

Introduction:

From Technologies of the Self to Identity Technologies

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The core theoretical framework of our book *You and Your Profile: Identity after Authenticity* (2021) consists of the three concepts sincerity, authenticity, and proficity. The first two concepts are borrowed from Lionel Trilling's study on *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972). Here, Trilling proposed that much of Western literature since the times of Shakespeare had been concerned with a shift in "moral life" from sincerity toward authenticity. While presenting astute analyses of numerous novels and plays in terms of sincerity and authenticity, Trilling never provided clear definitions of these key notions. Inspired by Trilling's interpretations, however, we ventured to use his terminology for a philosophical classification of different "identity technologies." For us, sincerity indicates the shaping of a sense of identity in orientation to social roles—including, for instance, traditional gender roles in the family and professional roles in public life—by sincerely committing to them behaviorally, emotionally, and/or ideologically. Authenticity, on the other hand, indicates the shaping of a sense of identity through the pursuit of originality. In authenticity, identity is formed by discovering or creating a unique self. Accordingly, authenticity emerged in modern society as a sort of individualist reaction against traditional sincerity: from the perspective of authenticity, an orientation to roles is rejected as mere conformity to external standards.

In our view, sincerity and authenticity are increasingly challenged today by a different type of identity formation that we label "proficity." Proficity indicates the way identity is orientated toward profiles. Like commercial brands, profiles are curated self-representations that are publicly validated in social validation feedback

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loops. Given the complexity and velocity of contemporary society, individuals need to constantly engage in the curation of various profiles including, for instance, economic, ethical, political, or gender profiles. In the context of today's digitalized life world, mass and social media facilitate profile curation and validation. While profiles are, from the perspective of authenticity, not authentic, they are by no means inherently fake: they are substantiated by the "true investment"—performatively, emotionally, and/or ideologically—of individuals or collectives who "identify as" them.

When writing *You and Your Profile*, we often debated whether we should use the metaphorical expression "identity technologies" to designate sincerity, authenticity, and proficity. We wondered if we should perhaps better limit ourselves to more literal expressions such as "modes of identity" or "types of identity formation" to clarify what we mean by these concepts. Eventually, we agreed (although not without reluctance) that it was all right to use "identity technologies," hoping that the expression would also indicate to readers a nod to Michel Foucault's notion of "technologies of the self."

In 1982, Foucault led a seminar on "Technologies of the Self" at the University of Vermont that resulted in an essay published under the same title. Here, Foucault uses the term "technologies" to differentiate between four "truth games" or "specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves" and which thereby establish "a matrix of practical reason." They are:

(1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things; (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification; (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject; (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (18)

Simply put, "technologies of production" refer to technologies in the literal sense; "technologies of sign systems" refer to sign- and language-based frameworks, including texts and ideologies; "technologies of power" refer to the sociopolitical realm; and "technologies of the self" refer to human life practices and ethical regimes.

Foucault was especially interested in technologies of the self, which he also understood as existential modes of “taking care of oneself.” Regarding such self-care, he compared “two different contexts which are historically contiguous: (1) Greco-Roman philosophy in the first two centuries A.D. of the early Roman Empire and (2) Christian spirituality and the monastic principles developed in the fourth and fifth centuries of the late Roman Empire” (19). True to Foucault’s penchant for historical genealogies, his reflections on the “technologies of the self” focused primarily on analyses of their various concrete applications in premodern Europe.

Our notion of identity technologies differs from Foucault’s technologies of the self in some respects. First, our concept of identity is not limited to individuals. Identity can also be collective and refer, for instance, to corporate or national identities. Second, the shaping of identity does not necessarily entail personal care in the sense of a transformative pursuit “of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 18). While such transformative self-cultivation may well contribute to developing a sense of identity, it is by no means always necessary. For instance, we work on our academic profiles through editing this special issue of *Concentric* and thereby apply the identity technology of prolificity. But this professional identity work is hardly an act of transformative self-care in Foucault’s sense.

These differences notwithstanding, our notion of identity technologies is decidedly Foucauldian in that it emphasizes the *constructionist* aspect of identity. Identity is not something innately given or objectively existent. It needs to be built and constantly rebuilt by social and psychological activity. We embrace, for instance, the terminological distinction between sex and gender identity that conceives of the former as a biological quality people are born with and of the latter as a historically contingent social and psychological construct. Of course, this is not to deny the reality of constructs. Just as bridges or airplanes are real not despite but precisely because they have been built, identities are real not despite but because they have been constructed. Material production applies different kinds of technologies to construct physical objects, and social and psychological production applies different kinds of technologies to construct meaningful identities. In our view, gender identities, for instance, will differ from one another in accordance with the specific identity technologies utilized in their construction.¹

Importantly, our notion of identity technologies links Foucault’s four technologies of production, sign systems, power, and the self. Foucault acknowledged that these “four types of technologies hardly ever function separately”

¹ See Moeller et al.

(18). We wish to emphasize this point and appreciate sincerity, authenticity, and proficity not merely as different methods of self-care, but as broader identity technologies connecting technological, semiotic, social, and personal phenomena to one another. The identity technology of proficity, for instance, is closely related to the development of new digital technologies. Social media are foundational for the creation, validation, and proliferation of profiles. They operate based on complex algorithms—a digital “technology of production” that is a major facilitator of proficity. As we argue in *You and Your Profile*, the rise of proficity is also related to a “post-representational” semiotic technology that produces meaning not via reference to supposedly objective entities external to signs or language, but as an internal effect of language games or semiotic systems (131-33). Such language games or semiotic systems constitute virtual worlds or, in Jean Baudrillard’s terminology, a simulated hyperreality. Proficity is also utilized as a “technology of power” in contemporary politics and in the economy. For example, political elections today can well be understood as profile contests. In the economic sphere, corporations compete with one another through profile-building or “branding.” Moreover, proficity can be a technology of the self in Foucault’s sense—a “taking care of oneself.” Under conditions of proficity, self-care can be exercised in the *curation* of one’s personal profiles.

The four essays collected here deal with the identity technologies of proficity, authenticity, and sincerity in relation to Foucault’s four technologies of production, sign systems, power, and the self, in different ways.

Seán McFadden assesses the transition from sincerity and authenticity to proficity in the context of the rise of cybernetics and new digital technologies. He highlights the intricate correspondence between proficity and current data-based *technologies of production*, saying that “the realm of the profile is the realm of the machine” where “identity is entirely dissolved into the technological ontology of mere data structures.” For McFadden, the rise of proficity is a great peril and “comes with what Heidegger refers to as *Seinsvergessenheit* (the ‘forgetting of Being’).” Accordingly, he thinks that *You and Your Profile* seriously underestimates “the threat that proficity poses” on both an existential level—where it corresponds to a “looming nihilism”—and politically—where it represents a new totalitarianism leading contemporary society “toward the ultimate trajectory of technocracy.” Given the enormous dangers of proficity, McFadden is not satisfied with our recommendation to simply face it with what we call “genuine pretending”—a neo-Daoist notion of “ease” that he compares not without justification to “the Heideggerian notion of *Gelassenheit*.” While generally confirming the validity of our

conceptual vocabulary of identity technologies, McFadden suggests that proficity must be rejected more forcefully and eventually be “overcome” to prevent the “dissolution of identity into a cybernetic network of data systems.”

Katja Kauer uses our theory of proficity to identify a specific narrative device in contemporary literature—the “digital other”—and thereby she applies our conceptual framework in connection with what Foucault called a *technology of sign systems*. Kauer traces the role of the digital other in various works ranging from early twentieth-century short stories to contemporary German novels. In all these cases, Kauer argues, the protagonists develop a sense of self and express it by imagining media representations of themselves and of their actions. They experience their lives “as though there were always a camera pointed at” them. In this way, they engage in a form of self-objectification, and their “authenticity is replaced by constantly having to worry about maintaining [their] own image.” Kauer critically relates such a loss of authenticity to female self-objectification in patriarchal society as described by Simone de Beauvoir. However, the self-objectification displayed to the digital other applies to all genders and is enforced today by social media rather than patriarchy. For Kauer, the digital other appears as an “internalized agent” of what we call the “general peer,” the trans-personal public that confirms profic identity in social validation feedback loops. But, Kauer points out, the digital other is more intimate than the general peer. Whereas the general peer is anonymous and remains impersonal, the digital other is an imagined “twin brother, a dreamed-of lover, a close friend.”

Daniel Sarafinas traces the shaping of a profic identity in the political sphere. Accordingly, he conceives of proficity in conjunction with *technologies of power*. As Sarafinas points out, to counter the historical humiliation “by foreign powers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” the crafting of a positive national image “has become a major ideological project” in the People’s Republic of China. Sarafinas analyzes specific feedback mechanisms in the “communication of the national image of China” promoted by the government “to reveal how certain mechanisms of profic identity operate.” Employing our notion of the “general peer,” he notes that the construction of a new “national brand” in China is not projected to “any particular country, region, or people,” but rather to “an abstracted Other, the not-us, the foreigner,” often conceived of in terms of anonymous “foreign respondents.” Moreover, he emphasizes a heightened concern with “second-order observation” by noting how much attention is given to “the evaluation of the national image by others.” As an example, he discusses the case of the popular Chinese YouTuber Ziqi Li. When, for instance, the Communist Youth League Central Committee claims that because of

Li's videos "millions of foreigners have fallen in love with China," her contributions to national profile-building are measured in terms of second-order observation.

Luka Lei Zhang outlines tensions between sincere and authentic personal identity formation in texts by two contemporary Chinese working-class writers. In a way, she describes how those identity technologies function as transformative *technologies of the self* for these authors. As Zhang documents, Wanchun Hu (1929-98) "committed himself to being a socialist worker-writer and constantly lived up to . . . role expectations during the 1950s." Hu joined the Chinese Communist Party and was trained to produce literature by and for the people. He developed a strong class-consciousness celebrated in his stories and novels. However, when China entered the era of economic and political reform in 1978, Hu "transformed his identity as well as his literary style" and increasingly distanced himself from a sincere working-class identity. Lijia Zhang's (1964-) autobiographical writings not only depict the social conflicts that unfolded during the transition from socialism to capitalism in China since the 1980s, but also the conflicts between sincere and authentic self-identification. In Luka Lei Zhang's analysis, Lijia Zhang's "shift from a 'selfless' communist hero to an 'individualist' 'poor girl like me' exhibits her self-recognition and self-interest." The author positioned herself intentionally "'against' the working class both ideologically and literally" and thereby constructed her selfhood in the mode of authenticity "as the product of personal achievement and individual freedom."

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