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Contemporary Autoethnography *Is* Digital Autoethnography

A Proposal for Maintaining Methodological Relevance in Changing Times

ABSTRACT Autoethnography has become legitimized through its ability to connect culture to personal experiences. This legitimization has occurred alongside a titanic shift in communication made possible by digital technology, which has rapidly transformed, multiplied, and mediated the ways through which we engage one another. This essay explores and exemplifies the necessity of autoethnography to evolve in concert with the ways our lives have become inextricably tethered to digital technology. Due to this shift, we propose that contemporary autoethnography *is* digital autoethnography, a method we propose that relies on personal experience(s) to foreground how meaning is made among people occupying and connected to digital spaces. Digital autoethnography is distinguishable from traditional autoethnography because the cultures analyzed are not primarily physical; they are digital. In short, the work of digital autoethnography is situated within and concerned about digital spaces and the lived experiences, interactions, and meaning-making within and beside these contexts. Embracing digital autoethnography pushes us to consider and reflect upon the ways we have changed over time with the influx of digital technology. Additionally, the method provides a framework to keep autoethnography relevant in spite of the inevitable changes to human experience that will occur as digital connectivity becomes increasingly enmeshed in our everyday lives. KEYWORDS autoethnography, digital, social media, relationship maintenance, computer-mediated communication

First, some statistics:

- There are 5.1 billion unique mobile users worldwide, which equates to 67 percent of the world population.[1]
- Currently, 4.4 billion people, or 57 percent of the global population, actively use the internet.[2]
- Forty-five percent of the world's population, which equates to nearly 3.5 billion people, use social media.[3]
- Globally, digital consumers spend an average of 2 hours and 22 minutes per day on social media.[4]
- Over 100 million photos and videos are posted to Instagram daily.[5]
- Over 500 million tweets[6] and 3 billion snaps are created each day.[7]
- To date, YouTube boasts more than 1.9 billion monthly active users[8] and is considered the world's second-largest search engine behind Google.[9]

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- Facebook currently has over 2.32 billion monthly active users. If Facebook were a country, it would have the largest population in the world.[10]

> "We don't have a choice on whether we DO social media, the question is how well we DO it."
>
> —Erik Qualman[11]

In October 2016, we live about two hundred miles away from each other: Ben in Nebraska, and Tasha in South Dakota. The distance feels unbearable at times given how close we have become over the past few months. What started out as randomly chatting on Facebook messenger as friends quickly evolved into flirting over text message. The flirtation eventually morphed into nightly Facetime calls, which brought us to the place we are now, where we visit one another as often as we can, despite the miles that separate us. At this point, we are officially a monogamous and committed couple: no seeing anyone else. We have toothbrushes at each other's houses, we are listed as each other's emergency contacts, and our dogs have come to accept the fact that when we are together they will have to compete for our attention.

We are caught up in the whirlwind of a new romance, which is inevitably exciting, but we both know and agree that it is not the right time to share our love with the outside world. Both of us are recently divorced, and Ben is in the middle of an intense custody battle for his son, Henry (which has since worked out, thankfully). While several of our close friends have tried to set us up, we think it's for the best if we don't disclose how serious our relationship has become. We have made a point to be strategic about our social media presence and how we appear to the outside world by choosing carefully what to share and when to share it. We have a public relations campaign strategy in place, complete with ideal timeframes for when certain stakeholders will receive relevant information. Our rules are as follows:

- No posting information about our relationship status.
- No pictures of just the two of us.
- No status updates when we are together.
- No geotracking enabled when visiting one another.
- No tagging one another in pictures or posts.

When we are ready, we can roll out the small details, but we want to be the ones to decide when, where, and how so that we can control the digital story of our blossoming relationship.

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It is the last weekend of October, which is Tasha's birthday, so her best friend Blake and I (Ben) are visiting her in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where she is living and working at the time. Prior to meeting in Sioux Falls, we had let Blake know we were dating because he is a close friend and we knew we were all going to be together. We had failed, however,

to give Blake the instruction manual about our public relations strategy. It hadn't even occurred to us that this might be necessary.

We decide to go to dinner at a local Japanese Steakhouse, where we proceed to enjoy hibachi, sake, and lots of laughs. Leaving the restaurant, I check Facebook on my phone and see a red dot on the bell in the upper-right corner of my newsfeed. Ah. Some activity. I wonder if anyone has responded to something I recently posted. I tap on the bell, and my eyes open wide and breathing momentarily ceases. I immediately pull Tasha aside:

"Tasha. Check your Facebook."

"Why?" she asks, furrowing her brows. "What is it? Is everything OK?"

"This isn't good," I say, shaking my head. "Just check."

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The instant I (Tasha) check Facebook, I understand Ben's concern. Blake has checked himself, me, and Ben in at the restaurant with the caption, "Hibachi with friends!" A simple and innocent gesture, but a flashing neon sign that me and Ben are together. Everyone who comes across the post will know that Ben drove two hundred miles to have dinner with me on my birthday. As special as a birthday is, I am sure no one who knows Ben thinks he drove two hundred miles just for dinner—he was hoping for dessert.

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Jokes aside, people check each other in all the time on social media. It has become so ubiquitous that it usually happens without mention. But it sends me (Ben) into a near panic. Blake's post was the first indication to many that I was dating someone since my divorce. And I was not ready for that information to be public. I was trying to craft the public narrative of a conscientious and responsible father whose sole attention was on his son. My lawyer had specifically instructed me not to share anything on social media that could be used against me. And I knew my ex's lawyer would find some way to spin a tale of me being more concerned about my new long-distance relationship instead of being a caring father.

"Shit. This isn't good," Tasha says quietly, grabbing my arm to slow me down as Blake walks ahead to get in my car.

"No. It's definitely not." I unlock the car door with my remote, hoping Blake will get inside to buy me some time. I turn to Tasha. "Henry's grandparents are on Facebook. If anyone knows I'm traveling to see you, it could be used against me in court."

Tasha stops, puts her head down, and lets out a sigh of frustration "I know. I know. I should have said something to Blake."

I stop and turn to Tasha once I see Blake enter the car. As soon as he shuts the door, I say in a soft, yet firm tone, "You have to tell him to take it down."

"Can you?" Tasha asks, clearly annoyed by my request. Confrontation is not her strong suit. "I don't want to hurt his feelings. I know he didn't do it intentionally."

"I know he didn't do it intentionally either, but he's your best friend, Tasha. It's better if you ask him. Just do it nicely. And please do your best to make sure he doesn't think I'm mad at him."

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The drive back home, though short, feels daunting as I (Tasha) think about how to ask Blake to remove his post on Facebook. As he and Ben engage in idle chat, I sit quietly, strategizing. Time is of the essence. Ben pulls the car into the garage and heads to the bathroom. It's time. I pull Blake aside and explain to him the situation as well as my request. Slightly confused and worried I am being too paranoid, Blake obliges. No one ever mentions the post. PR crisis averted.

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In the *Handbook of Autoethnography*, Ellis recounts that "a handful of us began writing and teaching about autoethnography in the 1990s."[12] These early pathfinders made their mark on the academic landscape through insisting that value existed in explicitly using personal experience to explore culture. Neuman argues that "any researcher can do no more than describe his or her personal experiences."[13] In other words, all research is intricately connected to the personal experiences of the researcher, but rather than work to mitigate that perspective, autoethnography celebrates it. Richardson encourages writers to produce "highly personalized, revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experience, relating the personal to the cultural."[14] Ellis adds that "as [autoethnographers] zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and the cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition."[15]

Autoethnography has built its legacy on providing the opportunity for researchers to explore how personal experiences, both heightened and mundane, are infused with cultural meaning(s). Within this mode of inquiry, the ordinary and everyday are cultural artifacts begging to be interpreted. Bochner and Ellis explain that "most of life is commonplace, so a lot of autoethnography will focus on details of everyday life."[16]

While certainly not accepted in all corners of academia, the autoethnographic movement has made great strides toward achieving legitimacy. There are annual conferences that feature autoethnographic work, books are regularly published on autoethnography, and Google Scholar currently recognizes over forty thousand academic texts that include the word "autoethnography." Ellis explains that "we have moved from defending autoethnography as research to witnessing its explosion."[17]

Looking forward from the 1990s, this "explosion" did not seem inevitable. By most accounts, it seemed unlikely given the dominance of traditional social scientific research. From the vantage point of 2020 looking back, this shift is less surprising since the legitimization of autoethnography happened alongside the titanic shift in communication made possible by digital technology, which rapidly transformed, multiplied, and mediated the ways though which we engage one another. Face-to-face communication steadily lost ground to various forms of computer-mediated communication made possible by digital

technology, such as e-mail, mobile phone calls, text messaging, and more.[18] While pioneers in autoethnography were making impassioned arguments that traditional scholarship could benefit from being open to personal stories, digital technology was sowing the seeds for social media platforms that welcomed personal stories and would revolutionize the way we communicate with one another. Autoethnography was encouraging researchers to come out from behind traditional academic conventions and use their personal (and often mundane) experiences to develop new understandings of culture as platforms like MySpace (2003) and Facebook (2004) offered people across the globe previously unimaginable opportunities to open up and share their experiences and stories with growing networks. The "explosion" of personal narrative was not limited to academia; it was—and still is—happening everywhere.

Much like autoethnographic work, the sharing of stories on social media has deep cultural significance since these platforms often help users process questions of identity. Wang, Lee, and Hou conducted an experiment where half of their participants recorded personal experiences in a diary, and the other half posted experiences to social media. The researchers found that, at a later date, the participants who posted to social media had a stronger connection to the events. They postulate:

> Sharing personal experiences online may facilitate meaning-making by allowing us to reflect on the experiences during the very act of writing and posting. This entails an active process of constructing and expressing our autobiographical self that is further supported by the interactive context of social media.[19]

The awareness of an audience seems to be an important function of helping a social media user make sense of personal experience, which indicates that storytelling on social media is a communal process, resembling the call in autoethnography to create reciprocity between writer and reader.[20]

Autoethnography is no longer the underdog it was in the 1990s. The cultural tide has shifted, and sharing stories with large audiences is part and parcel of modern life. In many ways, it is an essential part of participating in public cultural dialogue. This change raises the question: *If autoethnography has built a legacy on finding meaning in the mundane, but we live in an age when sharing the mundane has itself become mundane, how can autoethnography continue to maintain cultural relevance?*

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We find the answer to this important question in a method we call "digital autoethnography," which relies on personal experience(s) to foreground how meaning is made among people occupying and connected to digital spaces such as Facebook and other social media platforms. Digital autoethnography stems from digital ethnography—an approach that extends traditional participant observation beyond geographic and temporal boundaries to document digital culture(s). Digital ethnography does not require researchers to physically immerse themselves into a given culture; their research is instead conducted in a digital space where they gather digital artifacts, such as words, pictures, videos, and/or audio files, to interpret and make sense of that space and its members.[21]

Though our approach in this essay resembles digital ethnography in that we provide a cultural analysis of digital phenomena, we do so through personal narratives, which is why we call this approach digital autoethnography. As a method of inquiry, digital autoethnography is distinguishable from traditional autoethnography because the cultures analyzed are not primarily physical; they are digital. In short, the work of digital autoethnography is situated within and concerned about digital spaces and the lived experiences, interactions, and meaning-making within and beside these contexts.

Our proposal of digital autoethnography answers a call by Soukup[22] for ethnographers to develop alternative methods of research that acknowledge the saturation of computer-mediated communication. We are poised to propose this method because we have spent half of our lives with and half of our lives without the internet and subsequent digital connectivities.

We are what Prensky calls "digital immigrants,"[23] meaning we were not born in the digital age but have adopted many, if not most, aspects of digital technology. We stand in contrast to those born after 1985 who are considered "digital natives" because they are less likely to remember a time before the internet and, as such, natively speak the digital language of computers and related devices. In addition to being digital immigrants, we are also Millennials, referring to the generation of people born in the time period ranging from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s.[24] Interestingly, our generation is the only one that consists of both "digital immigrants" and "digital natives," making the connection to digital technology among Millennials varied, yet important. Millennials were either born using this technology or have learned to use it and inspired others to do the same. According to a recent study conducted by the Pew Research Center, Millennials in the United States—97 percent of whom use the internet—are most notorious for leading older generations to adopt and use digital technology.[25]

As digital immigrants who are part of the Millennial generation, our standpoint is unique because we remember what it is like to live without digital connectivities, but we have also accepted and, in many cases, embraced their presence. We are "the last of a dying breed,"[26] which provides an impetus for us to share our unique and situated knowledge of the personal, social, and cultural shifts accompanied by the digital age. As Harris notes:

> We have in this brief historical moment . . . a very rare opportunity. For those of us who have lived both with and without the vast, crowded connectivity the internet provides, there are few days when we can still notice the difference between Before and After.[27]

In this article, we take advantage of the historically rare opportunity to use our unique standpoint to reflect on living a digital life, which is much different than the life we led growing up. We specifically combine both collaborative autoethnography—a form of autoethnography that involves at least one other researcher and/or participant to co-construct a narrative[28]—and digital autoethnography to share our lived experiences of simultaneously maintaining a romantic and professional relationship on social media. We explore the strategic cyber cultivation of these two relationships, the performativity of social media in relationship maintenance, and the navigation it takes to keep these relationships appropriately connected and separated. We also demonstrate how our lives

have become inextricably tethered to digital technology. In sharing these experiences, our primary goal is to show how digital autoethnography can hone the radical potential of autoethnography by sorting through and making meaning from computer-mediated communication.

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Fast-forward a year (2017) from our previous story. We now live together and are engaged to be married. I (Tasha) secured a job at the same university as Ben, which we took as a sign that we should take the leap and build a future together. We have been dating only a year and a half, and as happy as I am with Ben, I am plagued with insecurities about how others might read the situation. I think of my friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances who are watching the story of our quickly blossoming relationship unfold on social media. I worry they think we are moving too fast, especially since we have both experienced a divorce. This is all complicated by the traces of our previous marriages that permeate Facebook. According to Fox,[29] couples who have been together for a long time—as we both were with our ex partners—develop an integrated digital presence on Facebook and other social media platforms through photos, mutual friends, posts in which they are both tagged, and other relationship status markers. This integrated digital presence is hard to erase if a breakup occurs, especially given the booming expansion of technological devices, social media platforms, and apps that allow us to capture, store, and exhibit memories of our relationships. For example, if a couple used Facebook to communicate about and display their relationship, old posts and pictures are likely to resurface and populate their profiles at any given time.[30] Ben and I have a shared history with our exes that digital archives won't soon let us—or others—forget. We are trying to tell the story of a new relationship as the old one continues to linger, remind, and resurface. Hence my anxiety.

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At this stage, I (Ben) am less worried about how others perceive us as a couple. We live together and are engaged. Who cares what people think? I've stopped feeling the need to be overly strategic on social media, and I spend a lot less time than before carefully thinking through the implications of every post in which Tasha is included. I've also been paying attention to a growing critical discourse about the implications of social media platforms. The Facebook Cambridge Analytica scandal[31] is fresh. I've read Jaron Lanier's book, *10 Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts*,[32] and I've witnessed several people I respect (in person) turn into jackasses when they get on social media. I'm increasingly aware of many of the problematic ways in which social media is affecting the world around us, and I feel compelled to share this epiphany with Tasha. I enter the kitchen where she is sitting on a stool in the center island mindlessly browsing Facebook on her laptop. The irony.

"Hey, honey," I say softly, hoping for an equivalent response. "I wanted to talk to you about something. I'm going to delete my Facebook account." I sit down on the chair directly across from her.

"Why?" Tasha snaps, looking up from her computer. So much for equivalence. I've clearly struck a nerve.

"I don't think it's good for me. I either spend way too much time on it reading posts from people I can't stand or consuming long rants about Trump. It puts me in a bad mood. Also, I've been using it at work, which is probably not the most productive use of my time."

Tasha pauses, slowly nodding her head. "Okay, I get that, but why don't you just use it less? You're in control of that. Set parameters around the times you should and shouldn't use it. That might be a way to address some of your issues with Facebook. Also," she adds in a tone that makes it clear she has been annoyed about this for a while, "you *really* need to stop following people who drive you crazy. I can tell they bother you."

"I doubt that would work," I say, breathing in through my nose while pursing my lips. I feel frustrated by her lack of support. "The issue is that these systems are programmed to be addictive. They are designed to creep in to more and more areas of your life. I know myself, and I am not strong enough to cordon off set times I won't use it. It's got to be an all-or-nothing thing."

Tasha closes her laptop and pushes it to the side, leaning in. "I just wonder if you aren't thinking this through."

"Why are you defending Facebook?" I say with a raised voice, as I stand and move my hands to the side, palms out. "Why does it matter to you if I'm on Facebook or not?"

Tasha eyes widen. "I would feel more comfortable if you were. We recently got engaged, and there are still members of my family who you haven't met. Also, I want friends who don't know you to be able to look you up. It will add a lot validity to us moving in together if people can check your profile and see you're not some weirdo." She pauses and with a flirtatious smirk adds, "I mean, you are weird, but you get what I'm saying."

"We're already engaged," I snap back. "What does it matter what these people think?" I'm pissed. Tasha's attempt to diffuse the situation with flirtation makes me feel she is not taking me seriously.

Tasha, clearly picking up on my frustration, stands and raises her voice. "That is a lot easier for you to say, Ben. You aren't the one who changed jobs for us to be together. I think it will go a long way toward making me feel more secure if you kept your account open."

"This right here," I say, forcefully pressing my index finger on the top of Tasha's laptop, "is exactly the problem with social media. I can't even cancel my account without getting pressure from my soon-to-be wife to keep plugged in. Platforms like Facebook have hijacked our social relationships." I remove my finger from her laptop, cross my arms, and lean in. "If we were in this same situation ten years ago, we wouldn't have had to argue about whether or not we needed to keep a relationship with one of the largest companies on the planet to help sustain our narrative. The political implications of what you're asking me to do are enormous."

Tasha, flushed with anger, closes her eyes and exhales loudly, trying to calm herself. She opens her eyes and in a quiet, neutral tone states, "I understand your reasoning, and I know you've read a lot about this issue, so I know you are informed. I just hope that you will honor your relational obligations. We've been so good about how we have chosen to tell our story to this point." She stands and walks toward me while clasping her hands

together and continues. "Please don't cancel your Facebook as we head into the final stretch before our wedding."

"This is not okay, Tasha," I say turning my back toward her. I can't stand the begging. "It's unreasonable of you to ask me to do something that I feel is politically problematic."

Tasha inches closer and with a slightly raised voice says, "And it's unreasonable of you to put your own newfound political ideology ahead of what is best for our relationship."

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This back and forth continues until we reach a compromise: Ben will leave his Facebook account active for three months, and try to use it only sparingly—a goal that lasts about two weeks until he is back to spending too much time browsing and critiquing others' news feeds. I (Tasha) feel bad he has fallen back into the social media hole out of which he was trying to crawl, but much of my concern in my initial reaction to Ben wanting to leave Facebook was guided by the recognition that social media's presence in the formation, development, maintenance, and dissolution of adult relationships is increasingly pervasive. It is commonplace and almost expected that we share our relational narratives on these various platforms.[33]

And, I must admit, my thirst for information about others' relationships, which I quench by browsing Facebook, is part of what drives that expectation to share. Interestingly, several scholars have observed that the more insecure people feel in their relationship, the more likely they are to post content about the relationship on Facebook.[34] These findings suggest that such displays may be a compensatory mechanism for less satisfying relationships. The irony is that I know this. I research this. I teach about this. Yet, I still fall victim to the expectation to display, to share, to tell my relational story because sometimes just living it doesn't feel like enough. I still ask Ben to periodically take a selfie of our family (because he has the longest arms) so that I can post it and feed the hungry Facebook sharks. I feel secure in my relationship, but I still find myself irrationally concerned about what others think. It's a vicious cycle.

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Contemporary autoethnography *is* digital autoethnography. This is not a proclamation about autoethnography as much as a reflection about everyday experience in modern life. Autoethnography finds cultural meaning by theorizing about the ways in which researchers move through experience. When everyday life fundamentally changes, autoethnography must shift to keep up. We used to talk about the "real world" and the "digital world," but the space between these two worlds is shrinking at a pace where we can barely tell them apart.

Contemporary autoethnography *is* digital autoethnography because life is digital given the increasing and ubiquitous human-computer interactive experiences that govern our lives. The average adult spends over eleven hours a day engaging with digital media; this is an increase from nine hours and thirty-two minutes four years ago.[35] Research using tracking data determined that the average U.S. citizen completes 2,617 taps, types, swipes,

and clicks on their phone per day over seventy-six individual sessions.[36] The Pew Research Center indicates that more than one quarter of adults report being online almost constantly.[37] Further, as we mentioned in the opening of this essay, the average person spends two hours and twenty-two minutes on social media per day.[38] Mediated digital connectivity is so taken for granted as a part of everyday life that refusing such connectivity is interpreted as an act of resistance.

Contemporary autoethnography *is* digital autoethnography because digital connectivity touches every single area of our lives. Such connectivity is simultaneously all encompassing and unobtrusive; it does not interrupt everyday life—it is everyday life. We move in and out of media ecosystems and between screens at rapid pace. We're sure we aren't the only ones who have opened an app on our phones to pay a bill only to be distracted by an e-mail alerting us that the delivery date for an Amazon package has been changed, which prompts us to start browsing products on Amazon, which then leads us to text a friend about a product we see and ends with us not even being able to remember what we set out to do initially.

The concept of digital autoethnography is not something we are introducing—it has already arrived. Contemporary autoethnography should embrace the digital. Recognition of the changing nature of our collective experience is vital for the method to stay relevant. The same way that Neuman[39] argues that all research comes from the experience of the researcher, contemporary autoethnography should account for the ways in which researcher experience is *hyperreal*. This is more than a call for simple acknowledgment; it is instead an accounting for the ways in which digital technology touches the innermost parts of us and alters our interactions with others. Neil Postman explained that "every technology has a philosophy, which is given expression in how the technology makes people use their minds, in how it codifies the world, in which of our senses it amplifies, in which of our emotional and intellectual tendencies it disregards."[40] Digital autoethnography can provide a means to reflect on the profound ways in which digital technology has changed what it means to be a person in today's world. We can use the method to peer into that shrinking space between the real and the digital and unpack its cultural implications. As our social world continues to radically shift, our inquiries of that space must keep up, which is what will allow autoethnography to thrive and maintain cultural relevance in the digital age.

THE DIGITAL LIFE

6:45 a.m.

A loud, vibrating buzz accompanied by ear-piercing syncopated beeps ring from Ben's iPhone. He grunts as he reaches over the side of the bed and catches a glimpse of his first sight of the day—the bright light of a screen permeating the room's darkness. Squinting, he taps the orange "snooze" button and places the phone screen-side down so the room can be completely dark again. Nine minutes later, the alarm sequence repeats, and as Ben puts his phone down with hopes of snoozing once more, he notices a familiar light and sees Tasha sitting halfway up in bed scrolling through Facebook on her phone. Another screen.

"What are you doing?" Ben asks, with a furrowed brow. "Why are you on your phone?"

"Good morning," Tasha cheerily replies, leaning over to give Ben a kiss on the forehead. "I'm just waking up."

Ben turns away from her. "Why are you on your phone so early? Put it away and come over and snuggle." He pulls the blanket over his head.

"You're awfully grumpy this morning," Tasha says jokingly, with hopes of diffusing Ben's noticeable frustration. Feeling guilty for choosing to engage her phone instead of her husband, Tasha swiftly places her phone on the nightstand and moves over to snuggle with Ben for a few minutes before the next snooze session ceases and they have to get out of bed to get Henry, their son, ready for school.

7:00 a.m.

Ben makes his usual breakfast smoothie and checks the weather on his phone to decide what to wear. It's cold outside now, but the weather app on which he relies indicates that the temperature is going to rise over the next few hours; it may be best to wear layers.

Henry comes downstairs from his room and Tasha, who is staring at the food pantry contemplating what to eat for breakfast, turns to him.

"Hey, bud. Did you remember to charge your Chromebook last night? Your dad and I got an e-mail yesterday from your principal reminding us to make sure it is fully charged for statewide testing."

"Yep!" says Henry, matter-of-factly. "I'm good to go."

7:45 a.m.

A text from Ben's brother, Josh, flashes on the screen of Ben's phone, which is lying on the bed where Ben is sorting out what clothes to wear. "Did you see last night's *Game of Thrones* yet?" The text is accompanied by a link to a Buzzfeed article speculating on what will happen in the rest of the final season. *Of course* I saw *Game of Thrones*, Ben thinks, remembering the hour he spent before the episode aired reading online posts in anticipation.

Tasha gets out of the shower and finds Ben hovering over his phone.

"Hey love," she says, adjusting the towel around her body. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Just texting Josh."

"Ah, okay," she says nonchalantly, as this is routine. "Do you want to ride to work together today?"

Ben looks up from his phone and turns to Tasha. "Let me check my work calendar and see what my day looks like." He then the proceeds to open the calendar app on his phone and moments later says, "Yeah, honey. We can do that."

8:30 a.m.

Tasha and Ben arrive at work and proceed to their separate offices, which are located in the same hallway. Though they are in different spaces, their routine is much the same. They first open their laptops and spend about thirty minutes browsing various news websites and

social media platforms. This ritual is a necessary part of getting ready for the rest of the day because it provides fodder for future conversation and enables them to get caught up on the lives of their friends and family. Next comes e-mail. The initial pass takes anywhere from fifteen to thirty minutes, depending on the day of the week. Easy requests are immediately addressed and more involved requests are tackled at a later time. After e-mail comes either grading or class prep, each of which are interrupted by intermittent breaks to check social media and respond to texts sent by family members on the two active text chains in which they are a part—one for Tasha's family and one for Ben's family.

10:00 a.m.

"Have you seen it yet?" Ben asks a colleague, Greg, who has just stepped into his office.

"No. Tonight." Greg says, assuming Ben is referring to his Facebook post from the previous night when he warned people in the office to not talk about *Game of Thrones* until he's had a chance to see it. "Don't say a word about it!" Greg adds, laughing.

"My lips are sealed," Ben says, as he presses his right thumb and index finger together and crosses them over his mouth. "Text me tonight after you watch it and let me know what you think."

11:00 a.m.

Ben barges into Tasha's office. "Did you see what _____ posted on Facebook?"

"I did," Tasha says, rolling her eyes. "I was just going to come to your office and ask if you'd seen it." She holds out her hands, palms up. "Why the hell would someone post that? What an idiot!"

Ben shakes his head and sighs. "Does he have any sense of how bad it looks when he posts judgmental rants like that? It's dumb. And it's rude."

"It really is" Tasha says. "But," she shrugs her shoulders, "That's just how _____ is."

11:45 a.m.

Ben is sitting at a table in his office grading a class assignment involving Twitter, when Tasha walks in.

"What do you want to do for lunch since we didn't pack anything?" she asks, sitting in an open chair next to Ben.

Ben pauses to think. "What is the Food Truck Cafe serving for lunch today?"

"Good question," Tasha says, as she unlocks her phone to find the restaurant's Facebook page, which displays their daily menu. "It looks like Chicken Shawarma and Falafel" she answers, smiling. Middle Eastern food is her favorite.

Ben smiles back. "Perfect. Text me when you're ready to go."

12:30 p.m.

Sitting at the Food Truck Cafe, Ben and Tasha browse their phones while waiting for the food they just ordered. As soon as it arrives, they place their phones face down on the table—a carefully negotiated relational ritual they perform when dining out that

acknowledges the importance of uninterrupted face-to-face interaction. While eating, they notice a young woman taking multiple pictures of her untouched plate of falafel.

"How ridiculous," Ben mutters under his breath.

Tasha laughs. "What hashtags do you think will accompany those pictures on Instagram?"

"Ha! I wonder," Ben says, smiling.

2:00 p.m.

"Hey Ben!" Tasha shouts, as she sees him walking past her office.

Ben stops, turns around, and enters Tasha's office, where she is sitting at her desk.

She looks up at him with a dull expression on her face. Something isn't right. "Why aren't you answering my texts?" she asks, with an air of frustration in her tone.

"I didn't see that you texted!" Ben replies defensively. He becomes frustrated when Tasha gets on him about responsiveness.

Tasha, sensing Ben's annoyance, takes a deep breath to calm herself down. "Can you please be more attentive? I was trying to ask about plans for the rest of the day, and it's annoying when you don't answer."

"Well, I didn't see it," Ben says, turning to walk away.

Tasha nods her head. "Okay." She knows he would never ignore her intentionally. "Just make sure your ringer is on so you know when I am trying to contact you."

"Sure," Ben says as he leaves her office.

4:00 p.m.

Ben and Tasha head to the gym to work out. Tasha runs on a treadmill while listening to her favorite "Exercise Jams" playlist on iTunes. Ben climbs on a stairmaster as he watches a Netflix show on his iPad and then listens to a podcast. Henry texts them both at 4:20 p.m. to let them know he made it home from school.

5:20 p.m.

At home, Henry is playing with Legos, which are strewn about the carpeted living room floor. Normally, he would be on his phone playing games or watching YouTube videos, but he is grounded from screen time for two weeks. Ben and Tasha, with laptops in hand, cautiously enter the living room trying their best to avoid stepping on the small plastic figurines—a painful mistake they've made too many times before.

As they sit beside one another on the sectional to do some light work before dinner, Ben hears his phone ding; it's a text, which he promptly reads. He then turns to Tasha, who is busy composing an e-mail. "Do you want to play trivia this Wednesday at The Taproom? Jared just texted me and asked if we were interested in playing with them."

"I don't know," Tasha shrugs her shoulders, continuing to type. "Maybe. What are the categories?"

"Let me check," Ben says. He then proceeds to locate and view the Facebook page of the trivia moderator and recites the categories for Tasha.

Tasha nods her head. "Sounds like fun. Text Jared and let him know we're in."

6:30 p.m.

"I'm getting hungry," Henry says, looking up at Ben and Tasha, whose eyes are glued to their computers—an all-too-familiar sight.

Ben promptly closes his laptop and stretches out his arms. "Yep, it's time." He then looks over at Tasha, who is breathing heavily while staring at her computer—a sign she is fixated on work. "Babe?" he says, lightly placing his left hand on her right knee so as not to startle her. "We should eat."

"I know. Sorry," Tasha says, followed by a deep sigh of frustration. "I'm just trying to upload this video for this online class and it keeps freezing."

"I hate when that happens," Ben says, rising from the couch. "How about I make dinner tonight while you get that figured out?"

Tasha looks up at Ben with a smile. "Really? That would be so helpful."

"Not a problem. I just need you to send me the link to the recipe so I know what I'm doing."

"Sure," Tasha says as she quickly logs into her Pinterest account where she stored the recipe for tonight's dinner.

7:45 p.m.

With dishes washed and the table cleared, Ben and Tasha decide to sneak in more work. They open their laptops and begin. Working at this time of night, however, is challenging. Their brains feel fried from staring at various screens all day, so their focus lacks. They are only productive about 70% of the time. The remaining 30% is spent browsing social media and popular websites. Short video clips of auditions from popular talent shows such as *The Voice* and *American Idol* have recently captured Tasha's attention more than she would like to admit. Adding to their lack of productivity is Henry, whose boredom from being grounded from screen time makes him extra talkative and inquisitive.

"I'm gonna put on some headphones," Ben says. "I'm trying to grade, but it's hard with those videos you're playing."

"Oh! I'm so sorry," Tasha says, embarrassed she was caught in her rabbit hole of audition clips. "I can turn the volume down."

"No worries. I'll just use my head—"

Henry interrupts. "Can I watch them with you?" He proceeds to sit next to Tasha. "Please?" he adds with raised eyebrows and clasped hands. His eagerness is hard to turn down.

10:25 p.m.

Ben's phone dings. It's a text from Greg. "Just watched it. Wow. Mind = blown. Let's chat about it tomorrow."

11:00 p.m.

"Do you want to watch a show before bed?" Tasha asks, looking up from her computer.

"Yeah. That sounds good," Ben says as he finishes responding to one of his last e-mails for the day. "What are you feeling?"

Tasha pauses. "Hmm. Not sure. Let me check and see if there's anything new on Netflix."

Fifteen minutes later, Ben and Tasha are cuddled on their sectional, streaming a thirty-minute sitcom they've never seen before—a choice inspired by reviews Tasha read on Rotten Tomatoes.

11:45 p.m.

As they crawl into bed for the night, Ben leans over and gives Tasha a kiss. "Sleep well, honey," he says, yawning. He then sets the alarm on his phone for 6:45 a.m. before lying on his back and resting his head on the pillow beneath him.

"You too, love," Tasha replies and pulls the white comforter they share over her body. She turns toward her nightstand where her phone is plugged in and decides to take one more look at her e-mails, Facebook, and Instagram. She wants to make sure she didn't miss anything significant. Satisfied with what she's seen, and worried that the light from her phone might wake Ben, who is now softly snoring, she places her phone back on the nightstand and closes her eyes, falling fast asleep.

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE OF AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

As illustrated in the vignette above, we exist in a time when our days begin and end with screens. This is the digital world in which we live. Embracing the imperative of digital autoethnography is a necessary step to opening up conversations about how to theorize personal experiences within this digital world. Digital autoethnography holds promise because it (1) requires us to rethink distinctions between public and private as well as interpersonal and computer-mediated communication, (2) allows for less ambiguity as records of communication are automatically stored, (3) pushes us to consider and reflect on how we have changed over time with the influx of digital technology and (4) provides a framework to understand the inevitable changes to human experience that will occur as digital connectivity becomes increasingly enmeshed in our everyday lives.

We envision an autoethnographic future where digital connectivity is always present and accounted for in lived experience. This future must acknowledge how everyday conversations are constantly inspired and interrupted by texts, Facebook messages, e-mails, Snaps, Instagram notifications, frequent requests to "get off the phone and pay attention," and more. The challenge for digital autoethnographers will be in finding ways to represent something so ubiquitous and mundane that we hardly notice it. We believe autoethnography is well equipped to rise to this challenge to find meaning in an often unrecognizable and confusing world where the digital is now a mundane, yet fundamental aspect of human experience. ■

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