frame). The net effect of this is the creation of what Frosh calls "gestural image," which says "not only 'see this, here, now' but also 'see me showing you me.'" Rather than the inviting voyeurism, selfies show a "self enacting itself" and invite spectators to reflect on the "very instability of the term 'self.'" Neither more idealized nor more duplicitous than other sorts of images, selfies invite viewers to think of identity "between the self as an image and as a body, as a constructed effect of representation and as an object and agent of representation."

### **Authenticity**

For Frosh, a major component of the selfie is the fact that it gestures toward what he calls "corporeal sociability." As he argues, "the selfie invites viewers, in turn, to make conspicuously communicative, gestural responses" that include taking reaction selfies or responding through gestures such as "like" and "retweet" and "comment." In online news reporting, this type of sociability is often linked to notions of witnessing, argue Michael Koliska and Jessica Roberts. In their article, "Selfies: Witnessing and Participatory Journalism with a Point of View," the authors begin by noting that, when one takes and uploads selfies such as "those taken with burning trash containers during the May Day protests in Barcelona, Spain or selfies taken with members of the Thai Army in Bangkok after the military coup," the image says not just "I'm here" but rather "I witnessed this event." Koliska and Roberts argue that, when circulated en masse, witnessing selfies provide "different perspectives or points of view that, when shared and observed together, can provide and map multiple perspectives of an event." Of course, witnessing selfies requires more than interested parties: For multiple perspectives to truly circulate material online, issues of authenticity and veracity come into play, as do matters of access and power.

In "The Selfie Assemblage," Aaron Hess argues that, to understand how authenticity intersects with power in selfie production and circulation, we need to understand the five overlapping elements of what he terms the *selfie assemblage*: the human selves who engage in acts; the images produced and consumed; the physical spaces in which representation and spectatorship transpire; the device(s) used; and the networks through which materials circulate. These overlaps matter, argues Hess, pointing out that, although selfies are "taken and retaken to find that perfect angle, selfies are staged performances, yet they also invite users to state that they indeed were at that vacation spot, ran into that celebrity, or lost that weight." As the abundance of hashtags like #filterfakers and #selfiefails makes plain, for every person who assesses authenticity based on posing and naturalness of the humans in the photo, someone else assesses it at the level of the time or place, while still others assess it by device.

Katharina Lobinger and Cornelia Brantner demonstrate Hess' arguments about the way humans and their devices signal selfie authenticity in their contribution, "In the Eye of the Beholder: Subjective Views on the Authenticity of Selfies." The authors report on a German study that measured how viewers perceived expressive authenticity in selfies, noting that viewers could be grouped into three general



campers: Some perceived authenticity through naturalness in posing (as opposed to overly staged actions such as duck faces); others when they believe a photo was spontaneous (rather than staged); and still others when they felt that a photo was presented as is, undoctored by filters or excessive cropping.

Taking on notions of authenticity at the level of device, Meese, Gibbs, Carter, Arnold, Nansen, and Kohn argue that those who decry the "inappropriateness" of taking selfies at funerals and circulating them on Instagram need to understand how audiences speak with and through Instagrammed images as a form of platform vernacular. In "Selfies at Funerals: Digital Commemoration, Presencing and Platform Vernacular," they examined a large corpus of photographs hashtagged #funeral on Instagram, noting that, given the social conventions of the platform, the majority of these images constituted "legible and legitimate cultural practice of presencing; a practice that is directly embedded in wider rituals of mourning and memorialization."

James Katz and Elizabeth Thomas Crocker make a similar argument in "Selfies and Photo Messaging as Visual Conversation: Reports from the United States, United Kingdom, and China." The authors interview users of SnapChat, a platform that allows viewers to see an image for only 10 seconds before it disappears, noting how the service affords the ability to create "meaningful 'language games' using images as both grammar and vocabulary."

Arguably, the network level of the selfie assemblage is where authenticity may be taken most seriously. When someone posts a selfie featuring the words, "I am the 99%" or "Black Lives Matter," we hope to be able to take the person at his or her word, while acknowledging our lack of leverage in the matter, given that we will probably never meet the person in the photo. Senft (2008) uses the term "networked reflective solidarity" to describe the way online networks can link us to others with political sentiments similar to our own and how such solidarity undergirds nearly all viral campaigns on the Internet. Selfies are not necessary for people to engage in networked reflective solidarity. Online political organizing predates photo sharing, social media, and indeed the visual Internet itself. However, when selfies are used, it becomes easier to see how every campaign for solidarity, from the most urgent to the most banal, contains explicit and implicit claims regarding whose suffering and heroism matters, and whose does not.

Two contributions to this issue, approached from different parts of the world, make this argument quite plain. In "Selfies as Beneficial Meme: Charity and National Identity in the #nomakeupselfie and #thumbsupforstephen Campaigns," Ruth Deller and Shane Tilton compared British media coverage of two different fund-raising campaigns that used selfies to raise funds for cancer-related charities in Britain. Although the authors note, "the connection between British identity and charity is nothing new," they discovered that media coverage of the two campaigns differed dramatically. The authors conclude with the observation that, in Britain, national ideas about who counts as a hero (and what counts as heroism) seem to operate along deeply gendered lines.

In "The Selfie and the Other: Consuming Viral Tragedy and Social Media (After)lives," Jenna Brager considers not heroes but victims. Brager focuses on a selfie taken in Beirut moments before a car bomb exploded, killing a teenager named Mohammad al-Chaar and six others, including political figure

Mohammad Chatah. After discussing how the incident catalyzed the international #notamartyr campaign on Twitter, Brager observes that, while teenaged al-Chaar was featured in #notamartyr campaign, Chatah was not: “presumably,” she writes, “because as a political figure, he constituted an ‘appropriate’ target of violence.” Brager then turns to the minimal Western interest when selfies of slain Lebanese teenagers Malak Zahwe and Maria Jawhari were circulated online. Noting that these two girls hailed from Dahieh, known as a Hezbollah stronghold, Brager writes, “these other victims are framed, by association, as members of a terrorist organization, rather than ‘innocent’ civilian victims” and wore hijab—“a visible marker of otherness.”

Brager ends her piece by conceding the importance of victim selfies, if only to challenge the notion that victims exist only as “bug splats” (a term for drone photographs of killings) in public memory. However, she argues, when selfies enter transnational circulation, what they are thought to mean may differ radically depending on the cultural context of the viewer.

### **(Dis)Empowerment**

As the foregoing discussion makes abundantly clear, celebrating all selfies as empowering makes as little sense as denigrating them all as disempowering, and yet this polarizing rhetoric persists. To understand why, it helps to recall that discourses of empowerment and disempowerment can, and often do, operate on multiple registers simultaneously. For instance, when most Americans speak of “feeling empowered,” they are referencing a psychological experience in which they feel at ease with themselves, and thus able to take more action in their daily lives. Yet empowerment also has been narrated through sociological language: To be socially empowered is to have the capacity to take actions in relation to others. The distinction between the psychological and the sociological matter, here: I may feel psychologically empowered by feminist rhetoric, but that does not stop legislators from passing laws about what I can and cannot do with my own body or ensure me equal pay. Conversely, the fact that a White person feels what she perceives as the psychologically disempowering phenomenon known as “reverse racism” does not mitigate her actual social power to be free from racist scrutiny while walking into a convenience store. When we speak in these intersectional ways, empowerment takes a political turn. When we experience a capacity to generate more wealth, or to distribute existing wealth more equally, empowerment is thought to be economic.

When speaking of selfies as empowering (or disempowering, for that matter), these registers are worth remembering. The act of creating, uploading, viewing, exchanging, or commenting on a photograph cannot in and of itself lead to any of the states discussed above, though it may facilitate all of them. For instance, it is relatively easy to imagine how someone might feel a sense of psychological and social well-being after posting images of his less-than-perfect body for others to view, and getting positive reinforcement for that act (Tiidenberg, 2014). It likewise makes sense to understand how a personal photo generated in one’s social circles might carry important political weight, as happens when Saudi women post selfies of themselves driving in a country that does not permit women to drive. Any time anyone uses a selfie to take a stand against racist, classist, misogynist, homophobic, racist, ageist, or ableist views of what a worthwhile representation is, or should be, issues of political power are clearly at stake.

Finally, while most of us might imagine the economic empowerment potential of selfies to be limited to the Kim Kardashians of the world, selfies have been used to raise awareness around economic inequities. One example is the "rubble videos" (Jabari, 2014) in which water-deprived residents of Gaza engage in the ALS "Ice Bucket Challenge" by making videos of themselves dumping sand, rock, and military debris on themselves.

Yet it is equally easy to imagine how someone could go from feeling empowered by producing or viewing a particular selfie to feeling socially, politically, or economically disempowered by its circulation. Such disempowerment might occur online in the form of being disciplined for taking selfies wrong; as racist, misogynist, homophobic, racist, ageist, or ableist attacks; as online bullying; or under the guise of a malicious meme that "borrows" a photo generated for an entirely different audience. It could occur off-line, too, as happens when someone finds himself fired at work after being targeted by a revenge porn episode; victimized by doxxing (where personal documentation is hacked and released online); or, worse still, becomes the target of stalking or physical violence.

### **The Grab**

To better understand the double-edged nature of selfie circulation online, it may be helpful to recall that, on social media platforms, users tend to consume image, sound, and text differently than they do when viewing print, film, or television. Senft (2008, 2013b) has argued that social media viewers tend to consume visual material not by gazing (as one would a traditional film shown in a cinema), nor by glancing (as one might do with a television turned on in a room), but in a segmented and tactile manner: "grabbing." To grab signifies multiple acts: to touch, to seize for a moment, to capture attention, and to leave open to interpretation (as in the saying, "up for grabs"), raising questions of agency, permission, and power.

Understood through the mechanics of grabbing, selfies operate on many levels. First, there are the images we have taken, grabbed to our own phone, or grabbed through the network and downloaded onto our computers. Next, there are the images we choose to grab to circulate via social networks—or those grabbed without our consent by someone who hacks our accounts, accesses our phones, or forwards something sent privately to the public. From there, our images circulate through networks via grabbing terminology such as "share" and "forward." Of course, once an image begins to travel around the Web, the grab is truly at play, because it is impossible to control where an image will wind up.

The third level of the selfie is where things move from visibility to invisibility. Here, we might consider the selfie as it is grabbed as raw data by proprietary services such as Facebook and Instagram—data then grabbed by algorithms fueling features like tickers and newsfeeds. These data are also sold to advertisers through the process known as "mining." The fourth level of the selfie involves the grabbing of corporate data by governments and corporations under government contract to aid facial recognition, law enforcement, or profiling efforts.

There is even a fifth level of grabbing, when a government or corporation decides its data-

produced profile supersedes our self-produced image and demands that we redocument ourselves to its satisfaction. This happens routinely on places like Facebook, where enemies report one another as fraudulent users to subject one another to the invasive and time-consuming process of providing government documentation to a corporate entity to prove true identity.

Although grabbing happens to everyone with data circulating on the Internet, historically, some bodies have grabbed and been grabbed more than others. This is one of the arguments of Elizabeth Losh's "Feminism Reads Big Data: 'Social Physics,' Atomism, and Selfiecity." The author considers the implicit and explicit political messages given by the the Selfiecity project, a big data effort to cull, code, and ultimately display Instagram images marked #selfie taken from five cities around the world: Bangkok, Berlin, Moscow, New York, and São Paulo. Although Selfiecity offers itself as a value-neutral resource for research on selfie culture worldwide, Losh points out that "harvesting data from near the geographical centers of metropolitan hubs frequently excludes user-generated image content from more marginalized residents in peripheral slums, former townships, or state-sponsored housing projects farther away from the central sites of power and privilege." In other words, when creating large-scale selfie projects, we need to foreground who grabs what, from whom, where, and why.

Anirban Baishya makes a similar, though far more damning, political point regarding grabbing in his contribution, "#NaMo: The Political Work of the Selfie in the 2014 Indian General Elections." He analyzes the role played by carefully culled selfies circulated by India's right-wing prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi, as well as Modi supporters. As Baishya explains, the "banal" and "amateur" nature of these photos worked to convey particular notions of sovereignty, patriotism, and suffrage to supporters of right-wing politics in India. In these contexts, argues Baishya, the quotidian nature of selfies performs of new sort of political labor: "the selfie itself *is* work, whether it is as visual evidence or, as in the case of Narendra Modi, the consolidation of the affective relations that *produce* the sovereign."

When selfies become politicized, every grab seems to inspire a countergrab. This is especially in the case when photos are seen as overtly manipulative in their aims. Matthew Bellinger makes this case in "Bae Caught Me Tweetin," which focused on responses to UK Prime Minister David Cameron's Twitter account after a photo was posted featuring Cameron on the phone, with a first-person announcement that he was on the phone to Obama. Although not technically a selfie, writes Bellinger, "Cameron's image became tied in the eyes of several media outlets to a genre of self-portraiture more often associated, at least in popular consciousness, with bathroom mirrors and smart phones than office desks and 10 Downing Street." The photo's staged quality was duly parodied all over the Internet, with celebrities like actor Patrick Stewart miming himself on the phone using a box of hand wipes, writing on Twitter to "patch me through."

In his work on humor on the Internet, philosopher Joshua Shaw (2010) offers three major reasons why a selfie parody like the one described above might make us laugh: because it helps us feel superior to others; because—like all humor—it displays incongruity, unexpectedness, or weirdness of some sort; and because it helps provide relief in socially tense environments. Yet humor that provides relief for one individual might well cause trauma for another. Witness the rise in memes that grab the selfies of nonfamous people in the name of political humor, such as antifeminist memes (Martin-Broderick,

2013); welfare-shaming memes (Mccutcheon, 2014); or the meme that featured a woman who took a photo of herself crying after a bad haircut, only to discover that she had been turned into an anti-Obamacare joke (Broderick, 2014).

Even when a selfie is remade into a meme for ostensibly good reasons, questions about agency abound. This was the case of the parents of a child with Down syndrome who was alerted that their family photo had been remade into a series of treacly "inspiration" memes (Evelyn, 2014). In these moments, the selfie performs a special of political work, demonstrating three contesting versions of reality at play: the version originally imagined by photographers; the version potentially imagined by anyone using the Internet; and the version where questions of ethics reside.

Christine Bacareza Balance argues that viral memes depend not just on an object's circulation through networks but on creators who "craft emotional hooks, key signifiers that touch upon a shared set of affective investments and affiliations" (2012, p. 143). In the United States, perhaps no campaign has made this case more strongly than the Tumblr, "If They Gunned Me Down, Which Picture Would They Use?" (IfTheyGunnedMeDown, 2014c). The site, which erupted in response to nationally significant race-related police brutality cases in Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City, encourages non-White users to juxtapose two contrasting images of themselves. In one entry, a user writes, "They wouldn't show the smiling girl who graduated abroad at one of the best schools in the country. The media would portray me as a hard and mean-looking girl who was asking for it" (2014b, para. 2). In another, a man writes, "I am tired of being put in a box. I am not a rapist. I am not a thief. I am not 'entitled.' I am not a criminal. More importantly, I am not an animal" (2014a, para. 3).

### **Toward Better Understanding**

As the bravery of those who participate in "If They Gunned Me Down" makes achingly clear, if we hope to have any serious understanding of what the selfie says, to whom, and why, cultural literacy is not just a nice idea; it's an ethical prerequisite. This is why Elizabeth Losh argues that, rather than more raw data, projects like Selfiecity would be well served by "selfie research groups [that] include specialists in anthropology, sociology, history, visual culture, rhetoric, political science, gender and sexuality studies, and many other fields."

This special section is one step toward such serious understandings. Another is the emerging Selfie Researchers Network, which aims to create an international forum for exactly this sort of work. The group's Facebook page (Selfies Research Network, 2013) currently has more than 2,000 members from more than 40 countries, Group contributors have translated the website's welcome page into more than 15 languages (Selfies Research Network, 2014). Members have organized academic panels on selfie culture at international conferences such as the Association of Internet Researchers in Daegu, Korea; South By Southwest in Austin, Texas; and Consoling Passions in Dublin, Ireland. Members have organized selfie-related conferences in the United Kingdom, including the Picturing the Social conference in Sheffield (D'Orazio, 2014) and the Selfie Citizen workshop in Manchester (Kunstman, Vis, & Faulkner, 2015).

Finally, for those seeking to explore selfies beyond the essays in this special section, members of

the Selfie Researchers Network have created "Studying Selfies: A Critical Approach," a seven-week syllabus for teachers, students, or anyone on the Internet wishing to think critically about the use of selfies in popular culture (Senft et al., 2014). This syllabus, licensed under a Creative Commons agreement and designed to be used in either modular fashion or in full, focuses on how selfies can be used to better think through issues of identity and interpellation; branding, celebrity, and consumer culture; biometrics, facial recognition, and dataveillance; sexual expression, dating, and gender; subalternity (subaltern as "self"), subaltern representation (subaltern as "other"), "criminality" and race/nation; and place, space, and "appropriateness" critiques regarding selfie production and circulation.

This special forum should thus be read as a set of first steps toward building the deep, interdisciplinary, international, multilayered understandings of selfies and all that the discourses that surround them represent. The perspectives here are far from complete, but they should open doors and provide openings for others to enter, elaborate on, and challenge the important discussions yet to be had on the many meanings of selfies.

In closing, we wish to thank Rebecca Hoffman for her editorial assistance and the members of the editorial board assembled for this issue, many of whom read several pieces and all of whom provided substantive feedback that greatly strengthened each piece and the forum as a whole. They are Crystal Abidin, Kath Albury, Nick Boston, David Brake, John Edward Campbell, Lynn Schofield Clark, Gaby David, Veronica Davidov, Bent Fausing, Miao Feng, Tarleton Gillespie, Fabio Gomes Goveia, Amy Hasinoff, Andrew Herman, Jeremy Hunsinger, Aynne Kokas, Adi Kuntsman, Tama Leaver, Jessa Lingel, Jimmie Manning, David Marshall, Alice Marwick, John Carter McKnight, Ryan Milner, Kate Miltner, Magda Oszanowski, Zizi Papacharissi, Natalie Pennington, Carrie Rentschler, Jill Walker Rettberg, Ed Schiappa, Nishant Shah, Katrin Tiidenberg, Shobha Vadrevu, Nancy Van House, Siva Vaidhyanathan, and Katie Warfield.

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