

**The Qualified Self in Quantified Times: Translating embodied wellness practices into technological experiences**

Rebecca Jablonsky, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

jablor@rpi.edu

4S Boston 2017

In this research, I explore the relationship between digital self-tracking and wellness culture—asking where paying attention to devices and paying attention to one’s own body and mind intersect. Can there be a transcendence of late capitalism’s increasing expectations on the body, mind, and self through the very devices that bind us to these demands? Quantified self-tracking and the practice of meditation might, at first glance, appear to be diametrical opposites. One speaks of numbers, constant self-improvement, and gamified goal setting. The other focuses on one’s subjective mental state, flows of energy, and letting go of the expectation to constantly achieve things. However, in our current cultural moment, both self-tracking and experiential, embodied wellness practices such as meditation and yoga appear to be on the rise in conjunction with each other.

Within recent scholarship, both self-tracking and wellness practices have been explained and sociologically critiqued through the lens of healthism (Ayo 2012; Lupton 2013), whereby the capacities and affordances of mobile health technologies perpetuate power structures that call for voluntary surveillance of one’s body. Furthermore, both have been critiqued as manifestations of neoliberalism (Lavrence and Lozanski 2014; Moore and Robinson 2016), or “a political and economic approach which favours the expansion and intensification of markets, while at the same time minimizing government intervention” (Ayo 2012, 101). On the other hand, to practitioners such practices represent a type of self-

optimization that occurs through a combination of bodily activity, self-monitoring, and self-reflection. The Quantified Self website states, “Our mission is to support new discoveries about ourselves and our communities that are grounded in accurate observation and enlivened by a spirit of friendship.”<sup>1</sup> The well-known meditation leader Thich Nhat Hanh (1976) writes: “mindfulness is the miracle by which we master and restore ourselves” (14) and “To master our breath is to be in control of our bodies and minds” (20).

When embarking on this project, I intended to study the experience of meditation as it was translated into something technological—specifically, I planned to do an autoethnographic account while completing the introductory programs offered through various mobile phone meditation apps. My research questions were focused on technology and design. I wondered: Can meditating through the aid of a device actually induce what practitioners understand to be a transcendent, calm, qualitatively distinct mental state? Would this be facilitated by the design of the product, or does the user ultimately create her own mental peace in spite of the trappings of technology? I saw these questions as logical extensions of previous conversations about mental and emotional presence in an age of ever-connected digital technology, as popularized by the work of Sherry Turkle (2011) and more recently, Judy Wajcman (2015).

In *Alone, Together*, Turkle (2011) traces two major trends that became apparent by the mid-1990s—the fully networked life and the evolution of robotics—by conducting ethnographic work over the span of fifteen years that

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://quantifiedself.com/about/>, Accessed August 3, 2017

emphasized the experiences of young people growing up into a highly technological world. She notes a rise in multitasking, which she attributes to the fact that it feels good neurochemically—producing a type of “high” that brings the illusion of productivity. While this description hints at the addictive properties of technology, Turkle’s viewpoint ultimately places this issue within the context of a particular cultural moment—which she calls “the robotic moment.” The introduction of new hyper-networked, instantaneous technologies fundamentally changed cultural expectations in such a way that people have become not merely amenable to simulated life—they now often prefer it to real-life interaction.

STS scholar Judy Wajcman (2015) brings the subjective experience of time to the forefront of conversations about using technology—explaining the gendered differences in the experience of time, stress, leisure, and freedom. In her chapter on the time-pressure paradox, she illustrates how the sense of having enough time isn’t only influenced by the quantity of leisure time—but also by the quality. After analyzing data from 10 countries, she found that men and women had almost identical amounts of quantitative leisure time, but women were more likely to multitask and perform some work duties during their leisure time—making them feel as if they had less time. Wajcman ultimately argues: “temporal demands are not inherent to technology. They are built into our devices by all-too-human schemes and desires,” which “enables us to leave behind the old dichotomies about technologies being either inherently liberating or enslaving” (3). Overall, she identifies with the *social shaping* approach to technology. While she acknowledges

particular affordances built into the design of technologies, she sees “nothing inevitable about the way they evolve and are used” (4).

Within the context of the sweeping cultural trends I just reviewed in relation to technology use, time management, and work patterns, taking time to sit still and be with one’s self in meditation might begin to be viewed as a cultural anomaly—perhaps even a radical, subversive act. Indeed, popular media abounds with articles that describe wellness and self-care as radical: some positive, but surface-level<sup>2</sup>, others diary-like and self-reflective<sup>3</sup>, and others more attuned demographic and socioeconomic constraints.<sup>4</sup> But can something so supposedly radical actually take place while using technology? Can devices that have particular *quantitative* affordances effectively be used to improve *quality* of life?

While the term the *quantified* self has become well-known in both popular and academic literature, the notion of the *qualified* self has been comparatively understudied. The earliest mention of the qualified self I have found is in a blog on Cyborgology written by Jenny Davis (2013). After inspiring conversations at conferences, Davis begins to take note of how quantified self data is often interpreted qualitatively to produce meaning for the individual, concluding that “Self quantification is a process bookended by self qualification....Self quantification is, by definition, self knowledge through numbers. Those numbers, however, take shape qualitatively.”

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-7633/10-simple-acts-of-radical-self-care.html>, Accessed August 25, 2017

<sup>3</sup> <https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/radical-self-love-means-radical-self-care/>, Accessed August 25, 2017

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/audre-lorde-thought-self-care-act-political-warfare>, Accessed August 25, 2017

Eric Boam and Jarrett Webb (2014), two designers at Frog, later make a similar argument when they state in a blog post: “With richer context, we can better understand the qualities of these quantities, and thereby better understand our being....This is what we describe as the *qualified self*. Where the *quantified self* gives us raw numbers, the *qualified self* completes our understanding of those numbers.” While these attempts to elaborate on the qualified self seem well-intentioned, they remain heavily biased towards quantification. I would argue that such emphasis is imbricated within a larger cultural process, which Neff and Nafus (2016) explain as *datafication*: “Datafication means that societies privilege data, and data-driven outcomes, over other kinds of knowing. When data mediates so many things, control over the meanings of data is a type of power” (186). It is important to note that in this context, the term “data” is unanimously understood to be quantitative—not qualitative—in nature.

However, Neff and Nafus (2016) ultimately remain hopeful as they reflect on the example of Linda Stone, who had a prolific career as an executive in the technology industry. As Wade Roush (2014) recounts from an interview, Linda ultimately abandoned her quest for a quantified self and replaced it with a quest for what she calls the *essential self*. The essential self is qualitatively different than the quantitative self (pun intended) in that it actually nurtures a true qualitative self: one in which presence, sensation, and the felt experience of the body reigns supreme, and whose definition of quality doesn’t simply mean understanding quantity. Linda came to the conclusion that technologies could be better designed

for the essential self after she developed a health issue that caused her chronic facial pain and needed a deeper connection between her mind and body.

Keeping these questions and ongoing conversations in mind, I will share some of my experience with two meditation apps I used throughout the early months of 2017. Meditation apps provide a unique case study that combines aspects of quantified self-tracking and embodied wellness practice—making them ideal to investigate the relations between the quantified and qualified self. The first application is called Headspace<sup>5</sup>, which has a free ten-day introductory program. The influence of gamification, or “the use of game design in non-game contexts” (Deterding et al. 2011, 10) is apparent upon beginning the program: the sessions appear as numbered circles on a timeline on the screen, with future sessions visualized as goals to be unlocked and a current session that can be played now. The narrator of the first guided meditation confidently explains that doing meditation will increase my “headspace,” positing headspace as a thing to be acquired that is assumed to bring benefit to my life. This description makes me liken meditation to deleting pictures from my iPhone to free up more storage space: sometimes it’s necessary, but mostly it is tedious. In short, Headspace frames the user’s experience of their brain as if it was a computer, and the mobile phone is a recalibration tool used to update and improve it. This perspective echoes what Joe Dumit (1995) once found in his research on brain-mind machines, where he argues that “Viewing ourselves as possessors of quantifiable and incrementally increasable states of mind

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.headspace.com/>, Accessed August 7, 2017

is a relatively recent phenomenon and can also be dated to the interwar period and the invention of the concept of stress by Hans Selye” (354).

Another noteworthy feature of Headspace is data-tracking. I opted to sync the data from Headspace to the “Health” app on my iPhone, where I discovered a Mindfulness section that tracks “mindful minutes” throughout the day. How could the app possibly know when I am mindful and when I am not? When being mindful, I would be utilizing my full attention and presence—not spending time tracking my mindfulness, or reflecting on how mindful I was. In this sense, mindfulness is being conflated with self-tracking, and the distinction between paying attention to your body and recording information through a device is blurred.

The next application I will comment on is called Calm.<sup>6</sup> Upon downloading and signing up, the first screen instructs me: “You’ll need to turn on Push. In order to fully experience Calm, you’ll need to turn on notifications.” This was inaccurate, since there was clearly an option to click “Not Now” below this message. Yet the wording and design decision pushes the user in the direction of receiving more notifications on their phone—contrary to previous research that has found a link between receiving e-mails and feeling stressed (Mark, Vaida, and Cardello 2012).

Before starting the introductory 7 Days of Calm program, I switch over to the “Breathe” option and am greeted by a moving circle inscribed with the words “breathe in.” A small icon floats around half the circle in sync with a sound as the circle expands, a nice interaction that helps me *physically identify* with the circle as an object that represents myself. I expand the cavity of my chest as I breathe in sync

---

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.calm.com>, Accessed August 7, 2017

with the expanding circle. When the floating icon arrives at the bottom of the circle, there is a brief period when the circle instructs me to “hold” my breath. I start to sink in to this experience, but then an e-mail notification disruptively pops up on my screen. Ironically, the e-mail is from Jennifer at Calm, who beckons me to unlock the full Calm experience! I pause the circle, swipe the notification away, and resume breathing. At this point, the circle contracts as I am instructed to breathe out and the app begins to circle again and again.

In spite of the brief interruption, I find this circle to be one of the best features in a meditation app I have seen thus far. It is a thing I can physically identify with—much like a visual focus point used during a regular meditation session, but it is not reduced or flattened in such a way that I need to physically fit into its parameters. The timing of the circle can be changed to suit my breathing capacities. It is physically flexible and molded by the workings of the body, rather than requiring me to mold my sensation to the technology. In other words, this feature presents a model more attuned to individual, qualitative experience—perhaps what Linda Stone meant by the “essential self”—and hints at how moments of transcendence might come to fruition through a mobile phone screen.

### *Conclusions*

In this paper and presentation, I have reviewed some critical academic (Lupton 2013; Lupton 2016; Moore and Robinson 2016; Neff and Nafus 2016) and popular media conversations about self-tracking and embodied wellness practices—probing for the limits of their definitions as quantified, qualified (Boam



and Webb 2014; Davis 2013), and essential self technologies (Roush 2014). As I have shown through a brief autoethnographic account, meditation apps are a unique case study that inherently lends itself to analyzing the relationship between the quantified and qualified self. While Turkle's (2011) extensive research has illustrated information technology's effects on social experience, the impact of technology on the physiological experience of stress is context-dependent, amplified or diminished by design, and as Wajcman (2015) has shown—highly subjective. The design of technologies can unnecessarily restrict physical, sensory experience or vastly improve it according to its embedded values. However, the cultural bias towards tracking over experiencing, knowing over feeling, and proving over embodying, occurs even within meditation technologies that were created for the very purpose of experiencing transcendence—throwing us into loops of tethering our bodies and minds to the discomforts of technology, and attempting to liberate ourselves with the very same tools. Given the imbrication of mobile phones within so many facets of life, is it possible to design for mindfulness, or is this even preferable over practices such as non-use or digital detoxification? At what point can we insert new values into this moving circle?

## References

- Ayo, Nike. 2012. "Understanding health promotion in a neoliberal climate and the making of health conscious citizens." *Critical Public Health* 22(11): 99-105.
- Boam, Eric and Jarrett Webb. 2014. "The Qualified Self: Going Beyond Quantification." *Design Mind*, May 2.  
<https://designmind.frogdesign.com/2014/05/qualified-self-going-beyond-quantification/>.
- Davis, Jenny. 2013. "The Qualified Self." *Cyborgology*, March 13.  
<https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2013/03/13/the-qualified-self/>.

- Deterding, Sebastian, Dan Dixon, Rilla Khaled, and Lennart Nacke. 2011. "From game design elements to gamefulness: defining gamification." In *Proceedings of the 15th international academic MindTrek conference: Envisioning future media environments*, 9-15. ACM.
- Dumit, Joseph. 1995. "Brain-Mind Machines and American Technological Dream Marketing." In *The Cyborg Handbook*, edited by Chris Hables Gray, 347-362. New York and London: Routledge.
- Lavrence, Christine and Kristin Lozanski. 2014. "'This Is Not Your Practice Life': lululemon and the Neoliberal Governance of Self." *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue canadienne de sociologie* 51(1): 76-94.
- Lupton, Deborah. 2013. "Quantifying the body: monitoring and measuring health in the age of mHealth technologies." *Critical Public Health* 23(4): 393-403.
- Lupton, Deborah. 2016. *The Quantified Self*. Malden, MA: polity.
- Mark, Gloria, Stephen Volda, and Armand Cardello. 2012. "A pace not dictated by electrons: An empirical study of work without email." In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 555-564. ACM.
- Moore, Phoebe and Andrew Robinson. 2016. "The quantified self: What counts in the neoliberal workplace." *New Media & Society* 18(11): 2774-2792.
- Nhat Hanh, Thich. 1976. *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Neff, Gina and Dawn Nafus. 2016. *Self-Tracking*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press.
- Roush, Wade. 2014. "Linda Stone's Antidote to Quantified Self: The Essential Self." *Exconomy*, August 8.  
<http://www.xconomy.com/national/2014/08/08/linda-stones-antidote-to-quantified-self-the-essential-self/>.
- Turkle, Sherry. 2011. *Alone Together*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wajcman, Judy. 2015. *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.