
From Quantified to Qualified Self

A Fictional Dialogue at the Mall

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Abstract

Quantifying the self is not enough; numbers and statistics must be interpreted, that is, integrated into networks of identity, society, and meaning. The quantified self must become a “qualified” self if body tracking is to have any impact on our lives and society. Data generated by body tracking in all forms are not merely a passive material for interpretation, they do not merely lie around in databases until something from outside makes meaning out of them. Data become information and flow in global networks. Without access to data, individuals must rely on experts and expert systems. Putting body-related data into the hands of those who are directly concerned makes them responsible for doing something with the data, for interpreting and making use of the data. Interpreting the data of body tracking occurs as networking. It breaks out of the constraints of modern subjectivity as well as paternalistic health care structures and occurs by participation, communication, and transparency, that is, by following “network norms.” Personal informatics and body tracking is a performative enactment of the informational self. The informational self is neither the product of technologies of power (Foucault), but of an “ethical” technology of the self. The self becomes a hub and an agent in the digital network society. Body tracking transforms the opaque and passive body of the pre-digital age into the informational self. Networking is the way in which order – personal, social, and ontological – is constructed in the digital age.

When Socrates took up the maxim of the Delphic oracle, “know thyself” in order to lead his disciples on the road to wisdom, he could not have known how “personal informatics” would understand this aphorism today. According to the movement’s official Website, personal informatics “is a class of tools that help people collect personally relevant information for the purpose of self-reflection and self-monitoring. These tools help people gain self-knowledge about one’s behaviour, habits, and thoughts.”¹ As this broad definition suggests, personal informatics is concerned with any and all digital information that pertains to one’s activities, work, hobbies, finances, family situation, and of course,

1 Cf. <http://www.personalinformatics.org/>.