THE DIGITAL SELF

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List of Illustrations:

THE DIGITAL SELF

The Digital Self is how we present ourselves online. The Internet, the World Wide Web and Social Media all contribute to the creation of our digital selves. But the expansion of Social Media and its use of imagery is what fuelled this concept. In this essay I will start with a brief history of the Internet, the World Wide Web and Social Media. I will investigate my own digital self, paying particular attention to who is tracking me, why and how this is being done. The advantages and dangers of creating a digital self, especially for photographers, will be highlighted with examples.

Between 1961 and 1967 the concept of transferring data, from one computer to another, by packet switching[1], instead of by circuits, was being researched in the US and in the UK. The first message was sent from one computer, at UCLA, to another computer at Stanford Research Institute in 1969. Over the next couple of years more computers and more applications were added to the network. In 1972 the first email was sent from one user to another. These message transfers were carried on huge national level mainframe computers. In the 1980s the first PCs and workstations appeared, opening up the possibility for those outside the scholarly research communities to interact with each other (2). The material being transferred was all text based. By the mid 1980s commercial communities were becoming interested in how the technology could be used to control product sales to their customers.

The methodology of connecting individuals between these early computers was not smooth and often involved different computer languages. In 1989 Tim Berners-Lee, computer scientist with CERN, proposed a way in which the information on these computers could be shared more seamlessly by adding a 'front page' behind which the

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[1] *The routing and transferring of data by means of addressed packets so that a channel is occupied during the transmission of the packet only, and upon completion of the transmission the channel is made available for the transfer of other traffic (1)*

information containing computers could be connected. The World Wide Web was born. Tim Berners-Lee realised that

*(*The World Wide Web's*) true potential would only be unleashed if anyone, anywhere could use it without paying a fee or having to ask for permission.(3)*

Because of the technical limitations of the original computers and the cost of dial up access, images could not be shared easily or cheaply. The first shared images were on personal web sites. In the early 2000s companies began to offer scanning and storage services. But the early companies struggled to offer free access to these images. Picasa was developed in late 2001. It teamed up with the Google owned, Blogger, to allow the display of images on blogs (4). A number of other photo sharing sites followed. In 2004 Flickr was launched. Users could share their photos with whomsoever they wished and the images could be tagged with keywords. Facebook also appeared this same year. In 2005 the blog host Wordpress offered it's own image hosting (5).

Digital camera sales increased worldwide as they became cheaper. Sales peaked in 2010(6).
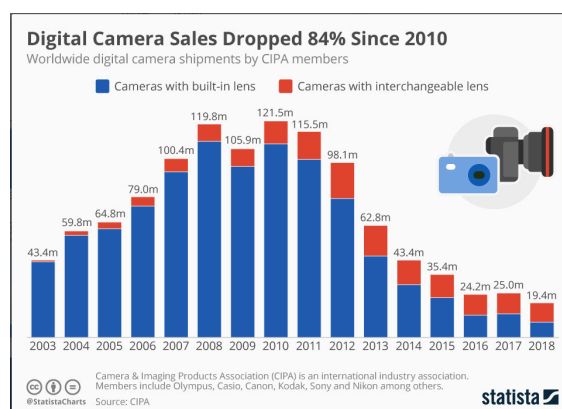
Today the digital camera is being superseded by the smartphone that offers portability, ease of use and high quality imaging. All of these developments gave users the possibility to create and post photographs easily online. This ease of uploading gave everyone the opportunity to 'create' an online self. Being *present* online soon became

insufficient. People wanted recognition and praise for what they were posting. The culture of 'liking' images developed. Online digital personalities were being created. What an individual posts creates part of their online profile that defines their Digital Self.

STATISTA has generated a prediction for the growth of social media sites up to 2021

Number of social media users worldwide from 2010 to 2021 (in billions)
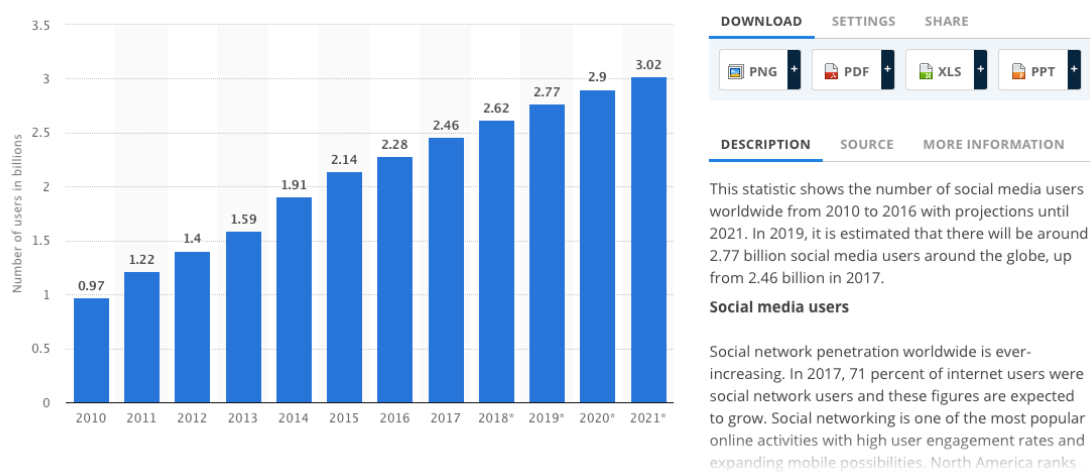
statista 2019, *Number of social media users worldwide from 2010 to 2021 (in billions)*, Statista, retrieved 6 April 2019, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/>

Close to half the world's population participate on some sort of Social Media site (7). This is the 'virtual person' that anyone interacting with us on a social media site, encounters. This is not who we are in reality but very often it is how we would like others to see us. People often create their idealised digital self to avoid or manage their day-to-day anxieties. Because social media has grown so quickly we have not had sufficient time to learn what are the consequences of creating a digital self. Many people are unaware of how the data they provide is used and often abused. Several different digital selves can be created using different profiles on different sites. Sometimes this is recommended if one wants to avoid being 'tracked' thus receiving unwanted messages or advertising. In most cases it is recommended to create a digital self that is as close as

possible to the person we are in reality. If this is not done there is a risk that the digital

self will become who we think we are (8).

Who am I on Social Media – what does *my* Digital Self look like out there on the World

Wide Web? Putting 'Nuala Mahon' into a Google search comes up with five people

with this name. I was the first name on the list. I assume because Google knew I was

asking about myself. Clicking on my name brings the searcher through to my Facebook

page. On this page it is possible to see the very limited amount of information I have

made public about myself. In my profile only my date of birth is there and access to this

information is locked. There is no way of removing this date. It is to be assumed that

this is to facilitate targeted advertising. I have 147 'friends' on Facebook. There is no

record of my interest in any films, music, sports or books. I am a member of five groups

and have made only one review. Despite my careful management of my profile online, a

request, for all the information Facebook holds on me, revealed that there is 13,763,919

bytes held somewhere in the Facebook cyber space. There are 23 sub headings under

which this information is held including my 'Search History' and "Apps and Websites' I

have logged into using Facebook. Because I have never 'traded' with anyone on

Facebook my file on 'Marketplace' is empty. The file entitled 'ads' has a long list of

titles including one headed 'Black Pepper'. I have no idea what information is held

within this file, as it is not possible to expand this subheading. This is just one social

media site on which I participate.

I have information on seven social media sites most of which I do not use regularly. I

am a fairly active contributor to Instagram. I made a request to establish what

information Instagram holds about me. This revealed that there are 14,042,188 bytes,

contributing to my digital self, on or behind this social media site. In this case my

photographs constitute 13,209,655 bytes. The remainder of the information is held in

files with the suffix 'json', a JAVA script format. Viewing the information in these files it is evident that every comment, every like and every message I have sent is noted in a file. My 'likes' file is 229KB. A print out of 2 months of 'likes' looks like the following image:

[illegible dense JSON data block]

Google owns YouTube and many other social media sites. Facebook owns Instagram. It can be concluded that the information from all social media sites is used to build up a combined digital profile of me. This can then be used to target advertising towards the digital version of me. I become the product being 'sold' to product providors to facilitate their targeting of me.

As a social media user one must be continually aware of the personal information that is being shared behind these sites. This information is used to target advertising considered suitable for the digital self we have created. The sites on which we post material are paid for, through advertising. The more an advertiser knows about you the better they can target you. In order to know more about you an advertiser uses a tracking service. These trackers create small text files that are inserted into your browser. They are called *cookies*. These cookies perform two functions the first is to keep passwords stored so

that you can return to a site on which you have saved a password and re-enter without re-entering your password. The second function, of these cookies, is to track your behaviour online. Those behind these tracking 'services' can see exactly what and how often a user has looked at something on a site and share it with the site operator (9). With this information the tracking service can build a profile that is extrapolated from your online behaviour. This information will be sold to product providers who will then target the user with publicity on social media.

Sites that do not require a login use third party tracking tools to accumulate their information. A search of four news sites using the browser Firefox and the plugin Lightbeam showed the following tracking image
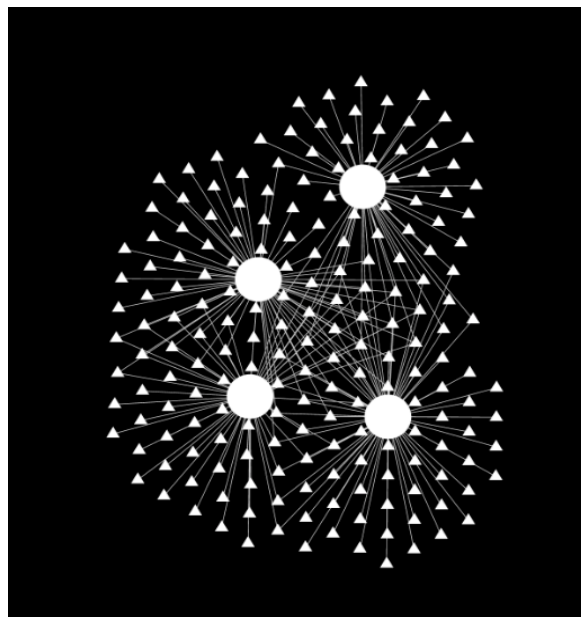
The white dots are the four sites accessed. The 190 triangles are the third party sites that tracked the search. There are software products that can be used to block third party trackers. But the need for caution when creating an online profile is evident.

Having created an online persona, a Digital Self, how can this be used or abused? There are positives and negatives around our Digital Self. One of the obvious positives of having a social media persona is that social media sites can be used to promote business or work. There are hundreds of 'self help' articles, on the Internet, about how photographers can and should promote their work on social media. The three most popular social media sites for photographers are Facebook, Instagram and 500px. Posting a photograph to a site does not guarantee that anyone will see it. One has to actively pursue followers on Facebook and use hashtags(#) on Instagram and 500px. Hashtagging is more like a game of chess than a logical procedure. To increase the number of followers one is advised to look at the #'s being used by the accounts with the most followers and to use the same hashtags. One is also advised to create a personal database of hashtags and to use at least thirty with each posting.

Paul Nicklen (#paulnicklen), a National Geographic wildlife photographer, commands a huge following on Instagram. He has written and talked extensively about his work. His passion for preserving our planet draws followers. He claims that it is not just the images he is producing that are important but the message he is delivering about how we are destroying the world's ecosystem. (10). Steve McCurry has, also, a large following on Instagram. His portrait work and his photojournalism stories have been published in many magazines. His work is widely exhibited. He has wide name recognition that enhances his digital recognition. A photo of Murad Osman's (@muradosman) girlfriend, entering a graffiti sprayed door, while pulling him along, went 'viral' and 4.4 million people now follow him. Osman says there was a great deal of luck involved in his instant online success. With his success he spotted a niche market almost immediately and created the hashtag #Followmeto which was a travel project where he created similar images of his wife pulling him along in dozens of spectacular places throughout the world. Travel promoters began to use the couple to promote their travel destinations.

The couple became 'influencers'. These are people with huge numbers of followers on social media. They can demand £4,000 - £10,000 for a single Instagram post promoting a business (11). Trey Ratcliff has written a book about how some 'influencers' work. This author created dozens of fake Instagram accounts with thousands of fake followers. He then approached agencies that put him in contact with different travel companies who were prepared to engage him as an influencer to promote their business (12). A young musician, Jered Threatin, did something similar. He was exposed recently as a complete fake. He had created a completely false digital persona. Threatin was interviewed, by Jessica Lussenhop for the BBC, about how he had created his fictitious world (13).

The wish or need to be seen online poses copyright problems. Maintaining copyright online will be made a little easier if the EU member states approve the directive that was agreed by the European Parliament on 26th March 2019. This makes the large social media companies responsible for ensuring that the content provider gets paid if material on their platform is used by a third party (14). However many artists want their work to be seen and shared and do not feel the same sense of ownership as earlier photographers. Commercial use of a photographer's images, without payment, is never acceptable. But artists have used social media to expand their work and to create collaborative projects. In a YouTube video (15), chaired by Stephen Mayes, Henry Jacobson and Kerry Payne discuss their collaborative project on Instagram. They and Danny Ghitis, who was also on the panel, feel that their work has become recognised because it has been viewed, used, tweeted and re-tweeted on social media. This, they believe, has lead to commercial opportunities for them.

Many, young non-professional photographers, use social media to post self images. The arrival of the iPhone in 2011 with its front facing camera facilitated the making of 'selfies'. A 'Selfie' is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as:

a "photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media."

The word 'selfie' was added to the dictionary in 2013.Superficially the practice can be seen as harmless and a typical teenage obsession with the 'self'. A study of 225 adults in India did point to a certain condition that was called 'selfitis', defined as an obsession with taking self-images and posting these on social media. In this very limited study it was concluded that the practice is an effort by these people to fit in with those around them (16). On the other hand the practice of taking a self-image, in a conflict situation, has helped to develop, what is termed, citizen journalism. Young people posted images of themselves during the Arab Spring, and many other political disturbances, and this drew attention to what was happening and convinced others to support the conflicts. However, a journalist, David Patrikarakos has written a book (17) entitled *"War in 140 Characters: How Social Media Is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century"* which paints a very gloomy picture of how social media is spreading harmful propaganda about politics and conflict throughout the globe. He points to the alleged Russian attempt to influence the American election of Donald Trump by using information on social media about users. These users were allegedly fed propaganda that influenced their voting choice (18).

The future of social media is difficult to predict. In the immediate future I believe we will continue to use and create digital selves. We will continue to be targeted by product sellers. This targeting will become more focused and use cutting edge technology. Artificial Intelligence will, undoubtedly, play a greater role *by developing systems capable of tracking complex problems in ways that are similar to human reasoning*.

(19). The arrival of 5G will mean all devices both personal and public will be interconnected making it impossible, if we carry any mobile device, to escape being tracked. Who will 'manage' this exponential expansion? Will it be the platform providers or the governments? Will we be able to trust either of them to manage impartially? Some governments, around the world, are trying to control social media but in doing so many governments are abusing this power by putting their own trolls in place effectively to spy on and influence their citizens. (20)

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