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# Self-Production through the Banal and the Fictive: Self and the Relationship with the Screen

Yasmin Ibrahim, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK

## ABSTRACT

The self is performed through the banal of the everyday on social media. The banality of the everyday constitutes an integral part of our communication on digital platforms. Taking this as part of our performative lives in the digital economy, the paper looks at ways in which we co-produce the self through the banality of the everyday as well as a wider imagination and engagement with the world. These wider engagements are termed as ‘fictive’ not because they are unreal but through a conceptual notion of how the self is performed and imagined through wider world events in digital platforms and screen cultures where convergence of technologies allow us to be constantly consumed through the screen as we live out our daily lives. The narration of our lives through the banal and the fictive constantly co-produces the self through a situated domesticity of the everyday and equally through the eventful. In the process it reveals our ongoing relationship with the screen as an orifice for the production of self and the construction of a social reality beyond our immediate domesticity.

## KEYWORDS

Banality, Digital Economy, Self-Production, Social Media, Social Reality

## INTRODUCTION

The notions of identity and the performative are tightly entwined in our digital lives. Our daily interactions and engagements online contribute to identity creation. The banal and the perfunctory as they migrate to online spaces of communication, everyday life becomes performed online and these mediated rituals of communicating the mundane and ritualistic can be therapeutic while enabling the self to be consumed by others. Both the ways in which we perceive ourselves through our daily rituals and the ways in which others consume us are important to the notion of presence in digital culture. The communication of the daily rituals also inscribes a sense of space demarcating certain spaces with a sense of familiarity and resonance online. As such the self is constantly produced and renewed through the everyday. The diarisation of our lives and equally the exhibitionistic qualities along with the performative means the self is produced and consumed contemporarily in online spaces as we go about our daily

routines in our physical environments. Beyond the routine and perfunctory of the everyday, self-production online entails interaction with a wider world. These wider worlds of conversations, political events, popular imagination and fantasy equally conjoin with the everyday. The self is then co-produced through the banal and the fictive as we conceive them in our everyday imagination.

This paper explores the notion of self-production online through the categories of the banal representing the everyday and the notion of entwining the self with the wider world events which I term as the 'fictive'. The fictive of the wider world is an important part of inserting the self into a social reality beyond personal lived experiences and the routines of the everyday life, where the political and aesthetic self emerges and interacts with a world imagined, experienced and performed through digital platforms and experienced through the screen.

## **THE BANAL AND THE FICTIVE**

The project of self-construction online has entailed the sharing of our intimate and private moments with a perceived sense of audience eager to consume the self, crafted through its everyday experiences. We have as such made the representation of the everyday a vital content for consumption in online spaces (Ibrahim 2015). The banal and routine is experienced both in the material world and equally experienced through its projection, narration and exhibition online. Engagement and consumption through the screen has experiential properties as the screen offers us a means to produce our disembodied selves which we can equally consume in real time while living out our daily lives. This duality is part of digital living where the corporeal experiences and lived experiences become conjoined. As bodies become domesticated through mobile technologies, life experiences become conjoined through the screen with the convergence of technologies and our ability to produce ourselves as content on the move. The production of the self through the everyday is a necessary part of our sense of sociality and engagement with a community. But importantly it asserts the sense of presence in the digital environment by enacting the familiar and the perfunctory through the routines of the everyday. The digital age and our obsession with the self is also seen as a 'narcissistic turn' where we can produce and curate ourselves online (See Ibrahim 2009).

The projection of the everyday onto the screen for sharing affords a resonance with fellow human beings. While much has been written about the domestication of technology in our domestic environments, we need to reconsider how we have inscribed domesticity onto the screen as a means to communicate our presence on the screen and to equally live through the screen. Screen living has domesticated the banal and perfunctory as a form of resonant code of communication that engenders familiarity and solidarity with fellow humans. It forms the basis of not just presence but an essential element of sharing and sociality online. The sociality of the everyday by showcasing the intimate happenings of domesticity and the banal produces highly personal moments online and is part of our semantics of bonding with others in our

everyday engagements online. This screen living assumes a degree of 'publicness' in enacting ones' daily routines and in communicating the everyday.

The communication of the everyday whether it be Snapchats of your breakfast or pet, or sharing the aggravation of your delayed train encode an implicit intimacy as these are resonant depictions of the everyday and the familiar of our social settings. The banal of the everyday renders a therapeutic element to digital communication underpinning implicit codes of familiarity which others can identify with. As such the 'banal of the everyday' stands in contrast with an attention economy where the unexpected and salacious events punctuate our routine lives with breaking news of explosion and disruption in the age of anxiety. The communication of the everyday whether through text or images provide a therapeutic value in this 'age of anxiety' where we are constantly distracted by the next big event. The interplay of people's intimate and everyday routines communicated and consumed through a screen which can equally call us to bear witness to other worlds and events beyond our control asserts the therapeutic value in consuming the familiar and inscribing the perfunctory of the everyday into social media platforms. The banal of the everyday has social value. As the 'non-event' of the banal saturates our image landscape with objects of domesticity, it lends an important role in asserting and sustaining normalcy and in enabling a communion with an intimate and imagined audiences on social media platforms. Our notions of sociality are also constantly reconfigured through these public displays but equally in how others consume us. The reciprocity of offering our banal lives for others and an expectation that we are consumed through our daily routines becomes a means to pattern therapeutic communications online. The banal in the age of anxiety seeks to retain the routine and patterns and indeed the normalcy of our everyday lives as these become disrupted through unexpected events which are constantly thrust into our lives without warning.

If the banal reinserts the time and space of the everyday, the self is also constantly co-produced through a wider world of events and interactions beyond the banal of the everyday. The wider world of the political, popular culture, consumerism, national conversations and voyeurism of the digital world is what I term the 'fictive'. The fictive does not imply the real is not encoded in the wider happenings of the world. The fictive here is defined as what is represented through a digital environment and landscape where we can gain proximity and intimacy which may not be afforded in the real world. The fictive of the digital world allows the layperson to be part of wider political debates, to partake in world events and popular culture without being materially present in these events and happenings in offline spaces. This possibility to insert the self into a wide array of events ranging from the popular to the political is enabled through the interactivity and mobility of the internet where social conversations can signpost events and enable engagements with distant events both in terms of consumption of these online and to partake in them through conversations and discussions. The convergence of technologies and the architecture of web 2.0 presents the possibility to archive and curate images even when we don't produce or own them and as such to create an intimacy through our engagements and modes of consumption of the

fictive. It presents us with unlimited possibilities to veer into virtual image galleries and video platforms and to curate images from a wide repertoire of offerings from professional to amateur productions. The immense digital landscape allows one to negotiate the sense of time and space and equally to re-position notions of intimacy and proximity with the wider world represented through the digital terrain. It allows us to tag, to like, to follow the stranger and the celebrity while showcasing these wider engagements through the projection of the self-online. As such our imagination of the world is co-produced through these wider engagements while centering the self as an interlocutor between the fictive and the banal.

## **THE SCREEN SELF AND SELF-COMMODIFICATION**

The passing of the terrestrial age into a digital one brought an immense and renewed awe with technology. The digital age in contrast to the terrestrial age of broadcasting is one which allows us to be inserted inside the screen. The age of broadcasting produced both a fascination with the screen and its ability to re-produce and project the world into our intimate social settings. It provided a means to represent a wider world and mediate it through a screen culture of consuming what was out there through the confines of the home. The screen domesticated through the hearth and home provided an intimacy to distant and remote world events (Williams 1974). The screen over time acquired a social status of being a filter to the outside world. Unlike radio or print, the screen could fill ones' senses with sights and sounds supplanting imagination while offering ways to consume the world. Screen as receptacle of the popular culture, political events and a platform for marking national processions and sharing the traumatic produced an incestuous bind with the screen over time, reifying it as a cultural and communal artefact that provided connections with the wider world through everyday consumption habits.

While the age of broadcasting, the domestication of the television and its centrality as a cultural artefact where it provided communion with an imagined community became underpinning factors which sustained the screen as a space of cultural veneration. The screen provided a means to gaze at others and to be mobile even in the private spaces of the home. The intimate relationship with television as a central technology in the home crafted the screen as an edifice for escape but equally for forms of sociality and in patterning our sense of time and space through broadcast schedules and the act of watching. The watching of television produced an imagined sense of solidarity with the unknown other. The screen produced this implicit social bond while asserting its dominance in the privacy of our homes. The screen as such was bound with domesticity and consumed through the pace and rhythm of domestic life. The screen prevailed as a filter for viewing another world, signifying a place of make believe and escape. The screen's association with make believe and its ability to showcase the powerful and the deviant, or celebrity or the suffering of the unknown expanded our field of vision beyond the immediate surrounds to encompass another world of staging events and productions. The screen provided the technical orifice

for entering another world and hence the screen symbolised not just the expansion of vision and our ability to see beyond our immediate surrounds but also the possibility of immersing ourselves into alternate realities far removed from our own. The screen acquired a prominence in modernity where it was the source of entertainment, information and mass communication in society. This doubling of our field of vision through the screen made the screen an intimate part of reality construction in modernity.

The emergence of various forms of mobile gadgets again valorised the screen but also introduced the possibilities for solitary pleasure. The advent of the internet age and the incorporation of the PCs and laptops in work environments as well as the home, enabled us to think about the screen where we could control, produce and mediate content directly. We could capture ourselves and others through the convergence of technologies and through mobile gadgets. It enabled an obsession to image ourselves and others non-stop and in the process in produced different forms of gaze enable through existing power relationship and as well as through the subversion of prevailing norms (See Ibrahim 2011).

The screen became much more malleable beyond watching one's favourite movies through the video recorder or the DVD. With the World Wide Web and the possibilities to browse disparate content, to communicate synchronously and asynchronously, the screen transcended into a much more personal artifice truncating it from its earlier social role as the immobile centre piece in the living room. As the screen became more personalised through PCs and laptops, it came to signify much more intimate and private engagements while mediating a wider world through it. The convergence of technologies, the advent of web 2.0, better bandwidth along with the refinements in handheld smart technologies which targetted the corporeal body rather than the physical space of the home, the screen entered a new era of social relevance. The body as a site for embedding smart communication technologies produced the self as constantly mediated through both its physical space and the virtual one enabled through the screen. If the screen acquired social resonance and dominance in the age of broadcasting, it acquired a bodily intimacy in the age of the digital media, becoming an extension of the body where it was possible to ubiquitously consume the world as well as our selves online while simultaneously offering ourselves to others for consumption.

Beyond the 'intimatisation' of the screen, the transcendence from the broadcasting age to the social media age was marked through our ability to see ourselves inside the screen. The screen no longer belonged to the powerful or the celebrity, it became a space in which one could view oneself and offer the self to others as an object and subject. The self-became part of content production online and became a means to fill the spaces of social media platforms becoming part content and part data where these can be transacted with and without human consent. The inserting of the self into the screens, our ability to consume and narrate ourselves and equally to make ourselves content for consumption of friends and strangers extended the social importance of the screen in the digital age. The screen belonged to us and we started to belong to the screen.

With reality television, the loss of scripting and the demise of production values were critiqued. Nevertheless, reality television made confessional television and consuming ordinary people part of the fabric of television and consumption. The changing political economy of broadcasting particularly the shift from terrestrial broadcasting to the satellite and cable television, banished issues with spectrum scarcity enabling a whole array of niche lifestyle and reality programmes to saturate television broadcasting. It led to criticisms about the loss of quality and the demise of the public sphere and public service broadcasting with less funding routed to public information and education programmes. The incorporation of reality television and the re-fashioning of public gaze to view the ordinary and intimate details of people's everyday lives became a precursor in enabling the perfunctory and the everyday to become part of media content. The unscripted watching of people and leveraging on people performing for the camera or 'acting up' constituted a new era of watching others but equally envisioning the screen as part of the expose. Equally it re-inscribed the banal and domestic routines of peoples' uneventful lives and the ordinariness of existence to become viable subjects. Television veering beyond the valued principles of education, information and communication entered a phase of perverse and pervasive people watching which the digital age sort to expand infinitum. However, it went a step further where people could watch themselves and also offer themselves for others to watch. Self-gaze became an intrinsic component of watching in the digital era and hence it created the asestheticization of the self, evident in rise and rise of selfies and a whole repository of advice and technical proficiency in presenting and curating the self aesthetically online.

With social media, the self-became commodified as content and data – as a commodity for exchange and transaction. It provided a means for people to insert themselves into the screen. This self-commodification again reconfigured the relationship with the screen and equally the narration of the routine and banal as content online. Prior to the digital age we domesticated technologies such as the television and other domestic appliances into our private realm, in the digital age the technologically embodied body co-opted the banal and the routine in our private domains as content for social media and new media platforms. The corporeal embedding of technology meant it entered a much more intimate realm than the age of television. While television as a technology projected content from outside, the technologically embodied self-projected the domestic and banal or what may have been deemed as private onto to the outer world. Technology's conquest of the body also meant an increasing loss of inhibition and increasing blurring of boundaries on what can be deemed public or private. As technologies became part of the body and extended vision, memory and sensory perceptions and to live our lives through the screen, the banal and the everyday became genre of content others could find communion and resonance with. Digital age in essence made the banal an intrinsic part of sociality and in gaining intimacy with others.

While mobile gadgets privatised the screen by decoupling it from the domestic environment, social media inverted the screen into a mirror where people could

watch themselves forging an intense intimacy through the everyday and in terms of transforming the self into a disembodied entity online. The screen was no longer just private or solitary space and but one which recorded 'the daily and the everyday' and projected it to others updating on the movements and experiences of the self.

While reality television enabled us to insert ordinary people into the screen and consume them, social media enabled the self to be part of the content of the screen enabling visibility to a wider audience and equally propelling the self into a public arena. This duality of the self where life is experienced through ones' physical environment and equally through how it is experienced and narrated online, meant that the screen acquired a projective quality of extending the real into the virtual. The public quality of social media platforms enabled the self to become a performative entity and to exist through the consumption and the endorsement of an imagined public.

With the proliferation of new channels and programmes with cable and satellite broadcasting, social media conceived the hoi polloi as content. While imparting notions of its democratic potential as a people's communication tool, social media leveraged on people as content and data to drive these platforms and to create value (See Bonsu and Darmody 2008; Terranova 2000). It extracted people and their daily lives as content. The digital platforms enticed people to share stories, direct gaze, to endorse people, products and services to signpost information but most importantly to sign up to an economy where these creative enterprises whether these be in the form of text, videos or images did not foreclose of people revealing the personal and the intimate and courting public gaze. While the empowering qualities of the internet and social media platforms were constructed through issues of access, connectivity and the ability to transform people into public entities, it laid claims to the commodification of self and creating value through the public transaction of the self. It in many ways symbolised the ultimate triumph of capitalism where the self could be monetised and transacted as content and data in online platforms while creating value for advertisers and social media sites by conjoining them to products and services. The lure of the screen and our awe with it also meant the increasing loss of inhibition where we are willing to be intimate and public on the screen. The monetisation of the self-meant that we as digital tribes became complicit in the digital economy of exchange and value creation. Equally, we became complicit in wanting to share our lives online and hence became part of complicit risk economy (Ibrahim 2008a).

As social media commodified the self, it also became a place to share the banal and the perfunctory of everyday life. Social media eager to fill empty spaces on digital platforms, offered the self as commodity for transaction and consumption in a mediated world. The domesticity of the everyday, our everyday routines and the perfunctory became means to narrate our lives and to offer them as content for others to consume. In the process we consumed ourselves and equally sought to see how others consumed us through page visits and endorsements such as likes, reposting and re-tweeting. The ubiquity of mobile technologies, its co-location on the corporeal body and the emergence of a sociality through the everyday made the banal a resonant part of human communication and communion.

## **‘JE SUI WORLD’**

The participatory elements in new media technologies, the ability to partake in public conversations and democratic potential to be a producer of content online, enabled the self to be narrated beyond the banal or the perfunctory. The self and its engagement with the world and the public nature of these engagements sought to narrate the self through wider events of the world and the market place. The self through its instagram or twitter accounts could be part of the conversations and as such it enabled the self to be re-fashioned from purely as narcissistic production modes to one in which it interacted with world events. The self as a reactive and expressive entity to the wider world composed through the screen is also an important part of identity creation today. Thus beyond our composition through the everyday, the wider world and its happenings co-construct the self. While broadcasting sought to reconfigure our notions of space and time through the screen, social media age intensified this. By mediating the virtual world through the screen, time and space are not only reconfigured but a distinct proximity is created through our engagements with the fictive world as represented on the screen. The convergence of technologies means that we not only gaze but consume and communicate ubiquitously expecting an instant gratification from our activities online afforded through synchronous communication such as chat facilities and people reading posts in real time and endorsing these.

In contrast to the broadcast age, the screen does only double the vision into an alternate reality but also enables the self to be re-cast with world events through the ability to partake in them through discussions, signposting, re-tweeting, blogs, image curation, etc. The self can perform solidarity with renunciations of atrocity or commune with trauma where these occur. The self has become a means to stand in solidarity and to co-produce it as a symbol of protest during times of crisis. The rise of ‘solidarity selfies’ revealed the entity of the self as an active agent in terms of political engagement. The re-fashioning of the self as part of another person’s trauma or misfortune not only communicated the solidarity in these enactments but equally the potency of employing the self as a political tool to express disaffect, citizenship, protest and communion with the dispossessed. The rise of solidarity selfies doesn’t necessarily decentre the self but provides a means to locate politics through its disembodied representation online while using it as a form of political expression. In numerous political contexts and situations of social dissent, the selfie has become a hybrid form of social protest; of standing in consensus with the crowd yet employing the individual self to be part of the collective. Hence the ‘fictive’ of the wider world becomes renegotiated through the sense of self online both through its political orientations and the self as an entity for public and symbolic protest. The new media screen allows the individual to delve into the virtual and to be mobile within its offering and to exercise choice and agency. While television was about mobile privatisation, new media allowed one to go beyond and to add to the content creation online. Thus images could be re-hashed and real events can be satirised through memes and mashups. Where real world events can be narrated through user-generated

content and personal commentary to reconfigure the sacred and puerile in the virtual world. Where people in elongate event creation by partaking in both celebrations and tragedies online through the projection of the self onto the screen. As such digital platforms have become spaces to enact new rituals of mourning and celebration and to create social norms where the self is never completely de-centred.

If television allowed us to witness tragedies and be part of national mourning and celebration through the notion of mass audience and consumption, the mobile screen of tablets and smart phones personalised our engagements with the wider world. It allowed us to be selective with what we let into our screen while being enticed into a whole array of content online through cookies and algorithms which track your preference and seek attention constantly. Today watching communally then entails also the phenomenon of ‘second screening’ where people interact about content while they consume it. It conjoins a connection with a wider audience where it was previously imagined through the nation state in the age of broadcasting (See Anderson 1991). If the age of broadcasting prior to the notion of ‘television on demand’ sought to order time and space through broadcasting schedules and to impose the notion of an imagined community through broadcasting in a nation-state, the personal screen of today has made it a reality for us to speak to this ‘imagined’ community while consuming and watching, relating our comments in real time. Our public spheres forming through text and images exchanged in real time.

The digital age is an age of distraction, where advertising content and alerts add layers to the screen vision, seeking to distract and divert the self elsewhere. While the screen of the mass consumption as conceived through the television sought to deliver mass mediated world, the small screen signified by the personalised gadget fractured and personalised the virtual arena, seeking to impress the self as an individual with its own preferences and agency. While the proliferation of multiple channels on the television screen stood for choice and leisure. The small screen of fracture is a screen that conjoins several platforms including television programmes and user-generated content. It stands for a distraction economy where the engagement of the self in terms of content can leave a data trail while creating a browser history unique to it (Ibrahim 2008b). Hence the self is constantly narrated through its data trail where it can be coded as part of the big data and equally through its unique preferences and settings. If the screen stood for communion in the age of broadcasting, in the digital age the screen is a fluid space that requires the self to be both performed and coded through its consumption and preferences. The digital screen requires a more active engagement seeking to build private spaces through logins and passwords while seeking to render one a subject of wider invisible processes of turning everything into data.

## **CONCLUSION**

The paper reviewed the notions of banal and fictive mainly as a means to interrogate how the self is performed through the everyday and through world events where these provide a theatre to narrate the self and its engagements. The banal is part of self-

objectification where our ability to insert ourselves into the screen enable us to perform the self through the everyday routines and rituals. This exposition of the banal is a therapeutic element of communion and sociality today. The objectification of the self also devised a more intense relationship with the screen where notions of privacy and intimacy and equally of being connected became reconfigured. The intense relationship with the screen and the transformation of the self as an object of consumption through its daily rituals provide a means to fill a vast abyss of the digital terrain with content. The self is both content and data online where it is both consumed and transacted through algorithms creating value for advertisers and organisations. In the contrast to the banal, the self is also narrated through a wider world of events where the self is imagined by inserting it into trauma, celebrations, rituals of mourning and protest. The engagement with the fictive allows the self to be more than just a voyeur in the new media economy. It can partake and elongate event creation without decentering the self while sustaining itself as a form of commodity for others to consume. The fictive of the wider world can be owned, curated and co-produced through the self in this digital screen culture.

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