

Patricia Ciccone

Book Review: *Lee Humphreys, The Qualified Self: Social Media and the Accounting of the Everyday*



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In *The Qualified Self: Social Media and the Accounting of the Everyday*, Lee Humphreys asks her readers to reconsider some of the dominant assumptions about everyday social media use. In recent years, attempts to understand what constitutes social media practices have emerged as a central question across varied academic disciplines from anthropology, to media and literary studies, to science and technology studies to psychology. Humphreys' contribution to this question is distinct, thanks to a two-fold approach that simultaneously historicizes social media and situates its contemporaneity through a multiplicity of social inquiries. This project looks at how we have been chronicling the mundane aspects of our lives through the technological affordances of our time, and through time, and how these oft-forgotten practices are integral part of our social

growth.

Humphreys' book is also unique as it serves to depathologize our understanding of social media "cultures." In rejecting the language of narcissism that surrounds individual social media practices, Humphreys proposes instead, to look at these uses as constitutive of our social worlds.

Through "media accounting," which the author describes as "the media practices that allow us to document our lives and the world around us,"¹ *The Qualified Self* offers clear and sometimes forward insights into the very human need to be in contact with and be seen by others. However, the book isn't without a critical lens, as Humphreys argues that the traces left by our media practices also serve to convey our qualifications for our various social roles. The titular qualified self, then, emerges as both a personal and structural force. Through a feminist lens and feminist logics, Humphreys explores and exposes the social potential of these mediated contacts between the self, the world and the technological.

The book's leading arguments are divided between four chapters, each shedding light on a different media accounting practice. While this organization seems to propose some inherent distinctions between each practice, Humphreys indicates that "all practices are mutually enabled and constituted."² Furthermore, the author also points to a certain unexpected homogeneity among all social media platforms. Early in the book, she argues that she could have easily swapped between any of a number of proprietary platforms to illustrate the practices she takes up. This is made clearer by Humphreys' trans-historical emphasis, which compares personal diaries from the turn of the last century with contemporary practices such as tweeting. In so doing, the author destabilizes the discourse around the uniqueness of social media as a form and a phenomenon by demonstrating a shared

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sensibility among a variety of media forms over time—a welcome respite from the predominating academic account that tends to focus on the particularities of each modality rather than on the similarities between them.

In the Introduction, Humphreys carefully defines her terminology. Eloquently describing the differences among her use of account, accounting and accountably, but also between the quantified and qualified self, this introduction serves as a solid entry point to the book's interdisciplinary ecosystem. This precision in language serves as a productive mechanism toward the development of insights that would otherwise be missed.

Chapter 2, titled “Sharing the Everyday,” looks at the ritualized aspects of social media use and situates platforms and social media as part of a larger, and historically longer, routine of the everyday. Using three case studies – a personal diary written two hundred years ago, and the more contemporary cases of Twitter feeds and video vlogs – Humphreys situates everyday mundane and routine use of social media as a part of a much longer tradition of personal practice falling somewhere between the repetitive and ritualistic and the jolt and punctuation of major life events. Humphreys' reframing of seemingly inconsequential small and personal moments as captured by diarists in both analog and digital contexts and within a longer trajectory of a historical framework helps demonstrate how such small practices are simultaneously connected to each other while also being key to understanding “quotidian experiences that precede and proceed momentous events.”³ This serves as Humphreys' own rejection of the classification of these practices as problematically self-involved, self-reflective or meaningless; instead, she challenges us to re-center the mundane within a larger temporal sphere.

In Chapter 3, “Performing Identity Work,” Humphreys looks at identify formation and the role of social media in helping to both create and then circulate these identities in a variety of dynamic ways. This chapter marks a pivotal moment in the narrative of the book by linking the various roles that we take in our lives to the media forms in which they are constituted, to each other through the trajectory of one's life, and to those of others. In doing so, Humphreys shifts our understanding of the taking on of such identities from something

received to a sort of active, affective project of making—a process of identity *work* for oneself and for those to whom one is connected. Using the object and genre of snapshot (through its transformation on film, in print, as digital artifact) as an example, this chapter focuses on the affective maintenance labor undertaken by women to keep family histories and ties alive. Humphreys' interest in building a feminist argument truly takes shape in the pages of this chapter.

Chapter 4 takes a look at practices that surrounds the intertwined experience of death, loss and the act of remembrance. Media traces in this context, Humphreys argues, can become ways for people to engage with the past, and the chapter articulates how practices of media accounting can help to ease trauma caused by the experience of loss. Paradoxically, Chapter 5 examines the reconciliation process that happens when an individual *doesn't* feel aligned with these past media traces, such as awful and mortifying adolescence pictures. Using the tensions between the ephemerality and the permanence of lives and social media, these two chapters offer closer looks into the ways we often discover ourselves through the media traces we leave behind. Using memorial photographs, Facebook Memory prompts and a series of photographs from her own high school years, as case studies, these chapters constantly oscillate between gravity and playfulness, which are two key operational modes in Humphreys' writing style.

In the book's concluding chapter, Humphreys reflects on the “newness” we often associate with social media. By providing a wide range of cases that constitute both the social and media, Humphreys concludes not only that we have always been social but, rather, that historically our practices have similar ends, but the modalities of our encounters with *media accounting* have changed. Unfortunately, this is one of the book's weaker points; Humphreys' quick dismissal of the economic realities that lie behind these practices (e.g., the political economy of social media firms), seems strange. By only devoting a few passing thoughts to the huge industries that undergird the practices and media forms with which the book is largely concerned, historical and contemporary alike, Humphreys fails to consider an important zone of contact and source of meaning found in the meeting of the self and the

technological.

Despite this notable omission, Humphreys' book is still a highly readable critical account of contemporary social media and offers a refreshing take on the topic. Her rich account surveys an

important social reality of our collective history and breathes much needed new life into an area of inquiry framed by many hot takes that, too often, feel stale, redundant and dismissive of the joy and meaning found within.

Patricia Ciccone is a first year PhD student in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California. She holds a MA in Film Studies from Concordia University and recently completed her MLIS degree at UCLA. Drawing from a wide variety of disciplinary fields, her research is concerned with the visual and discursive organization of affects in social environments and explores how public displays and screens operate to construct and distribute different forms of power. Ciccone is a researcher for mediaqueer.ca, an online catalogue for LGBTQ Canadian film history, curates moving image events in Montreal and Los Angeles and performs as Patty Boo-boo in the feminist dance art collective Donzelle.

Notes

1 Lee Humphreys, *The Qualified Self: Social Media and the Accounting of the Everyday* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018), 9.

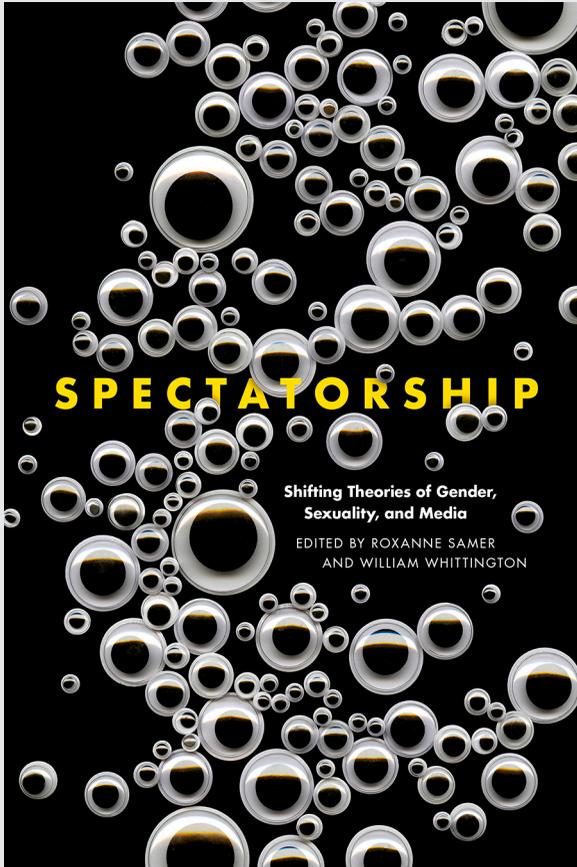
2 Humphreys, 26.

3 Humphreys, 47.

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