

Nancy Thumim, **Self-Representation and Digital Culture**, New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012, 205 pp., \$70.74 (hardcover).

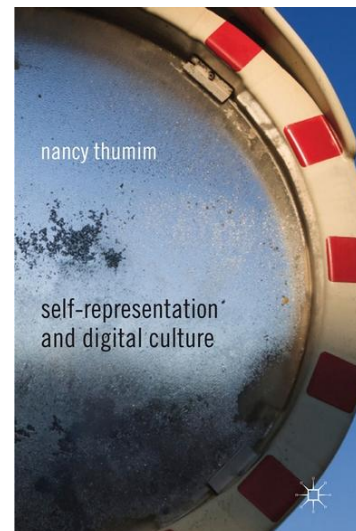
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The concepts of self-representation and digital culture can no longer be thought of as separate entities, but as perpetually linked in complex, complicated, and changing ways. The heart of [Nancy Thumim's](#) recently published book, [Self-Representation and Digital Culture](#), lies in the scholarly investigation of how ordinary people practice self-representation in contemporary culture.

Most people have a foundational understanding of terms like "community" and "ordinary people"; the words have become so overused and clichéd that they are rarely defined. The book offers a comprehensive literature review to uncover definitional precision of numerous terms, including self-representation, digital culture, community, and the ordinary. Accordingly, Thumim precisely tackles what is common and banal in everyday life, and she problematizes the concepts to contest conventional wisdom and dispute accepted norms.

Self-Representation and Digital Culture is the first full-length manuscript to comprehensively bring together various theories and approaches of contemporary self-representation. Beginning in the 17th-century post-Renaissance, Thumim traces the history of theorization of the self, as well as the history of representation. Shifts toward a digital culture have afforded the opportunity for self-representations by lowering the barriers of access for "ordinary people," which has resulted in a proliferation of the public actively electing to represent themselves through a host of communication media. To understand the unique nuances and affordances, Thumim emphatically acknowledges that various sites of analysis need to be examined individually, rather than attempt a sweeping understanding of all digital self-representations. However, if taken as a whole phenomenon, the book points out, there are some generic conventions of self-representations that are used across various types of digital platforms and assesses how those sites of analysis can be scrutinized.

The most important contribution of *Self-Representation and Digital Culture* is the detailed conceptual framework introduced to understand ubiquitous self-representations: mediation. Although mediation has long been used as a theoretical concept (see Katz, 1988; Lievrouw, 2009; Livingstone, 2009; Silverstone, 1999; Thompson, 1995), Thumim's unique contribution is to provide a theoretical overview of how the term has previously been used in media studies, while simultaneously applying the concept exclusively to self-representation practices. The author argues that mediation is a necessary condition of self-representation, as unmediated representations in digital culture is not possible: "[T]here can be no self without mediation" (p. 51). This assertion challenges the widely held belief that digital



platforms have afforded people the opportunity to represent themselves in an unmediated way. A plea is made to readers that, while one can use the analytical concept of mediation to broach the topic of digital culture, a critical and reflexive eye must be turned toward the tri-dimensions of mediated self-representation: (a) the institutional processes; (b) the textual processes; and (c) the cultural processes.

Thumim provides an exemplar for applying the mediation framework to three sites of analysis: television broadcasting, museums, and online platforms. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the author conducts interviews, focus groups, and observations of participants in the first two case studies, but not when analyzing online platforms. The two case studies—[Capture Wales](#) and [London's Voices](#)—are based in the UK and may be less relevant to those outside of this geographic area; however, the cases do provide a blueprint for how other scholars may use the concept of mediation to understand other cases of self-representation. *Capture Wales* is a seven-year digital storytelling project by BBC Wales that invited "ordinary people" to tell their story by digging up family archives and using them to produce a uniform, stylized version of their family narrative, with the expert help of BBC in sound editing, story writing, and overall production. *London's Voices*, the second case study, was initiated by the Museum of London. This project invited young Londoners to record their own version of their lives and then publicly display these narratives at the museum. In Chapters 4 and 5, Thumim analyzes the representations when third-party organizations invite the public to "tell their story," rather than construct a self-initiated, self-representation on a digital media, such as a personal website or a host of social networking sites—a distinction that is worthy of further articulation.

Thumim problematizes the celebration of Web 2.0's democratization of media production to suggest that self-representation is a necessary condition of participation. The author critically interrogates the "true" (political) incentives for institutions electing to engage in practices that invite the audience to tell their story. Whose interests are at play and who benefits from such a production? The answers are ostensibly complex and nuanced.

Thumim acknowledges and celebrates the various opportunities that people have for self-representation, but she also critically analyzes the various problems, drawbacks, and masked implications of a populace that is continually engaged in self-representation. Self-representation is alluring, as it is a practice that concurrently involves both therapeutic and democratic discourses. Self-representation is seen as democratic in that ordinary people are given the opportunity to tell their story and enact change. Self-representation is also seen as therapeutic, as the focus is on the individual sharing their story and having an outlet to be heard. However, the problem with this discourse is that participants are often speaking to an outlet that has no power to enact change. For example, participants in *London's Voices* were given the opportunity to talk about ways to improve their daily lives, such as better housing conditions; however, the museum does not possess any real or political power to make changes. As a result, participants may be disappointed at both the democratic and therapeutic level, which results in unequal power relations between industries and audiences. "Thus, the proliferation of self-representation takes place as actual democratic opportunities for speaking, and crucially for being heard, are dramatically reduced" (p. 46). Drawing from a rich theoretical framework, Thumim evidences how representations are always political and deconstructs the embedded politics of traditional representation, which is typically one group of

people representing another group of people. Self-representation is more convoluted, as one has to select which parts of the self to present.

The structure of *Self-Representation and Digital Culture* is clearly established, as the book is the product of Thumim's doctoral dissertation completed in 2007 at the London School of Economics. The introduction explicitly lays out the research questions, literature review, and theoretical approach, while unearthing definitional precision to justify the use of specific terminology and standpoints. As evidenced in the shift of title from Thumim's dissertation—*Mediating Self-Representations: Tensions Surrounding "Ordinary" Participation in Public Sector Projects*—to the title of this book, the emphasis has moved away from publicly funded projects toward a more digital focus, perhaps in an attempt to be more current and appeal to a wider audience.

The third case study of the book—online representation, with a specific focus on [Facebook](#)—appears to be an addition to the manuscript, as the same rigorous methods and empirical analysis are missing from this section. However, Thumim excellently opens the door for other scholars to use her compelling interpretive framework to conduct further analysis in specific online spaces. The author identifies the academic contribution and importance of the book:

If we accept a) that self-representations are proliferating in digital culture and b) that the concept of self-representation always invokes two particular discourses (therapeutic and democratic), then it becomes urgent to explore how self-representation (in all their diversity) are mediated in digital culture. (p. 10)

Overall, Thumim's first book is eloquently written and well-researched, and it manages to effectively distill and relay the ideas of complex and emerging topics. The work interrogates the meaning of truth, authenticity, and validity with regards to self-representation. Undergraduate and graduate students in media and communication studies would benefit from this highly enjoyable read, which is also scholarly, rigorous, in-depth, and precise. Scholars interested in representational, contemporary, and digital culture can use this book as a launch pad to analyze the interaction/intersection of self-representation and digital culture in other case studies. Thumim writes, "Yet while digital technology is understood to be important, its value is unclear and shifting" (p. 81). While it is certainly true that the landscape of digital culture is perpetually changing, the author skillfully carves out a little island, something concrete for readers to stand on (at least until the next wave of evolution).

References

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