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RG Rob Gallagher

AM Annette Markham

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RG: Hello. Hi everyone, then. And thanks for coming to this which is, I think, the seventh in our series of Life Online Today and Tomorrow talks. My name's Rob Gallagher. I'm a researcher with the Ego Media Project, here at King's. And we're a research initiative looking at how the internet and digital media and new media are changing and influencing the way we tell stories about ourselves, the way we record our lives, the way we understand identity. And for that reason, we're very excited to have here tonight with us Annette Markham to talk about auto-phenomenology, remix and other methods for curating future memories in the digital era. Annette is a Professor of Information Studies at Aarhus University in Denmark and Affiliate Professor of Digital Ethics in the School of Communication at Loyola University in Chicago. She earned a PhD in Organisational Communication from Purdue University in 1998 with a strong emphasis in interpretative, qualitative and ethnographic methods. Annette's early research focused on how identity relationships and cultural formations constructed in and influenced by digitally saturated social technical contexts. Quite tonguetwisting. Many of you will be familiar with her pioneering work researching real experience in virtual space. She's an internationally-known expert on innovative qualitative methodologies for studying sociality and identity in digitally saturated contexts. And speaking personally, I found her work on remix as a framework for thinking about both digital culture and academic research very inspiring. This work intersects with a strong focus on how ethical practice in social research and interaction design influence future human possibilities. And before I hand over to Annette, I did also want to say for the Twitter fiends among you, we're encouraging people to Tweet about tonight's talk with the hashtag future memories. And the Ego Media Project's handle is @egomediaproject. With which I will hand you over to Annette.

AM: So, thank you for inviting me. I'm actually very delighted to be here. But I'm also surprised to see anybody here because I live in Denmark where nobody does anything after four o'clock pm related to the university. So it's quite unusual for me to be doing anything after that time. So today I wanted to try to limit my remarks so that maybe we could have a conversation or discussion about some of these issues or maybe some of the cases that I'm going to mention today. So what I wanted to do is think about how we negotiate the self in the 21st century of embodied and embedded internets. And I'm talking about this from two different levels. One is as a scholar interested in symbolic interactionism and coming out of the communication discipline and the Chicago School of Sociology-style of education in the United States. I'm also thinking about this as a philosopher of method where I'm quite interested in we, that is, we, academics, if you will, come to know and to talk about the things that we study. So I wanted to talk on those two levels.

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So the first thing that I wanted to do was to give you a brief, and very brief, articulation of three epochs related to digital culture. Or three moments that I find quite relevant since the early 1990s when the internet became public. That I think represent key markers in how we think about the self. And this is by way of background just to set the stage. So I'm going to do a little swift and very glossed visual provocation of what I think are three interesting things, moments that have influenced how I think about identity practices in digital culture. And then the second thing I want to do and it may seem disconnected but I'm sure it'll come back around to be connected in some way by the end of this talk, but I wanted to talk about three research projects that I've been working on that can be examples of what we might focus on, again, as academics, in the development of research that understands and embraces the complexity of lived experience in the 21st century. So I'll talk about that in the second part of what I'm doing here.

So, let's swing right into it. I did want to mention, though, that on the cover of my deck here you see the smart trees in Singapore. Is anybody familiar with those? Have you seen them? Up close and personal? Are they as cool as they seem? Cooler, probably, right? Yes. Okay. So these are the trees, smart trees in Singapore. And you just need to look them up if you don't know about them. [0:06:06-0:06:20] [audio fades out] ...so that I can use my hands.

So 20 years ago I was studying how people experience this new thing called the internet. And at that time, I wanted to know how people made sense of their lived experiences in cyberspace. And that's what we called it at the time. Early 1990s. And most of you, if you have anything to do with digital culture research would know about this history. That in the early 1990s there were wild speculations that the internet would provide us a virtual environment for democratic participation. A new public sphere. A new way of thinking about identity and the self, precisely because it was an anonymous space. A space of exploration and imagination. And I, like many of my compatriots, I was really sparked by these kinds of ideas. These two quotes I think represent a very common conceptualisation in the early and mid-1990s. In fact, I don't think that they represent a very common conceptualisation. I was there and they do. So can you read them? Yes. I'll let you read them. But Howard Rheingold, who was not the least of but one of the primary speakers of this time, wrote several books talking about how we would homestead on the virtual frontier, a phrase that then got picked up by John Perry-Barlow who talked about the law of the wild in cyberspace. And if you were... How many of you were online at that time? Yes for us. Okay. Right, so if you were online at that time you know that this sense of virtual community and a very deep sense of embodiment was understood and lived through an environment that looked like this.

So the intense focus on embodiment and architecture and community, I think was based in part on the fact that all of the relationships that we built in that time and all the imagin aries that were put forth were done in ASCII text exchanges. And if you were lucky you had a colour interface. But that was it. And I think that's a remarkable moment in history to remember. Because the fact that we were disembodied put focus on the meaning of embodiment. The visceral experience that we could have online of the sort that Julian Dibbell would talk about in his piece for The Village Voice called 'A Rape in Cyberspace' was conducted through text. With texts people could feel a different kind of body. So it also put a renewed interest in discourse. Renewed interest on discourse. And posed

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many challenges for researchers, such as should we study people online or offline? When we interview people... This was a question that I had to ask myself in 1994 and '5, should I interview people in their bodies, in their physical bodies, or in their online selves? And what difference would it make? And what if I corrected their spelling errors? Would I be misrepresenting them or would I be representing them in a way that they would rather be represented? Maybe, in some cases, smarter. Then again, there were those people who deliberately seemed to misspell. And what was I doing if I changed their voice? How could I, as a social researcher, edit a non-linear experience into something that seemed quite linear and tidy after the fact? And was I changing the context? So these were issues that ethnographers faced because, all of a sudden, the boundaries that we take for granted when we study a physical environment had to be constructed. And they were constructed as we, academics, or we, scholars, moved through the field and as we participated. So the very texts that I produced produced a field which than I called the field that I studied.

Extraordinary moment, I think, because it also then starts to reveal some of the precarious and strange aspects of ethnographic or qualitative social research. Some of those things that we take for granted, like doing interviews in person, where we make sense of people supposedly by what they say. But then again, when you don't have a body sitting in front of you, you start to realise how much you miss using all those socio-economic cues to find out, are they female or male? What class do they belong to? What's their age? Which are all things that we use when we make sense of others. So it's a curious thing because all these things were missing. That was what social research was like in the mid-1990s. And I think it's a remarkable moment because it took place in ASCII text.

The web started to move, of course, into, well, the web. Once Amazon.com and CNN.com were launched, which were I think the two first websites that were launched in visual form like this. It transformed the way we think about the internet and we think about online communication. At least for most people who then entered this more public, mainstream-type of internet and understood digital culture to be someplace where you could go shopping or get your news. So, again, what we find in the late '90s is this shift toward a very plain interface to make it transparent so that you no longer notice that it's actually there but that you're more interested in the content that passes between the wires. So when you look at the interface called Facebook now, it has what became a very ubiquitous interface in the late '90s. User interface design was all about the clean, vanilla interface and Google was heralded as the role model of simplicity because it didn't matter what the site looked like any more. It was no longer about architecture or bodies, it was just about information. There was an attempt to really erase the visibility of the interface.

I think the second moment though occurs when we enter the web 2.0 generation and then we have this thing called a profile. And by 2006 Time Magazine named you the person of the year. So sociality enters this field of play once more after we get to web 2.0. But it's a different kind of sociality. It's not one that is based on the meeting of the minds or anonymity or the way that you can be witty through your words and not connect any of that to your embodied self. Now... And of course this is me giving a simplified version of history which suits me. So keep in mind that I'm glossing everything here, end parentheses. Now, sociality's all about being authentic. Being not just you but the best

you you can be. Because now you have something called a profile and these profiles live on many differ

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ent platforms. And as every year goes by would add dozens of new platforms. And some of them go away. My Space is still around but not so much used. Friendster. Anybody remember Friendster? Raise your hand if you remember Friendster. Okay, good. Yes. So some of these interfaces go away but many of them linger. Has anybody ever Googled themselves and seen what they look like ten years ago and been shocked that these websites still exist? I do it all the time. It's very embarrassing. But one of the interesting things here is that your profile is how you are. So we think. It's how you're measured. And although we don't get into the term 'measurement' yet, that's the third phase, the second phase is one where we have this thing, this self, that's promoted and managed. And soon students in high schools take a class at Loyola University where I used to work where they learn to clean up their profile, get rid of the stuff that they shouldn't have on there any more and get ready for their job profile. The next phase of their life. So it's a really interesting phase of profiling the self, branding the self and becoming, as Terri Senft would say it, trying to become a bit of a micro-celebrity.

I want to show this video clip. Well, I'm going to show it anyway. This is part of the third phase. [Inaudible – 0:17:09-0:17:43]. So that's 2011 and that is, I think, a marker of a third phase where... And these are all very blurry, I must say. And I just thought of them a couple of days ago as phases so I'm kind of working with this idea. So the internet is not on a screen any more. It's everywhere. And as devices got smaller and connectivity became more seamless, we started to carry the internet with us in our pockets. And Mark Deuze, here, would say that now we're shifting away from living life through media to living life in media. But this ad, I think, is intriguing for many reasons. Did I mention it's a Samsung ad from 2011? It demonstrates a particular relationship with technology that is very, very common. So this vision is not anything unfamiliar. At least it shouldn't be anything unfamiliar if you're part of the generation that uses smartphones. But it transforms and then flattens every aspect of our lives into bits of information that can be transmitted. And by 'flatten' I mean everything is made to be equal. That means that news about a celebrity, a plastic dinosaur, a soccer match, your job, your desires and dreams are all the same. They're just units of information. They're probably all the same size. Just like all those bits in that swinging galaxy of information were all the same size, relatively speaking. And they all fit into your phone. Now that's a simplified version and we can go ahead and scoff at that but it actually presents the idea of a universe that is intensely localised and personalised but also globalised through information flow and networks. But to be sure, it's datafied. So all of these things can be yours and they're pieces of data.

It also presents a complex, almost taken for granted blend of online and offline and physical. So physical and virtual. So we're starting to see the ubiquity of the internet very powerfully by 2010, 2011. Now, of course, in the last couple of years, two or three years, we see a different kind of image emerging with the rise of the idea of the internet of things. And since it's not really any thing, the internet of things, you can find many imaginaries of what it actually consists of. And whether or not you want to argue about what the internet of things is and many people are trying to own what that phrase is or define what that means, the idea is that the internet is just everywhere. And this is just the most obvious image I could find where data clouds are all over the place and we are

floating around on those data clouds. It's everywhere. And buildings are converging with smart devices. This is a pretty decent image of what smart city design is about these days. You

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can also see it implied in images of sensors in the natural environment, like these smart trees in Singapore's Garden by the Bay or when you look at, say, the smart palm trees in Dubai. Or you could look at various kinds of self-tracking and censoring kinds of materiality where the internet is interwoven into various aspects of our everyday lives and we can track and then datify things. So there's this era of quantification that I think is quite a moment to note.

So those are the three moments that I think are quite interesting for me. And I guess I would represent them in these three different kinds of books. The first would be Sherry Turkle's 'Life on the Screen' which came out around the same time as my book, 'Life Online'. And then a decade or more later you get 'Media Life' by Mark Deuze, where he talks about how all of that is converging and imploding together. And that our lives in media are so wrapped up that we cannot distinguish between what that would be like without media. And I think the third one is one that we are now exploring more. And this is an edited collection by Sarah Pink and Debora Lanzeni and Elisenda Ardevol on digital materialities. And they focus specifically on the way that we live life in material ways and it's very difficult to even see that the internet is there because it's so embodied and embedded, as Christine Hein* would say.

So if you think about this trajectory... Well, when I think about this trajectory, I think about a series of... I guess I'll think about a series of questions here. What role does technology play in our understanding of self? Another way to ask this is to think about the non-human. How do non-humans enter and play in our basic communication interactions? And to what extent does that impact how we think about and therefore make sense of things like the self or identity or relation or relationship or other or culture? And because technology's often invisible and even getting more so, I think it's interesting to ask how might we engage in techniques that enable us to actually see what are mostly invisible processes. And then the third question which is the third case I'm going to talk about is how can we proactively curate what we want other people to see in the future? And here I'm thinking about, say, 80 years from now when archaeologists who look at data, presumably, unless we have some kind of apocalypse between now and then or a big electromagnetic pulse that blows us all up. But presumably they're going to be looking back and finding data. Even ten years from now. Say, five years from now. So what data do we want them to find? So one way of reversing that question is to say, should we take some control of curating our own digital memories instead of having Google and Facebook and any other corporation who would gladly do it for us do it for us?

And I do want to make sure that I leave you with these points in case I forget to get here at the end. So, when I think about where I've come in my trajectory of research over the last 20 years... And I have to read my slides so I'm going to come back around here. I would argue that in all of my research I've found that the self is quite entangled but also we still do the same thing we've always done as humans. We make sense of it in a fairly clean and clear narrative at the end of the day. It's the only way we could make it through

the day. So, in retrospect, we are able to make a seamless and somewhat sensible story out of it. And I have about 1500 narratives from young people that all do this very well.

The other thing I wanted to mention, if any of you are interested in studying the notion of control, you should do it. Because control has been something that almost everyone that I

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have interviewed or talked to or studied since 1994 has mentioned as either a desire, an assumption or a goal or a concern. So it's an interesting... And I don't know what to do with it yet.. concept.

In terms of methods, as someone who studies a lot of methodology for the last ten years and I've been thinking about this a lot, I would argue that adaptive and playful methods of experiment are quite useful in helping to understand the complexity of lived experience. And also I want to make a little pitch that an ethical stance is one that looks forward and proactively thinks about how we might design our better futures rather than just looking at what was or what is. So instead of describing, I make a sort of an argument that we ought to be making academia relevant by making a difference. And looking forward is the way to do that. One way to do that anyway.

Okay. So three cases. Basically, if you want to think about this as a phenomenon of the 21st century, you can think about it as lived experience of the 21st century but it's also about research methods of the 21st century. Because I can't help but talk about methods because that's what I am. So when I talk you'll hear me blurring these things together. When I talk about lived experience, I'm also talking about how we study lived experience. And it's because once you start to do a reflexive looping about your own research methods and how you are making sense and how participants or other people are making sense, then those things start to collapse and collide in really useful ways but also in ways that make them difficult to pull apart. Obviously if you're studying life writing, that I would guess is a very common way of life for you too. But I wanted to just address these three cases quickly and then we can talk about the details and you can ask me any questions you want. I'm just going to fly through them because they are very involved and they've been ongoing for several years. But I think that they illustrate some interesting things.

So the first case is am I pretty? And it's a case that helps us think about the non-human and to what extent algorithms might be playing into our understanding of ourselves as an interactant in a conversation. So what I've been doing is experiments to try to figure out how, if algorithms have agency or if non-human software has any form of agency which an actor-network theorist and many other contemporary feminist theorists would say it does, then what is the voice of that actor? So what I've been doing is trying to actually give voice to the non-human agent. How many of you are actually doing that in your own research? A little. Okay. Great. I'll be interested to see what you think of this. So I've been doing some experiments to think about that. And one case is in response to the controversy in 2011 around young pre-teen girls posting YouTube videos to ask the world am I pretty or am I ugly and could you just tell me something like am I pretty or am I ugly in the comments and then I'll know the truth. So it came out of that and so I go through some rhetorical analysis to think about... It seems strange to add rhetorical analysis in here. But it's what I've been doing. I'll talk about it in a minute.

The second case is about our digital lives. In this case, I've been training youth for the last five, six years to become ethnographers of their own lived experience. Precisely because I couldn't see the detail of the invisible practices that they were experiencing. So instead of me studying them, what I did was I just taught them methods to do it themselves. Although we never called it ethnography and we never called it phenomenology or

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auto-phenomenology which is a bit redundant, those are what the methods turned out to be. So this is it. I'll talk about a little bit of that.

And then the last one is a study that's ongoing now and it's the next five-year project that I have. So it's very much at the beginning stages. Where I'm doing research as intervention. So I'm engaging in action research methods to work with citizens to help them think about how they might curate their own futures differently. So instead of asking them to describe what they are or what has been, I'm asking them to actively, proactively critique and change what they are doing.

So, oh yes, here's some theoretical stuff. And there's some more. Passing right by that. [Inaudible – 0:32:49-0:33:06] [video playing]. So these are YouTube videos from 2011 that were posted to not-very-large audiences but certainly very troubling in that it was a phenomenon. How many of you heard of this? Yes. It was a very troubling phenomenon that girls were asking am I pretty or am I ugly and saying things like I just need to know. Sick. And please tell the truth in the comments. But in this series of studies... And this is only the images and the videos that prompted my study. So what I'm really doing in this study... in this series of studies is a rhetorical analysis of the... Well, wait. An analysis of the rhetorical function of algorithms. So what I'm trying to do is identify where the algorithms come into the picture and how might we look at them not just by looking at where they play out in the string of code or how they might interact with other algorithms when we, say, do a search engine... a search in a search engine and get particular results. But then what do they say to us?

So when I say 'algorithms', maybe I should just briefly mention what I mean by that. Would that be useful? So, one nod then I will do it. So an algorithm is a small piece of code. And I apologise to any machine learning specialists in the audience. But an algorithm is generally a piece of code that functions as a recipe that will tell... that learns about what your preferences are and then yields a particular action based on what it sees. So it's learning your preferences by virtue of looking at what you're looking at and then making decisions about what that is. And then feeding you back things that it wants you to see. That's actually a type of algorithm. That's not what algorithms are generally. So that's what kind of algorithms I'm talking about here. It's a thing that happens when you look at a pair of shoes on the internet and then you see those shoes everywhere on your e-mail and you see it in Facebook and you see the shoes on your Google search and it pops up everywhere. So it's the thing that yields personalised ads. It's also the thing that functions mysteriously to show you certain things on Facebook and hide other things from you. And these are proprietary lines of code. So the companies don't exactly tell you how exactly they work. These are also the things that bring up your top results in Google search, for example. It also was what brought up these particular videos versus

others when I searched for this controversy online. So these choice of videos are because of an algorithm that made this decision or helped make this decision for me.

So what I want to do is really talk about this tiny moment when a person posts a picture on their profile. Could be Instagram... It could be an Instagram image, it could be a snap on Snapchat. But here I'm going to just talk about posting a picture on Instagram or Facebook. Let's say it's Facebook. And her friends see the picture or not, as this is algorithmically determined. And then her friends respond. So you post the picture and then

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somebody could like it or not like it. Of course there are other options but let's just go with this. So you can like or not like it and we're not even going to go with the whole Facebook's new options of multiple choices of what kind of response you can have. So this is just to play out what a single response is about. So your friends might like the picture or not and then they might do some kind of responding. And this is what we do when we study interpersonal communication in the United States. This is what you get to see that we then play out all the different scenarios. So the person might like it and then like it. They might like it and mention it later in person. They might like it but not go beyond the affective moment to respond or utter anything. Or they might not like it and they don't like it. They might not like it and mention it. They might mention it to somebody else. They might not like and not go past the affective moment or they might make a comment to somebody else about how they don't like it, in private. And what's missing on the screen there are a bunch of all these intersecting lines about likes and don't likes and branching. But they don't show up here.

But what you get though is this idea that there are these invisible algorithms and other things happening in between the moment of the post and the response. And then the response may not actually be a response. Or it might be a response but nobody really sees it. So what's interesting about the algorithm is that it determines whether or not you actually think I said anything. This turns out to be quite problematic when you think about all the ways that a young girl might be affected by the number of likes or the absence of likes on a profile feed. And it's not just young girls but they happen to be a very sensitive audience at that age and very susceptible to positive and negative validation. So it's an interesting thing to consider to what extent is the program itself influencing their identity practice. So you can think about it as being this moment of a post and then a lot of different things happening in between that cascade out into a variety of different frames that emerge or meanings that emerge.

But they're not quite predictable because they're actually quite invisible. Well, they're not invisible but they don't make much sense. When you look at on the face of it, Facebook doesn't make much sense. So let me play this out a little bit for you. So, for example, here's me. I've posted this picture and Facebook tells me 38 people liked it. Oh no, 42. 38 others liked it. So that's not bad. 42 people like it. That's not bad. I don't problematise this much, really. And I don't think most people do. And certainly a pre-teen girl does not problematise this number. 42, not so bad until I realise that I have 850 friends and only 42 liked it. So all of a sudden, I'm not very likeable at all. And I take this on the face of it. It's a total number because Facebook doesn't tell me that only a fraction of my friends have seen the post. They actually imply that everybody sees the post. We know better. We

know better. We know that not everybody sees our posts. But most of the people that I interview still act as though everybody's seen their post. So we know better but our lived experience is somewhat different. And this might be a part of novelty that we need to get over. In terms of new technologies and maybe some day we'll learn. But this is an interesting thing. So, if I look at the interface it says who sees my posts, my friends, otherwise I could limit my audience. But the default option is that everybody's going to see my posts. It verifies this in another place too. These are on the frequently asked questions. When I ask who can see my posts? My friends do.

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So in a way, by not being really specific, what happens is that Facebook provides us a message that, actually, functions as a communicative interaction. It's persuasive in that every communicative interaction is persuasive. So if you take that as a basic premise, then what you can do is look at some of the basic features of Facebook itself and its program and its algorithms, about its defaults and parameters, to get a sense of what it might be saying that might be influencing how I think about or make sense of my environment or myself.

So, there are other ways to look at it. I've been experimenting with ways of juxtaposing people's interviews texts with Facebook texts or texts from Facebook the corporation. Just as a way of trying to get at some of the... just a form of analysis to work with juxtaposition to try to see what it reveals. And so I've been doing layered narratives in this way which I'm not going to really get into. If you want to know more about it we can talk about it. So that's the first case.

Second case is about teaching young people to be their own auto-ethnographers. And this has been quite an interesting study over the last five years. And it really does emerge because most of what you see when you are studying someone's lived experience in digital culture is this. [Pause]. That's it. There's more to it than that and you can certainly interview people to get them to tell you what they perceive about their own experience. But what I wanted to do because I was struck by how difficult it was for people to identify it with any granularity the details of their lived experience in interviewing them. So it wasn't the right way. Or at least it wasn't the best way for me.

So I had them doing all kinds of things. Mapping and drawing and creating layered accounts. And so I decided to finally just train people to do this. So I gave a series of exercises for people to do. And this is a technique that my colleague Megan Dougherty and I are working on. She does archiving and virtual archaeology out of Loyola University in Chicago. And so she works with young in Chicago and I work with youth in Denmark and Finland. And basically we do different exercises to get them to think about whatever method would work for them to really trace with a fine-grain magnifying glass their own lived experience of technology every day. And in this case, social media. And then to also then take a diet or to turn it off for 24 hours. We'd say 48 hours but nobody can do that. So to have them turn it off and then to do other things that try to get at the reflexive experience. So, for example, they'll do... If you have somebody take a video of themselves for an hour and then you have them record a layer of narration over the top in response to the prompting question, what were you doing? Then they'll have some sort of... they'll give you some kind of a narrative account. But then if you have them wait

another 24 hours or another five minutes, depends on how experimental you're being and what you're trying to test. I did both. But then you can also have them make another soundtrack over the top. Not a soundtrack but another narration over the top in answer to a different prompt. How did you feel? Or how do you feel now? And so by having them narrate over their own videos of themselves, they get some really interesting stuff. So I wanted to show you a few examples. And some of these are... Well, the first one is an example of just how much... These are actually my students in this case because they've allowed me to show these. [Inaudible – 0:47:37-0:48:08]. I'm just going to show snippets of these. [Inaudible – 0:48:13-0:49:22]. So that's one archive that I've been collecting and, like I said, I've collected over 1400 of these media accounts. And this is just one of maybe

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a dozen different kinds of pieces that they put together for a multimedia... an archive of their lived experience. So it yields a lot of extraordinarily rich data but not necessarily data that can be used.

Here's another example of a more curated one. [Inaudible – 0:50:02-0:51:09]. This girl has published a video and it's ten minutes of her taking a selfie for Instagram. And she talks through the whole thing. It's just delightful and poignant. The video is so rich and beautiful but, of course, it's too sensitive for me to let you hear. But I'll read you a section of it. "I want to post a selfie. I just hope that someone will like the picture. I see that [inaudible – 0:51:49] Kardashian who posted just before me had 174,546 likes and 769 comments. Yes. I doubt I will get those. I mean, so now I guess so I can go on with my evening. I don't know why I like posting selfies like this. It's really important to me. I have made myself. I make myself. I have posted a picture and now I have shared something that I have made. I have made myself. I don't know how to put it. I have put myself out there. I've shown myself. Now I just hope that someone will see this and think of me and maybe... I don't know. It's hard to explain what I wish I would get from this picture. I just want to make myself present. I just want to let people know that I'm here. That I exist. That I'm not just sitting here. Which I am."

Or they'll take video of themselves watching the computer that they're looking at. So then they'll take a screen recording and then they'll record their own face. And of course it's hilarious because when you don't look at yourself online, you don't realise that you're mostly just sitting there. But then after they do this for an hour and then they go back and re-watch it, they start to think of all kinds of things. So then I have them map, do a lot of situational mapping which is a technique that Adele Clark talks about as a combination of symbolic interactionism, grounded theory, feminism and actor-network theory, as a way of revealing those things that are mostly hidden from us when we're analysing a situation. So what she does is she does these layers and layers and layers of different maps where you start with something in the centre, like in this case, myself, and then you do another map where you pull a tertiary item, like communication, and you put that in the centre of the map and you remap so that you get these layers and layers of different elements being centred. And you start to reveal things that you didn't see before. So it's a really good technique that she uses to get us to think about those things that are mostly hidden from situations but are quite influential.

So they do a lot of mapping. And then do these extraordinary narrative accounts. Here's a student in Chicago who writes about a moment that's less than five seconds long. So this

is an internal narrative that this person writes about this moment of online interaction. And this is just a fragment of this long narrative he writes. “I set my nerves aside and decidedly tap him firmly on the chest. Now, I can see him more closely. His eyes, still dark, still meeting my gaze, are a deep brown. He is so cute. Before I touch him again I decide that I need to have something to talk about. But what? Does it even matter? After what feels like an eternity, I chicken out. I shut down the screen and slip my iPhone back into the pocket of my jeans.”

[Pause]. Or in this case I have them write braindumps which is a 20 minute writing. And you probably do a version of this yourself where you either close your eyes or you do white font against a white background and you time yourself. So here’s she’s saying,

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“Nothing I did in the entire hour I recorded myself actually accomplished anything at all. Seriously. To think I do this for hours a day.” And then she mentions how zombieish she looks.

And I then also have them write narrative accounts... or have them give voice to their programs, to the different softwares that they’re using. So in this case, this girl is saying what Instagram would say to her if Instagram was speaking in the morning. “Hey, open me up. I’m Instagram. Turn me on.”

I also have some students... In this case, again, they’re students because they’re allowing me to show their materials who are exploring this by virtue of going out and trying to think about how they would brand themselves. How they would create an identity. So they go out and do these really provocative experiments. Like Freda, who’s a Danish student who gained about 19,000 followers on Instagram in less than a month which is, if you’re in Instagram territory, pretty astonishing. So she’s writing her Masters thesis about this.

So one of the things that I think is really interesting about this case is that, like I said, the material is quite rich and it’s very provocative but it’s not mine. Doing the research is the research. In other words, I’m not collecting data in order to say something about culture. Although I say that along the way. But the data is for those people who have produced it. And it’s the participants who get something out of it. So in this case, it’s really quite interesting to think about this as an ethical shift in my own work, where I’m less doing research for me and I’m more doing research that isn’t really research any more. It’s more like consciousness-raising. Or it’s thinking about the fact that I know a lot about identity practices because I’ve been studying it for 20 years and so, now, I’m just trying to help other people become their own social researchers so that they can understand their own identity practices as well. And I think that that’s a very interesting way of thinking about research, precisely because this material is so sensitive. There’s never any way that any ethics board would let me use any of this. And I would refuse to give it to any ethics board. But then again, I wrote the primary ethics guidelines for the Association of Internet Researchers which is an international document. So I can speak with some authority there and refuse to give my data away to an archiving body. Whereas in the UK I know that that’s not such an option for scholars.

But the idea is to think about why are we doing research in the first place? And now I’m going to get to case three, where I’m explicitly thinking about why do we do research in the first place. And when it comes to thinking about life online and lived experience or life

writing, obviously we're not... Well, maybe we are in it to be social scientists, to understand some kind of universal claim about what lived experience is in the 21st century. But for me, and for my money, I think that it's more important for me to do research that strives to make a difference in the world. And in this way, what I'm trying to do is help citizens think differently about their social media use or about technology or about algorithms. And to think differently about how non-human programs have a more and more powerful influence on how we live our everyday lives. And how we make sense of our own identity. And if we think... and it's true... that advertisements that are specifically targeted to us influence how we think about ourselves, then me, as an academic, my job is to help change that in some ways. If... Well...

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So the third case is just a series of experiments that we're doing and it's basically structured around the idea that ethnographic inquiry or humanities inquiry can be less about collecting information or generating findings and more about experiments in the laboratory with the intent of making new things happen. Obviously, there's an ethical and a moral component to this because if you are doing interventionist research or if you're doing action-oriented research, it implies that you're doing it for the right reasons. So I think that there's much to be said about that. But, in general, what we're doing with this next five years is a very ethically-oriented attempt to help citizens think about how to regain some of the control that we are losing over our own personal data. So we produce lots and lots of big data in our everyday use of technologies. And that gets automatically collected and curated by others. So the most common example would be when Facebook tells us the year in review. Or when Facebook suggests what you would have as a video on Friends Day. Or when Facebook tells you... It pops up a picture that was from two years ago or five years ago or one year ago. Facebook does this all the time. And one of the things that I think is interesting to try to do is to challenge ourselves to go back to some of the old school methods that people have used in memoriam for archiving their own memories.

So in this case it's a proactive approach to have people go to more analogue modes of artistic and creative sense-making. Probably a lot like what you do in the Ego Media Project or in the Life Writing Research Centre. Which is about having people think about what it is that they're producing about their own lives. And in this way, by producing your own kind of curation of big data, you're then creating a little bit of an archive that you would like to be found, rather than just leaving it up in the open or up in the air and out in the open for it to be put together in ways that you don't control. So once you think about the fact that once information leaves your body you no longer control it and it becomes something that has a social life of its own, then that information cascades out and what you might think the self is is actually being remixed by other people all the time. As Bruno Latour would say, if we're all data, living, and it's all in databases, then what happens is that what you know of me is something that you just grab for a moment. Theresa Senft, professor at New York University, calls this 'the grab'. It's really an interesting concept. I suggest you read it if you're interested in this. But that all of us are only made sense of by others through a grab. A moment of collecting some information and then saying, oh, that's who you are. And then that goes back into some giant database. But that we collect these things, as Bruno Latour says.

In a way that's kind of freeing because it means we're not really set into any kind of sedimented self. But on the other hand, when data is being controlled to large extents by algorithmic processes and by data centres and by marketers who can identify us almost in a scary way, then what happens is that that grab is becoming more and more a determinant of what it is that we are understood to be. And when an advertisement feeds back to us enough times, over and over and over again, this is who you are, this is who you are, this is who you are, then that grab becomes a very powerful thing. And because it's automated and because it's a self-learning process of mostly algorithms and because it happens in a seamless way and because it's so monumentally huge and it's full of infrastructures that are beyond our control it's difficult to get a grasp on. So one of the things that we've been realising over the last, I don't know, decade or so, is that it's not enough

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to simply understand it. What we have to do is shift to a different kind of question which says we want to do something different. And that is to say we want to regain control. So it's a more critical and activist orientation. And it's an interesting thing to pursue as a research mission. But also as a valid form of inquiry.

So I've developed this future-making space research group where I have various people working on different aspects of this project. And I'll be doing that for the next five years.

So those are the three cases. That's the phenomenon of lived experience in the 21st century and a little bit about methods. And it comes out of my understanding of these three interesting and pivotal moments. You probably all have your own moments and you certainly have interesting research trajectories yourselves that we might want to talk about. I think we have a few minutes. Maybe we could have a few questions then. Or maybe you have something you're thinking about. And thanks.

[Applause]

RG: Thanks Annette for a really exciting talk. And, yes, I imagine people will have lots to ask. We've got about 15 minutes by my calculation. And we would just ask that you speak into the microphone. So if anyone does want to ask a question, I will bring this over. Any volunteers? Yes? Not making it easy.

Audience member: Thanks so much for the talk. I'm not an academic but I used to study at King's. I'm now working in marketing. So in defence of marketers, we use the data that people have provided themselves in order to send them a relevant message. This might be the type of marketing I'm in and I can imagine other people use it in a different way. So I just wanted to get your thoughts on that. Where data is used by people who are trying to perhaps offer health benefits or a product that's actually going to help learning, for example. Thank you.

AM: Yes. Well, thank you for bringing that up because I generally speak out of a one-sided idea of critical theory and academia criticising the industries. So it's good for you to remind me of that. I also teach marketing and so I have a lot of students who are going into that industry. And so what we do is we just talk about the ethics of it. Because I think that it's one thing to think about what you, as a person in marketing, strive to do as a deliberate attempt to get relevant information to us. And I think that's a very good goal. But the flip side then, of course, is the ways in which the data that people willingly give is

also collected and aggregated outside of the marketer's control. So the information, unfortunately, is... Well, not unfortunately... Better for worse... better or worse. The information that's gathered is aggregated by a lot of different companies who then use it for different purposes. So some of it might be to provide relevant information. But then it also is used by the Los Angeles Police Department for predictive policing. So there's a flip side there. And I guess I'll also mention that I think that we also have a... There's a danger in thinking that people willingly give the information when that's a frame that we put upon people's activities. So, I do give my information. I tweet, for example. And if anybody were to collect all of my tweets and make that into a story, I would feel completely violated. I know it's public. But when it's taken out of context is when it becomes troublesome. And that's when... When you interview people about their media use, that's generally what they end up saying. Is that they know it's public and they willingly give it away because they want services. Or because they don't care. Or because they have a different notion of privacy.

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But one of the things that happens is that when that information is taken and used out of context is when it becomes something that is harmful to them. Or can create harm for them. So, thank you for reminding us that not all marketing is bad. Not all branding is bad. And I don't mean to tease about that but that's... You're right. Thank you.

Audience member: We're talking to the microphone. You were talking about self-branding and I immediately thought about Kim Kardashian, obviously. So I just wonder do you think there is something neo-liberal in the nature of the net that creates an environment for people to look for self-branding and practise this self-entrepreneurship?

AM: Some would say what isn't neo-liberal about the net? But I don't really think of it... It's not my bailiwick so I don't usually talk about that characteristic of the structure itself. I think, however, from my perspective as a communications scholar, the internet provides certain... it has certain capacities that facilitate certain things. So there is something unique about the internet. For example, the way that time becomes a malleable feature of an interaction. It's a malleable variable. It's something that you can modify. Or it's something that is out of your control. So it might not be something that you can modify at all. It operates in strange ways. The other thing is that presence is separated from sociality. So you don't have to have physical presence to be social. And that may have been the case but it's certainly highlighted with digital technologies. But the thing that... Well, and so I guess I wouldn't talk about the net as having that kind of neo-liberal tendency or structure. But I would think... But when we look at the infrastructures at play and how those get played out then you can certainly see it. Self-branding is its own section in the book stores now. Profile is a word that we use as a noun. That's new. So you don't have to go back very far in history to see when that wasn't the case. Or when self-branding wasn't such a thing. And we have this capacity to reach endless audiences. And then you see success stories like Justin Bieber, Taylor Swift. Both of them come out of YouTube. So there's this idea and a myth and a... So I don't know if it's anything about the net in particular. I think it's how we use it. Of course that... Then we get into this discussion of whether or not technology determines us which is the technological determinism argument. Or whether we determine technologies and control them which is the social construction of technology or SCoT. And then there's the people who hold the middle ground. There's social shaping. But I think it would be, in my thinking, a little bit

more like Anthony Giddens would talk about in terms of structuration which is cyclical. That we build structures that then come to have control over us and then we're not pawns to the system but we then resist and change the structure. I don't know if that's what you were thinking about when you asked the question but... What do you think?

Audience member: [Inaudible – 01:16:09].

A M : B o t h . B o t h . I f y o u l o o k a t J o s é v a n D i j c k ’