Lee Humphreys, Associate Professor, Dept of Communication, Cornell University

*The Qualified Self: Social media and the accounting of everyday life* (MIT Press, 2018)

This is a Q&A I did with Pablo Boczkowski, Professor, Communication Studies at Northwestern University for an article he wrote about social media:

<https://www.infobae.com/america/tecno/2018/03/19/vivir-en-los-medios-los-riesgos-sociales-culturales-y-politicos-de-una-nueva-realidad/>

Pablo: What is the practice of **media accounting** and what are the reasons why people enact it?

Lee: Media accounting is the documenting of everyday life through media (broadly defined) and sharing it with others. One of the ways we connect with friends and family is by sharing our experiences and we do this through media. Long ago we used to write in journals and scrapbooks about what was going on in our lives and the world around us. We shared these accounts with others to reinforce social relations. Today we post on social media about what we are doing. By documenting and sharing the everyday aspects as well as momentous events of our lives, we build and reinforce our social connection with others. We also come to understand ourselves and the world around us through media accounting. We can see changes or trends over time through media accounting in ways that we can’t in our lived experience.

Pablo: What are the **media traces** that people leave on social and digital media, and how do they compare to those pertaining to older kinds of media?

Lee: There are several important similarities between the kinds of media traces people create on social media and the kinds that we have created historically. 1) People tend to create media traces about activities and events in their lives - something we did, something we saw, something we read. 2) Media traces tend to be short, small, or brief like a diary entry or a photo, or a post. But media traces tend to be aggregated into media accounts. A diary is a collection of entries. A scrapbook is a collection of photos and memorabilia. A social media profile is a collection of posts. The aggregation of traces creates additional value and insights. Even small everyday aspects of people’s lives in aggregate can reveal insights into broader socio-cultural values and practices.

There are several differences in the kinds of traces created then and now. First, the materiality of traces are different. Historically, media accounts were typically bound in books or albums: e.g. diaries, scrapbooks, photo albums, baby books. Today the mobile phone is the primary material means through which we create, share, and consume media accounting. Social media platforms become the infrastructure for media accounting, prompting us to provide status updates. The digital and networked aspects of media accounting generate non-exclusivity of ownership and the expansion of potential audiences. While historical traces relied on commercial tools and in some cases these organizations had access to the content of our media accounting, the contemporary digital networked environment differs from earlier modes of media accounts in their commodification of our traces.

Pablo: What is the notion of **qualified self** and how does it differ from prevailing conversations about the growth of quantification of personal and collective experience?

Lee: The qualified self is the sense of self that comes from engaging with media accounting. When we keep track of things over time we can see things that we can’t in our lived experiences. I use the term qualified because our traces become evidence of who we are and what we have accomplished, both our qualities and our qualifications. But the qualified self is also a relational self. That is, our traces are not just about ourselves. We document our social lives and relations. The growth of quantification and self tracking primarily focuses on individuals or the aggregations of individual data. However, the qualified self is enmeshed in the relational sociality that shapes mediated interpersonal communication. When we read the journals of our grandparents, not only do we learn about the people in their lives, we see ourselves reflected in those writings.

Pablo: In your book you show that documenting our existence through media practices is tied to the **construction of the self**. What has historically changed and stayed the same in the ways we undertake this process? Have the changes led to new modes of subjectivity?

Lee: The earliest of diaries were typically religious diaries which were used to encourage piety. The act of writing about one’s thoughts and actions reinforced religious values and self-discipline. Secular accounting and travel journals were popular throughout the 19th century, but it wasn’t until the middle to end of the 19th that we begin to see more introspective and reflective secular journals, particularly among women in North America. Contemporary media accounting tends to blur accounting and reflective aspects of self representation. Our media traces convey not only what we did but what we think about it. The prominence in use and in public discourse of social media platforms today raises our awareness of the power of the media accounting shared through them. Not only does media accounting today shape our understanding of ourselves, it shapes how others understand us as well.

Pablo: What do you mean by the current emergence of a **post-digital turn**, and how might this affect media practices and identity work?

Lee: I argue that because most of our media accounting occur through digital platforms today, there a sense of ephemerality to our traces. If Facebook went away tomorrow, where would all our photos and memories go? To reconcile this lack of material ownership, we are increasingly creating physical traces of our media accounting. We can print books of our Instragram and Facebook posts. There are services now to both create and manage cross-platform customized wedding hashtags, which are used to make hardbound wedding albums. This post-digital turn is a way of creating tangible versions of digital media traces that can sit on our coffee tables or be given as gifts. Their exclusive material nature enhances their social and nostalgic value.