I Was There Too: A Visual Ethnography and Analysis on Meaningful Inefficiencies, Data Colonialism, and Digital Parasites Using Facebook Messengers Video-Chat Feature

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Abstract

My visual ethnography uses Facebook Messenger's video-chat feature to 'travel to' and 'be' in different parts of Calgary. By video chatting, I was able to hear and see aspects of various places that I was not physically present in. In the analysis, I draw from Bart Cammaerts' concept of self-mediation to illustrate how I abided by the intended affordances video chatting offers. Additionally, I draw on Gordon and Walter's concept of meaningful inefficiencies to demonstrate how I created a digital experience that was intentionally playful. I disregarded the need to obtain visibility in an online space, thereby challenging notions of governmentality. I reference Ghel and McKelvey's work on digital parasites to articulate the parasitic nature of this experience, not only between the human-computer relationship but also between human-human relationships. Moreover, I discuss how I partially subverted data colonialism, as the places I "went to" via video chat were not tracked on my GPS. This, however, required commodifying the involvement of the person that I was video chatting with; I made their experiences my own. This digital experience contributes to the literature about being visible in online spaces in an alternative way; it was not concerned with curating an online persona or acquiring likes and shares. The screenshots illustrate the technological noise that disrupts the call, further positing the intentional playfulness and inefficiency of the experience. The limitations of this experience relate to themes of resistance. While in some ways I resisted data colonialism, the only way to truly resist one's data from being collected is to create an experience that is offline and untraceable. This experience welcomes the messiness and hybridity of digital platforms and provides an opportunity for purposeful misconnection.

The purpose of this experience is to demonstrate how digital platforms can be used in alternative ways that welcome the messiness and hybridity of technology, rather than oppose it. A visual ethnography is used to illustrate and articulate this digital experience. An ethnography interprets everyday aspects of society and culture. Through participation and observation, an ethnography captures everyday experiences to better understand the society under study. This methodology involved both participating in and viewing aspects of the online and offline space. Incorporating screenshots adds a visual element that aids in illustrating the noise I encountered during this experience and the hybridity of the offline and online space. While many digital experiences focus on attaining visibility, I was curious if my participation could be less about cultivating a visible online identity and more about engaging in ways that are untraceable and playful. I wanted to experiment using a platform that is intended for intercommunication while being uninterested in holding a conversation; seeing through the camera's lens was of more value and importance. While I was aware that my face was being captured in the screenshots I took, I was not concerned with appearing a certain way. My goal was to engage in an online space with a focus on play and inefficiency rather than cultivating an identity.

Analysis of Digital Experience

The images presented in my digital experience titled "I Was There Too" can be understood through theories that analyze new media and society. This experience can be understood as a mediation because I abided by the affordances and technological rules of video chatting (Cammaerts, 2015, p. 4). Refusing to internalize the norms of this app allowed me to construct an alternative way of using Facebook's Messenger platform. Not only did this experience highlight the power imbalance between humans and computers, but it also explored the ways in which human-to-human relationships may become parasitic through digital mediation. Resistance was a prominent theme throughout this experience. I resisted some elements of data colonialism at the expense of extracting data from the person on the other end of my call and capitalizing on the events of their day. While I adhered to the affordances of video chatting, the process of video calling another person and having them take me to different places opposes the intended and typical uses of Facebook Messengers video chat feature. This illustrates the concept of meaningful inefficiencies as I was not concerned with quantifying my

experience—playfulness and exploration were of more value. The purpose of this experience is to demonstrate how digital platforms can be used in alternative ways that welcome the messiness and hybridity of technology.

My digital experience focused less on changing the technological system I was experimenting with and more so on challenging its use. Bart Cammaerts (2015) refers to Michel Foucault's definition of technologies of the self as the ways "individuals internalize rules and constraints" (p. 2). While I intended to use Facebook Messenger's video chat feature in an unusual way, I still abided by its functions. Cammaerts (2015) addresses how technologies, when used frequently, become extensions of ourselves (p. 4). Wandering around the city in this digital way made it seem as though my eyes were the camera lens, and my ears were the speaker. These factors shaped the experience and blurred the "subject-object dichotomy" (Cammaerts, 2015, p. 4). The boundaries between the human senses and digital infrastructure were blurred. Cammaerts (2015) further explores how mediation blends communicative processes such as production and reception (p. 4). During the video call, I was simultaneously producing and receiving information and content. This experience demonstrates an in-betweenness which blurs the boundaries of the physical and digital space. Moreover, this hybridity complicates the concepts of alternative and mainstream. I used a mainstream app for an alternative use, which impacted the dynamics of my participation; it impacted how my identity was shaped in this digital space. Cammaerts (2015) refers to three technologies of the self: disclosure, examination, and remembrance (p. 3). In terms of disclosure, this experience was not concerned with attaining visibility within a platform and, as such, limited the capacity to construct a digital identity. The task of mobilizing this digital experience, however, depended on my ability to use the required infrastructure. This further blends the notions of online and offline; I was simultaneously present in both a digital and physical space. Unlimited data and instant access eased the second technology of the self: examination. I could text, voice call, and video call all in the same place. Combining the affordances of archiving and recording via screenshotting, this experience aids in its memorability because the screenshots allow for easier recollection. These three technologies help build the user's digital identity. This experience, however, was less concerned with cultivating my online self. These technologies were used to resist the intended use of the platform rather than make my online self visible. In addition, Cammaerts (2015) attests that the affordances of

social media allow for communication to be less constrained by time and space (p. 22). Platforms such as Facebook Messenger allow users to communicate from any place at any time, offering the idea of universal outreach, but users must first create and accept connections before they can video chat with another user. This means users are not only relying on a corporate platform but are also usually only connecting with users they already know. These additional constraints may cultivate creativity where an alternative form of engagement, not concerned with likes, shares, or comments, arises.

Figure 1

I was there too

I reach for my phone so frequently that it is as if it has become an extension of myself. One early morning, I called my brother using Facebook's video chat feature on the Messenger app. Using this feature, I could see what he saw: the interior of the car and the blurry, cold exterior outside. The ability to see from his point of view added a personal touch that is not available in a regular phone call. Our interaction abided by the intended and typical uses that video chatting offers. My participation was akin to the discourse of Web 1.0. In this digital ether of cyberspace, it can feel as though one has unlimited access and connections. I felt I could go anywhere and see anything.

Using this medium of communication in its intended way reminded me of Cammaert's concept of self-mediation. Cultivating my online self was of less importance; I was not fighting for visibility within a platform but was eager to see through the eyes of another lens. With unlimited data, access and connectivity are instant and ease coordination. These screenshots enhance the memorability of this call. While I was using this feature of Messenger in ways that did not change the system, I was

challenging the use of it. I was engaging in an unusual way, free of likes and comments and shares.

To have this type of digital experience (one not constrained by time and space) requires one to have access to devices and platforms. Gehl and McKelvey (2019) argue the human-computer relationship is rooted in "power, exploitation, and inequity" (p. 220). They concur that platforms create private relations; certain information cannot be viewed without the required software (p. 222). My digital experience would not have been possible without a smartphone or a Facebook account. Similarly to how the authors claim the human-computer relationship is parasitic, I argue there was a parasitic element in this experience.

Parasites change the logic of systems; they produce hybrid ideas of in-betweenness (Ghel & McKelvey, 2019, p. 224). This idea is present in Figure 3, titled "In transit," which shows an image of me 'on the train.' It was this circumstance where I felt the hybridity of this experience most. I was mutually at home, on the train, and on the screen of each respective phone. At that moment, it

Figure 2

Passenger

became clear that the construction of this digital relationship was not rooted in mutual benefit. Like the human-computer relationship, there was a parasitic element. This experience revealed the capacity to use digital platforms in ways that exploit whoever is on the other end. Like a chain of commodification, I leeched off my brother's experiences, and his data was leeched as he moved around the city. Moreover, this highlights how these interactions were ripe for extraction, but not solely because of the platform we used.
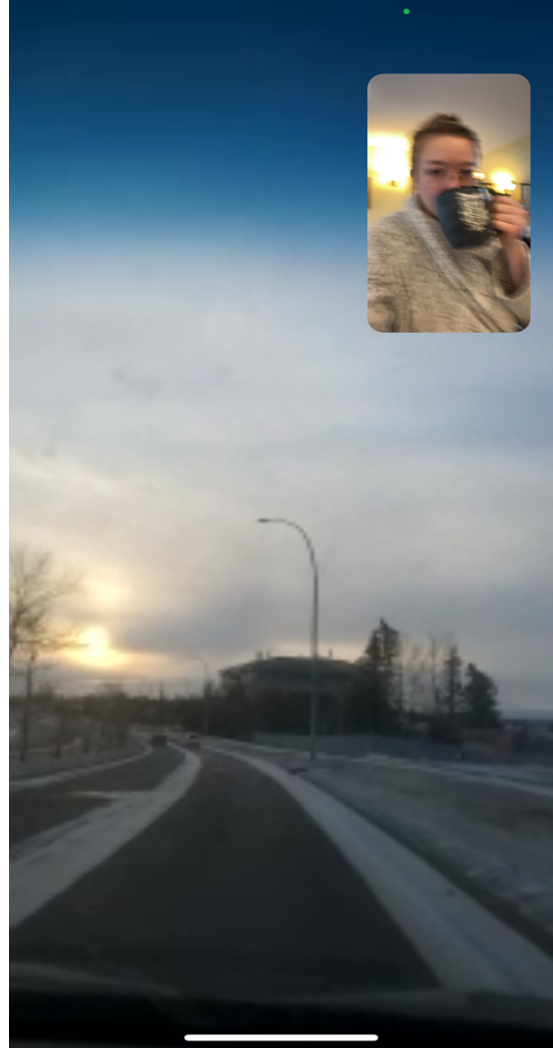
Figure 3

In Transit

Video chatting maintains that you are reliant on another person to answer your call. There is a materialistic element when your attention rests on your own face situated in the corner of the screen. Additionally, I felt a lack of privacy. When my brother was on the train, he was without headphones, meaning that my voice was echoing throughout his car. Disrupting the swift ride home for the other passengers made me feel like an unwanted guest—a parasite. All communication is challenged by noise but being in a position where you are aware of the noise you are making is an uncomfortable experience. Communicating through this platform emphasized the publicness of our conversation and made me recognize the demands I was making at the other end of the call. Moreover, I felt some socially accepted norms were colliding by being both online and in a public space; my interactions were being shaped by the platform I was using and the platform of the train I was on.

Throughout this experiment, a theme of civic efficiency presented itself. Gordon and Walter (2016) define efficiency as being cost-effective, quick, and able to be distributed on the market (p. 241). When technology is only concerned with this type of efficiency, however, it limits users' capacity to play within the rules and experience something new (Gordon & Walter, 2016, p. 242). I would argue my digital experience closely aligns with Gordon and Walter's concept of meaningful inefficiencies. Meaningful inefficiencies accommodate the possibility for

"messiness, disruption, and playing with rules and boundaries" (Gordon & Walter, 2016, p. 242). I would argue against the notion that video chatting on Facebook is efficient due to its requirement that one must create an account and expand their online network. I was not a passive user; I challenged the concept of efficiency and defied the normative uses of this digital technology. The purpose of video chatting is to connect face-to-face with someone you are not physically close to. It is unusual— and unexpected— to use this form of communication to see

and be in new places. Moreover, due to technological problems such as blurry imagery and faulty connections, viewing different places is not made easy. My experience, however, was not concerned with creating an "efficient" and stable tour of the city. The element of play posits that the means are more valuable than the ends (Gordon & Walter, 2016, p. 251). Furthermore, video chatting is not fully efficient due to its limitations. Firstly, one must learn how to use the infrastructure and labour to make it work. In Figure 4, titled "Buffering," this labour is evident. When connections falter, or sound cuts out during a video call, users recognize they must hang up and call again to reinstate the connection. While I laboured to make each call successful, the work was of less importance than the action and capacity to play within each video call. Gordon and Walter (2016) argue users act predictably when they internalize mechanisms of control (p. 248). I would counter that the process and involvement within my video calls challenge this notion of governmentality.

Figure 4

*Buffering*

Figure 5

I am Everywhere
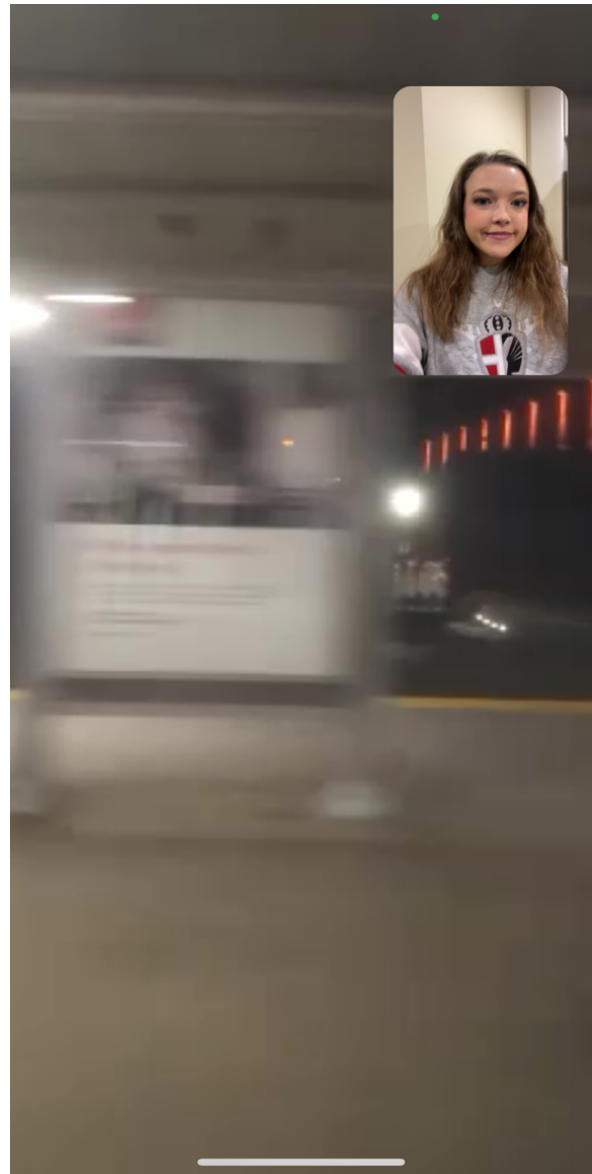
I found an element of playfulness throughout this experience. Similar to the ways in which self-mediation blurs some communicative processes, I, too, felt an in-betweenness of process and production. Video chatting brought me to many places. I was there on that sidewalk, and I was inside my house. I was online, and I was unavailable. I was with my brother, and I was by myself. This playfulness connects to Gordon and Walter's concept of meaningful inefficiencies. The alternative use of this platform highlighted the uncertainties and unexpectedness of the process.

Couldry and Mejias (2018) concur that data colonialism is the capitalization of raw life with no limits (p. 336). They argue that social media platforms encourage users to share their inner thoughts, proving that there are no limits to the commodification of life as raw data (p. 341). It is not only a matter of labour relations but social relations that are ripe for extraction (Couldry & Mejias, 2018, p. 343). I testify that my experience resisted data colonialism in some capacity. I subverted GPS tracking by staying home. Despite claiming I was in a new place, my phone's GPS did not track these locations. It did, however, track that I was home, and it recorded the history of each call. I used the affordances of video chatting to supply me with the data I needed. In this way, I participated in the commodification of life as data. I transformed human life into an abstract form and exploited the data from the video call. This, however, was not something that seemed bothersome. I would claim users are not overly concerned with their data being colonized when communicating with a friend over a video call, as the focus is on connecting and conversing in the same way they would during an in-person conversation. This experience was developed with the understanding that video chatting ensures users are sharing
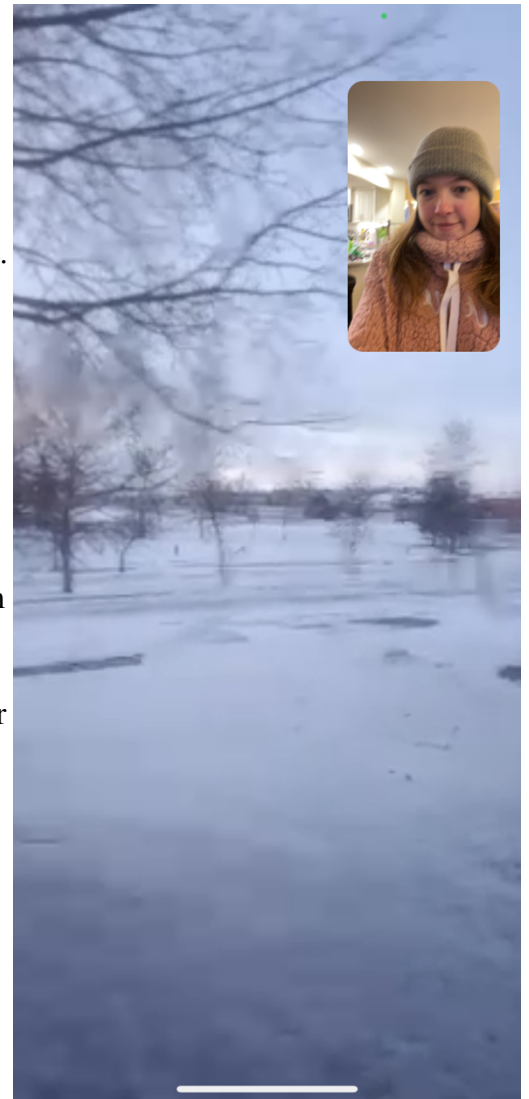
their data, not losing it. Yet the interactions between me and the person on the other end of the call were only of value to me if I was gaining something from it. The goal of each call was to obtain a screenshot to prove that I was in some place new. When every interaction is exploited, it takes away our ability to choose what is captured. When our choices are stripped from us, so is our humanity and autonomous identity. This relates to the concept of human erasure and what Couldry and Mejias (2018) identify as gamification (p. 344).

Figure 6

Poor connection, rich experience
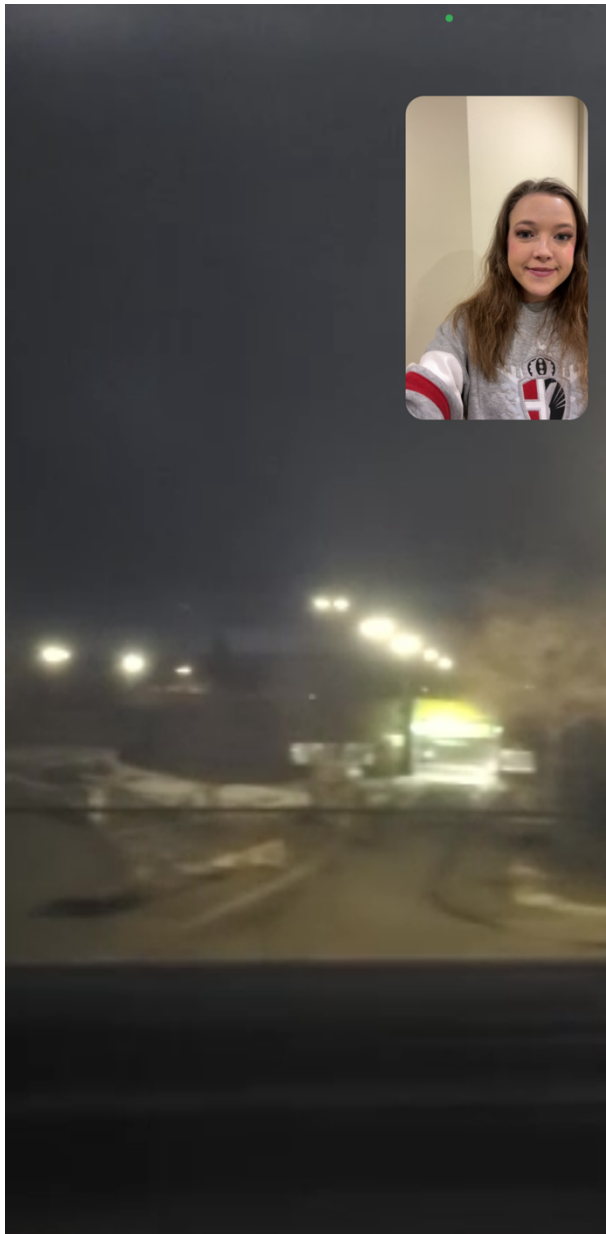
When you are present in a video call, you become raw data, yet these data projections are only partial to who you are (p. 344). The main problem with this data is that its collection is determined by fostering an imbalance of power. In this experience, it was not solely the platform that held power in the human-computer relationship. Similar to how data colonialism is concerned with extracting data for the benefit of a few, I, too, was extracting data for my own benefit. The screenshots I took demonstrate this power imbalance. When one video chats, they can take the information on the other end of the call and make it their own. Moreover, the screenshots are more effective as a reminder of the experience than being quantified by an algorithm. While I resisted some forms of surveillance and data collection, it was at the expense of exploiting and capitalizing on the life at the other end of the line. The only way to terminate this process is to stop producing

data by hanging up the phone and putting it to sleep.

I found myself using this app in ways it has taught me. I would pause my speech and patiently wait when the connection faltered. I would hang up and call when the screen froze. I have learned how to use this platform, and I laboured to make it work. Yet this labour felt easy and expected. Using this feature to experience being in different places rather than using it conventionally (having a conversation with another person) made me feel more aware of the time I was spending online. Each time I initiated a video call, I was eager to see what would appear in front of me. In some ways, I felt as though I was colonizing the data on the other end of the call. I did not just witness these everyday experiences; I made them my own. I subverted my own data from being tracked in these places by staying home, but it was at the expense of capitalizing on another's life. In this way, the person on the other end of the phone did matter after all—they were forgotten; they were. I was still breaking the boundaries of video chatting affordances, but I was using a platform that promotes social interactions that are ripe for extraction.

While I largely used the video chat feature for my own self-interest, the unexpected and impractical uses illustrate how I was not acting in a predictable way and challenged the notion of participating efficiently. The element of playfulness is a prominent component in meaningful inefficiencies and is evident in Figure 8 of my digital experience, titled "Live streaming." It is impractical to watch a movie via video chat. The quality is poor, and the presence of a phone in a theatre is both distracting and prohibited. This example highlights how it disrupted the efficiency of this online system—and was also disruptive to those physically present in the theatre. It was a rather humorous moment in the experiment, along with Figure 7, titled "Food tracking," where I was privy to viewing leftover pizza but, obviously, was unable to consume it. This entire digital experience was messy in the ways it blurred some communicative processes and toyed with unintentional uses and intentional misuses of this digital platform. It was within this playfulness that I was better able to explore, experiment, and resist (Gordon & Walter, 2016, p. 258).

Figure 7

Food tracking

Figure 8

Live streaming

While in many ways, I used this technology in ways that addressed its needs and functions; I also video chatted in unexpected ways. I used this feature to "travel" around the city, to "be" in two places at once, and to deliberately misuse the affordances of video chatting. My phone may have collected information, such as the person I was communicating with and the length of time we video chatted for, but it fails to collect the experience I had. It fails to collect the "in-betweenness" of where I was.

Figure 9

Put your phone to sleep

In some ways, I resisted data colonialism; my phone's algorithm did not pick up the various places I went; I was unable to be tracked. While my own data was not being exploited, I felt that I was labouring to function within this technology. Additionally, I directed my brother on the other end of the call, putting him to work to make this experience possible. The affordances of video chatting imply that you can communicate across barriers and far distances, but you still must know the person on the other end; you must have their contact information. With Facebook's Messenger app, you still need to be "friends" in order to video chat. Moreover, I had to use a platform that offered me access to these raw moments. I did not know exactly where I would go when I started each call, but this experience demonstrates how I adapted to and challenged the platform. I was an active user. My experience was meaningfully inefficient, the affordances were purposefully misused, and my interactions were intentionally unimportant. n conclusion, my digital experience utilized Facebook's Messenger app to video chat in ways not intended by the platform. Using this platform, however, required that I abide by most of its technological rules for it to function: I needed a Facebook account and an online network of 'friends.' There

was an element of hybridity within this experience, both in the ways that I simultaneously produced and received information, and with regards to the blurring of the digital and physical space. Cultivating my online self was of less importance than the experience itself. I was not completely free of data colonization, but I was able to resist some of its forms despite this resistance requiring that I exploit real-life moments from the other end of the call; I directed my brother around and captured what he viewed for my benefit. This illustrates the parasitic element of this experience. Without having a Facebook account or the digital infrastructure, I would not have been able to participate. Using video chatting to explore the city is unexpected and unusual. In many ways, it revealed the impracticalities of the video chat feature. These impracticalities, however, heightened the experience of playfulness and demonstrated the ability to disrupt the norms of this system.

While it is arguably inefficient to use the video chat function to "travel" around the city, it was effective in creating a unique and joyful experience. Analyzing this experience through the technologies of the self reveals some limitations, most notably in the analysis of disclosure, which emphasizes how the experience is limited in its capacity to mobilize a message to assert an online identity. Additionally, the notion of resistance is a reoccurring theme, but to truly resist one's data from being exploited, one would have to create an experience that was both offline and unrecorded. This adds a limitation to the analysis of resistance. The theories discussed contribute to this analysis by articulating the ease with which we use these devices in their intended ways but also highlight how we are active users and can use them in unintended ways that make room for play and increase the ability to self-reflect on digital processes and experiences. This experience was insightful as it demonstrates how power dynamics are not only restricted to the human-computer relationship. Moreover, it affirms how digital platforms can be intentionally used in ways not intended by their creators, where the sole purpose of such uses is to be humorous and reflect. It is within this increased opportunity for reflection that we can become more in touch with our real and digital selves.

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