We Track Ourselves, To See Ourselves, To Be Ourselves

Paul Ludwig Branzk

I am user 3329775517, 26 years old, 181 centimeters tall, and my heart will beat 62 times within the next minute. Last night, I slept 8 hours and 7 minutes. So far, I have walked 5,777 steps, burned 2,001 calories, and my 'body battery' is charged 24 percent. According to my Garmin Watch, my current stress level is 33, 9 points over my average. I am Ludwig. And I am not "alone".

In today's world, the phenomenon of the quantified-self has taken the narrative of Big Data and social media to an unprecedented level. With thousands of self-tracking applications, our smartphones have become the epicenter of this movement, enabling us to track and share ourselves. The advent of smartwatches, fitness trackers, and the Internet of Things has only accelerated our collective fixation on self-quantification. A recent study estimates that the global health and fitness app market will reach $185.8 billion by 2026, reflecting our increasing reliance on technology to track and improve ourselves.

In a world where we feel increasingly disconnected from one another, self-tracking devices promise us to take control of our lives. They enable us to set goals, monitor progress, and make data-driven decisions to enhance our health. This apparently empowering trend, however, conceals a darker side. By quantifying ourselves we collect sensible data, raising concerns about privacy and data ownership. Moreover, it is debatable to what extend self-tracking increases our health, as it also fosters pressure of accomplishment, stress and anxieties. While others have previously addressed and debated these issues, I will not delve into them. Instead, I will introduce a fresh perspective, connecting self-quantification to Big Data and social media, arguing that self-quantification not only harms individuals but also poses risks to society as a whole.

In this essay, I will provide a critical outlook on the quantified-self movement, and expand on it, examining the potential consequences of our growing fixation on self-quantification. I will argue that this obsession negatively impacts society by diminishing our sense of community, fostering an undue emphasis on personal accomplishments, and prioritizing quantifiable metrics above all else. Together we need to reevaluate the trade-offs between individual self-improvement and the well-being of society, contemplating whether our fixation on self-quantification is inadvertently causing more harm than good.

Dataism: A New Religion Shaping Self-Quantification

During the Enlightenment, science transformed dramatically from focusing on qualitative observation and reasoning to a quantitative, empirical approach. This shift paved the way for the scientific method, emphasizing data and experimentation's importance in understanding the natural world. As science progressed, this focus on data and quantification became more and more important. With the advent of computers and the rise of the internet, we entered an era of Big Data.

Today, data is king, and we rely on it to make informed decisions in all our lives. The historian Yuval Noah Harari termed this increasing reliance on data *dataism*. This new belief system places an almost religious faith in the power of data to solve all problems and answer all questions. It posits that extensive data collection and analysis are the only key unlocking the world's riddles, ultimately viewing the universe through the lens of data. Under this influence, we have come to view ourselves and the world around us in terms of quantifiable metrics, striving to measure every aspect of our lives. In this context, self-quantification becomes an extension of our faith in data, a way to assert control over our bodies and minds by meticulously tracking and analyzing our behaviors and physiological states.

However, while self-quantification may seem part of the evolution of science and technology, it does not come without its drawbacks. Our society's increased reliance on data in society has shaped our self-perception and habits, making self-tracking seem like a natural extension of our cognition. But at what cost? By tracking everything from our health and fitness to our sleep patterns and even our moods, do we not risk losing the very essence of what makes us human?

The unprecedented trust in numbers fuels a dangerous mindset that devalues anything unquantifiable, causing us to dismiss our innate ability to interpret and appreciate qualitative experiences. For instance, individuals who rely on calorie counting to dictate their food choices may overlook the importance of listening to their body's natural hunger cues or the joy of savoring a meal. Similarly, those who determine the success of their workouts solely by the data provided by their fitness trackers might ignore the importance of tuning into how their body feels during and after exercise, potentially overlooking signs of overexertion or injury.

Proponents of the quantified-self movement claim that rather than losing our qualitative nature, we empower ourselves to control our lives and make better choices based on objective information. The data we gather can help us identify patterns, set goals, and monitor progress, ultimately allowing us to optimize our well-being in a way that is uniquely tailored to our individual needs.

While it is true that self-quantification can offer valuable insights, it is worth noting that data from self-tracking can be reductive and may not capture the full complexity. For instance, mood-tracking apps often require users to rate their feelings on a simple numeric scale, which might not do justice to the rich tapestry of human emotions. Moreover, focusing on quantifiable data points can lead to a narrow, fragmented view of our lives, potentially causing us to overlook the interconnectedness of our well-being and the various factors that contribute to it.

In this essay, I do not aim to dismiss self-tracking outright but to critically examine the potential ramifications of our preoccupation with quantification. Our fixation on measurable data will neglect intangible, subjective experiences essential to humanity. Emotions, Relationships, and Personal growth – these are all aspects that cannot be easily quantified, yet they form the core of our human experience. In our relentless pursuit of quantifiable self-improvement, are we not inadvertently devaluing these vital dimensions of life, ultimately reducing our prosperous, multifaceted existence to mere numbers and statistics?

Me, Myself, and Social Media: Self-Branding in the Age of Big Data

In the age of social media, our identities have taken center stage. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram have catapulted us into a world where the individual reigns supreme, outshining the collective. Our society has witnessed a seismic shift from a community-focused approach to an environment that promotes personal branding and self-presentation. This transformation has paved the way for the quantified-self movement to flourish, driven by an insatiable appetite to display our data-driven success.

Today, social media platforms provide us with the ideal stage to showcase our achievements, skills, and experiences, subtly reinforcing the importance of individual success and self-promotion. In this context, social media is

pivotal in steering this change. With its reliance on data-driven metrics, the quantified-self movement aligns seamlessly with the social media ethos of personal branding and public validation.

In a world where numbers shape views, self-tracking has become the ideal tool for individuals to mirror their ego of performance. In presenting the quantified self, social media platforms have become the perfect breeding ground, flourishing in a society that values public validation and self-promotion. Finally, the convergence of social media and self-quantification gives birth to a new paradigm in which data-driven self-improvement becomes the ultimate goal.

Under these circumstances, individuals will find it increasingly difficult to resist the pervasive influence of social media and the continuous pressure to measure and compare themselves to others. Social media platforms have become a haven for self-promotion and presenting a carefully curated image, frequently emphasizing achievements and quantifiable accomplishments. This culture of comparison and competition can exacerbate the emphasis on data, driving people to value quantitative aspects of their lives over qualitative experiences.

As a result, the distinction between self-improvement and self-promotion is becoming increasingly blurred. The desire for external validation progressively replaces the quest for betterment, leading to a distorted sense of self-worth tied to metrics and numbers. Indeed, the emphasis on quantifiable success in social media reinforces the obsession with self-quantification, making it even more difficult for individuals to keep a balanced view of their well-being and human experience; and thus, the question arises: are we sacrificing our genuine human connections and self-growth in exchange for a hollow, data-driven facade?

To be clear, I do not question that social media and self-tracking can have positive effects. I think, encouraging healthier lifestyles, goal setting, and achieving personal milestones are perfect examples of how self-tracking can foster a sense of accomplishment and motivation when used responsibly. However, I am questioning whether the far-reaching consequences of our data-driven culture are worth it.

Dataism and Social Media: The Societal Forces of Self-Quantification

While it is true that self-quantification is mostly a tool, and it is ultimately up to the individual to decide if, and how to use it, we cannot ignore the broader context in which this phenomenon has emerged. The rise of *Dataism* and the increasing influence of social media have created an environment that strongly encourages self-quantification and self-branding, making it difficult for individuals to resist the pressure to conform.

We Track Ourselves

Dataism, as a new narrative, claims that data-driven decisions outperform those based on human intuition and emotions. This ideology supports the idea that self-quantification can lead to more accurate self-evaluation and, ultimately, self-improvement. Opting out of self-quantification in this context may be interpreted as rejecting a route to self-optimization, leading to feelings of inadequacy or social isolation.

To See Ourselves

Simultaneously, social media's pervasive presence has transformed how we present ourselves to the world. Self-branding, primarily driven by social media, pushes individuals to curate and display their quantified selves to pursue public validation and recognition. This process further reinforces the societal pressure to engage in self-quantification, as individuals who do not participate may feel excluded or left behind.

To Be Ourselves

Given these factors, it is crucial to recognize that self-quantification is not merely a neutral tool that individuals can use or disregard. Instead, it is a manifestation of broader cultural shifts driven by *Dataism* and social media self-branding, which significantly influence individuals and their choices. As such, it is essential to critically examine the societal context and the potential consequences of self-quantification on individuals and communities.

A Self-tracked Society: Why We Need to Rethink the Quantified-Self

In the future, self-tracking technologies will only enhance our obsession with numbers. Individuals will become more likely to describe themselves and their achievements through the lens of data, measuring their worth and progress against quantifiable metrics. If not, they are constantly reminded of this by others that do so and might even face disadvantages. Today, tools like Microsoft Teams provide insights about the productivity of its users, paving the first step toward employers requesting self-quantified data for employment. Phrases like "picture or did not happen" could easily be translated into "show me the data; otherwise, it does not exist", and follows the overarching narrative of; We track ourselves, to see ourselves, to be ourselves.

One could ask why this is not desirable. A society in which everyone is inclined to self-track and share everything about oneself with anyone can be viewed as a utopia, promoting transparency and efficiency in society. In Dave Eggers' book "The Circle", we are presented with a world where personal data is constantly collected and shared, leading to a society that values sharing and transparency above all else. In this world, privacy is seen as an obstacle to progress, slowing the development of new technologies and innovations. A world of ultimate personal transparency may seem attractive, but it is crucial to question whether this narrative truly aligns with our values as individuals and as a society.

A society where self-quantification is the norm, we will witness the erosion of genuine human connections, empathy, and shared experiences. As individual achievements and superficial self-promotion become paramount, we will see intensified competition and comparison among people. Fueled by an obsession with data-driven success, this shift will usher in a cascade of adverse consequences for mental health, social connections, our understanding of self-worth, and even the foundations of our democratic society.

Our preoccupation with self-quantification threatens to erode the very fabric of our social bonds. In pursuit of personal records and milestones, we risk neglecting the significance of shared experiences and empathy. For instance, consider the trend of gamifying personal achievements in various aspects of life, from fitness milestones to professional accolades. While these gamified metrics can provide a sense of accomplishment and motivation, they also foster a competitive environment where individuals prioritize their own goals over collaborative efforts. In such a context, we risk neglecting the impor-

tance of empathy, understanding, and mutual support in building strong communities. Consequently, our focus narrows on individual accomplishments, isolating us from the collective good and fostering detachment from our communities.

Historically, communities have thrived by rallying around common goals and ideologies, working together to create a better world for all. However, this mindset changed from a broader collective understanding towards prioritizing the individual. This cultural shift has caused political beliefs and social values to be influenced by incentives to improve oneself on an individual level, prioritizing the own development and success over the interests of the larger community. This will foster the erosion of communal values in favor of individualism, weakening the social fabric that binds communities together and potentially undermining the foundations of our democratic societies.

For instance, in the context of politics, people may begin to evaluate policies and candidates based on how they would benefit from them rather than considering the greater good. This individualistic approach could lead to short-sighted decisions, exacerbating social inequalities and impeding progress on issues that require collective action, such as climate change or social justice.

In addition, the erosion of communal values will result in declining civic engagement and social activism. As people become more self-centered and disconnected from their communities, they will be less inclined to participate in civic activities, engage in political discourse, or contribute to the greater good. For instance the phenomenon of "slacktivism" on social media, already today, illustrates that. Individuals feel satisfied with their online activism without making tangible contributions to the cause. This focus on self-promotion and the appearance of engagement can lead to the erosion of meaningful connections and genuine commitments to social change.

From Me to We: Policies for a Balanced and Connected Future

The Quantified-self is more than a simple matter of numbers. It is a complex issue with ethical, social, and cultural implications. As such, it is crucial to recognize that self-quantification is inherently neither good nor bad. It depends on how it is used and who benefits from it.

In this essay, I have argued why the evolution of the quantified-self movement, driven primarily by the forces of big data and individualism, should be seen more critically, as it, ultimately, fosters a society in which *we track ourselves, to see ourselves, to be ourselves.* It is time we address these pressing concerns, and as such, I advocate for the following policy recommendations, tackling each facet of the concerning developments arising from the quantified-self movement.

We Track Ourselves

We must consider the ethical considerations and responsible usage of self-tracking technology. The first step in this process is to reflect on our own behavior. We must ask ourselves: What do I want to track? For whom do I track myself? What data do I want to share? With whom and where? Reflecting on our behavior is essential for increasing awareness and critical thinking around self-quantification.

A key policy recommendation would be to promote education and awareness to inform people about the advantages and disadvantages of self-quantification. By promoting education and awareness, we can empower individuals to take control of their data and make more conscious choices about how they engage with self-quantification technologies. This approach will help individuals better understand the implications of their actions and foster a more thoughtful and balanced approach to self-improvement that considers both; personal and collective well-being.

To See Ourselves

I recognize that policymakers face a daunting task when attempting to alter the narrative of self-tracking in a hyper-individualistic society fueled by social media-driven self-branding. People will hesitate to shift the focus of self-tracking and self-optimization from individual achievements to community well-being, as they are influenced by the pervasive presence of self-branding in pursuit of public validation and recognition.

Hence, I recommend that policymakers address the intertwined issues of self-quantification and social media by promoting the responsible use of self-tracking technologies. One way to achieve this is through regulations that emphasize the need to disentangle self-tracking from the pressures of social media sharing.

To implement such regulations, the industry could be encouraged to develop technologies that not only help individuals achieve personal goals but also contribute positively to the community as a whole, without the added pressure of public validation. A concrete example of such a regulation could be to remove the "share button" on various self-tracking apps, gadgets, and platforms. By eliminating the option to instantly share one's quantified self, individuals may be encouraged to focus on their personal progress and well-being rather than seeking external validation. This approach could also reduce the feelings of exclusion or inadequacy experienced by those who choose not to participate in self-quantification.

To Be Ourselves

On a societal level, we have to move towards a more collective approach, encouraging the optimization of the collective instead of the individual; and thus, we should ask ourselves how self-tracking technology can contribute to a well-being society.

Policies should foster community-building initiatives to facilitate a shift in empowering empathy and emotionsunity-building initiatives. One approach is supporting and investing in community-building initiatives emphasizing the importance of shared experiences, empathy, and collaboration. I argue that fostering community-building initiatives can create a social environment that values collective well-being and encourages individuals to engage in activities that promote the much-needed shift. This approach not only counters the adverse effects of excessive self-quantification but also helps to build stronger, more resilient communities that prioritize the well-being of all members over individual achievement. This way, we can balance personal improvement and collective growth, ensuring a more harmonious and inclusive society.

Regardless of our approach, we must be mindful that technological advancements within the field of self-quantification do not come at the expense of meaningful human connections, collective well-being, and the empathetic fabric of our society. That is why I have decided to sell my Garmin Watch on Maarktplaats, as a small act of resistance. Let us take control of our bodies and our community - "together".