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Opinion: The selfie – an aesthetic of realism

The Oxford Dictionary recently named selfie, the practice of taking and distributing a self-authored photograph of oneself using a smartphone, its word of the year for 2013.

Invariably, the commentary that typically accompanies such a proclamation has bubbled up in order to assess, and in some cases decry, yet another media phenomenon brought about by a purportedly narcissistic culture awash with front-facing camera phones and obsessed with celebrity and self-promotion.

Although I am sure some of this commentary has its merits, I think far too often public discourse about social media, and digital culture more broadly, is inclined to focus on the novelty of new forms of communication instead of considering the extent to which these innovations are actually a continuation of already existing media practices.

Which is to say, from my point of view, it is worth thinking about how something like selfies actually functions to reinforce as well as disrupt the norms associated with self-authored media content.

At its most elemental, taking selfies is photographing oneself in order to share those images with other people. This inclination, of course, is not new. From a psychoanalytic perspective, for instance, one could argue that such an activity is just another manifestation of an enduring propensity to represent what we imagine our identity to be to others.

At the same time, selfies embody a form of representation that is, like so much social media, increasingly abundant and highly dependent on immediacy. For example, many of us share images throughout the day using handy mobile devices in order to capture a happening, however banal, in real time (I am quite fond of texting photos of food).

In this scenario, the value associated with something like selfies not only comes from immediacy, it is also derived from the way that selfies use the author's face to code an image with a personalized and, therefore, intimate quality.

Authenticity

From the perspective of media studies scholars such as myself, this intimacy is one of the most interesting aspects of a phenomenon like selfies because it connects the practice to a more pervasive interest in media that uses amateur performers — whether they are on reality TV, YouTube or webcams — to affect an aesthetic of realism and authenticity.

Thought about in this context, the contours defining our media landscape are reflected in the various ways in which selfies are now coming to exist in our daily lives. As already

mentioned, selfies are very similar to other kinds of social media practices that encourage us to curate and regularly tend to online personas.

They are also another instance in which ubiquitous digital technology provides a seemingly egalitarian form of self-promotion. Because so many of us have smartphones and accounts on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, we all have the ability to publicize ourselves.

Paying attention

The question to be asked, then, is who — besides the NSA and Google, of course — is really paying attention? Who wants to see a self-portrait of you while you wait for a friend in a parking lot? Unless you are famous, the answer is most likely, very few. If you are famous, however, that same image could be easily monetized in the hands of a good publicist.

And this is how I suspect the cultural logic driving the selfie phenomenon connects more broadly to other types of social media: individuals who are already public figures (actors, athletes, musicians, politicians) will increasingly snap "spontaneous" selfies in order to garner publicity while lesser known members of the digital ecosystem transmit similar types of images, but to much smaller audiences and, in most cases, to different ends.

Today, for instance, we are said to live in era that is increasingly inundated with different kinds of celebrity. At the same time, however, our relationship with celebrity has not changed all that much. The pleasure to be had in seeing a selfie of Alec Baldwin while he waits in a dentist's office is not that dissimilar from the enjoyment found in looking at tabloid photos of celebrities walking their dogs or getting parking tickets.

In such images we are given evidence of what celebrities are like at their most ordinary, which celebrities and their handlers have always used to cultivate marketable private personas.

Conversely, non-celebrities taking selfies appears to follow a similar, albeit inverse, logic that informs social media more generally: We busy ourselves creating and maintaining online personas as if we were in some sense already famous in the hopes of appearing somehow less ordinary in order to make friends, attract lovers, secure jobs and so on.

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