

Privacy in digital media – an Arendtian approach

Tobias Matzner

Paderborn University (tobias.matzner@uni-paderborn.de)

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Why should we turn to Hannah Arendt when talking about privacy in the digital age? She is, after all, known for a rather old-fashioned theory of privacy. In her work, the private sphere is the household, where the necessities of life, subsistence, reproduction, and care are addressed. Only once these necessary conditions of life are satisfied, we are free to enter the public sphere of political action – for Arendt, the highest form of activity. In particular, Arendt was very worried that the necessity of biological life could destroy the freedom to act and, in consequence, has to be kept out of the public realm. This, of course relegates many highly political issues, like gender, race, poverty, or education to the private sphere.¹ Clearly, this is no attractive concept of privacy today. However, Arendt's thought is informative for thinking about privacy in the digital era for two other aspects of her work. First, she diagnoses problems that are quite similar to those today thematized with regard to digitalization: the fear of being overly determined by external ascriptions and heteronomous forms of subjectivation. Second, Arendt finds a particular antidote to this threat: not the autonomous individual, that usually holds center stage in theories of privacy, but a socially situated political subject. This form of subjectivity, I will argue, fits the current situation of life in the digital era much better than the autonomous individual prominent in liberal thought. It provides a new approach to grounding the value of privacy in plurality rather than individualism. However, this concept of privacy still has value for the individual, since only in plurality there is the possibility to change, to become somebody new, albeit not necessarily by private choice. In the following, I will shortly summarize existing theories of informational privacy and the way they ground the value of privacy in autonomy. In section 2, I will discuss some recent analyses of subjectivity in social media that challenge the presupposition of an autonomous subject. Section 3 introduces the threat of heteronomous determination as a prominent motivation for Arendt's political thought. I show that Arendt aims at a different form of heteronomy, grounded in a political phenomenology as a remedy against this threat. Rather than opposing the power of a single actor with the power of an autonomous subject, she pluralizes the power of subjectivation. Finally, section 4 argues that this enables a new form of grounding the value of privacy, which is suitable for the forms of subjectivity encountered in digital communication.

1 Privacy, autonomy, and the presentation of self

Early discussions and practices of digital media or the internet have been dominated by a rather dualist view: On the internet a “virtual life” was possible, completely independent of “real life”. This dualism was seen as enabling freedom for the persons in “real life.” When “going online”, they could invent themselves a personality that was at their disposal and thus could leave behind all kinds of discriminatory or just unsatisfactory identifications of “real life”: one could change one's gender, age, skin color, nationality, and size – or even leave out such identifying details

¹ Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 138 et seqq.

completely. Early manifestos that celebrated this liberty emphasized that, on the internet, one is judged only by what one does and not by who one is.²

Just a few years later, this idea seems quite naive: Today, the internet appears to be the place where knowledge about our entire lives accumulates. Everything we say and do is accessible, not only what we do “on the internet”. The distinction between a life online and a life offline, a virtual and a real world are no longer tenable. The recent revelations showing how much the internet is permeated with activities of secret services and other “security agencies” all over the world³ increases the impression that the innumerable networked databases contain knowledge about ourselves that even we do not possess. The availability and dissemination of all kinds of sensors has also included our material bodies in this realm of digital information. Smart phones and “self-tracking” technologies do not just measure our bodies but importantly upload that information and process it based on data from many others. That way the perception of our bodies and our corporeal practices is subsumed to the forms of knowledge production that have been established with the rise of the internet. The “internet of things”, the networking of all kinds of technologies – cars, TVs, fridges, thermostats, pacemakers – will create and communicate even more data, with the users of these technologies at best vaguely aware of its scope and content.

Thus, the old idea of the internet as a space of complete freedom to create the person we always wanted to be (or just wanted to try out) is confronted with the idea of the internet as resource of circumspect knowledge about us that eradicates ever more possibilities to deviate from this verdict “who we are”. Increasingly, border controls, future employers, insurances, or dates already know us from information on the internet when we first encounter them. Furthermore, this knowledge seems to be more readily available to inscrutable government agencies and transnational corporations than to ourselves, adding to the loss of freedom.

We are faced with two opposing views: digital media as extension of human autonomy, increasing the possibility to decide about the life one wants to live or who to be more generally; and digital media as the source of heteronomy, of others deciding for us, about us, determining who we are. These are clearly extreme perspectives and usually privacy is attributed as an important role of establishing a middle ground between them. Primarily, privacy is seen as warding of heteronomy. It is the individual itself that should be able to decide with whom to communicate, which data to disclose, etc. However, modern theories of privacy do not consider the individual as the completely free self-creator, which the libertarian utopias of the internet posited. Warren and Brandeis’ influential definition of privacy as the “right to be let alone” from 1890, which advocated to establish privacy as a legal right in the USA, still presupposes an autonomous individual, for whom autonomy means being free of influence from others.⁴ Such traditional liberal notions of autonomy have drawn all kinds of criticism, especially from feminist and communitarian thinkers.⁵ Thus, while more recent theories of privacy still see autonomy as the core value

² One of the most prominent expressions of this view is Levy’s (2001, p. 26) famous hacker ethic, which of course only pertains to a part of the early internet community. See also “The Conscience of a Hacker” written pseudonymously by “The Mentor” (<http://phrack.org/issues/7/3.html>) or John Perry Barlow’s “Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace” (<https://projects.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html>). More comprehensive accounts of this dualist view can be found in Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. or Turkle, *Life on the Screen*.

³ Greenwald, *No Place to Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA, and the U.S. Surveillance State*.

⁴ Warren and Brandeis, “The Right to Privacy.”

⁵ See Friedman, “Autonomy and Social Relationships: Rethinking the Feminist Critique.” or Rössler, *The Value of Privacy*. for a summary and critical discussion.

that is protected by privacy, they conceive of autonomy in a more socially situated manner. Autonomy here refers to the possibility to decide on one's own "how to stage oneself," opposing which audience.⁶ Those theories concede that such decisions need an adequate education and development, they presuppose versatility in cultural and social practices. They concede that the way persons engage in personal relations and the way they present themselves answers to social demands and possibilities. Yet, such socially situated subjects still should be autonomous in the sense that they should be able to critically distance themselves from these influences and demands and decide from themselves, rationally and without external influence, with which of the possibilities they can identify. "To describe a person as self-determined, we expect her desires and actions to be authentically hers, in the sense that she can in principle identify with her desires and actions as her own."⁷ Privacy is seen as a precondition for such an autonomous subject. If a person has to have control over the way they presents themselves to others, a good deal of information about this person has to remain private until the person decides to use it in their self-presentation. This also presupposes that one act of self-presentation at a given time and other such acts are shielded against each other. This problem is discussed as "context collapse" in social research on digital media.⁸ This threat to privacy is thus not limited to cases where information is accessible that is considered inherently intimate or private, e.g. regarding health, intimate relationships, sexuality, etc. "Context collapse" pertains to the fact that the self-presentation for one audience suddenly becomes accessible to others. For example, most children perceive the appearance of their parents or teachers in social media as context collapse, even if this pertains to things that they share with all their peers and friends. In a sense, the discussion of collapsing contexts extends to digital media what Goffman has discussed as "audience segregation" in personal interaction as a necessary precondition for a successful presentation of self.⁹ Thus, theorists have argued that in order to enable a successful role performance, not only the privacy of the individual but the privacy of relations or networks have to be protected.¹⁰ Nevertheless, such relational or relative amendments to privacy are still normatively motivated by their necessity for individual control over one's self-presentation.

2 Subjects in digital media

The self-reflective and self-controlled individual and the way it stages itself, which is presupposed by the theories summarized in the last section, is challenged by several studies regarding subjectivity in digital media. Rob Cover engages with the predominant research on social networks which focuses on conscious, intentional use of digital media. In contrast, he wants to highlight "non-conscious, non-voluntarist uses of online social networking that retroactively produce the user with a particular selfhood, demographic of user, connections and identifications."¹¹ He uses Judith Butler's theory of performative identity to engage with these aspects. Cover argues that her theory is suitable for engaging with social networking, since she does not only show how identities can be stabilized in performances, but also how they become complex and conflicting. Such complexity defines social networking for Cover, which he describes as a "set of interrelated – sometimes incompatible – interactivities which include identity perfor-

⁶ See Rachels, "Why Privacy Is Important"; Rössler, *The Value of Privacy*; Marmor, "What Is the Right to Privacy?" for such concepts of privacy.

⁷ Rössler, *The Value of Privacy*, 53.

⁸ Wesch, "Youtube and You"; Marwick and boyd, "Networked Privacy."

⁹ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 137.

¹⁰ Rössler and Mokrosinska, "Privacy and Social Interaction"; Marwick and boyd, "Networked Privacy."

¹¹ Cover, "Performing and Undoing Identity Online," 178.

mances through profile management, friending, becoming a fan ('liking' fan pages), tagging, being tagged, updating statuses, and having responses given by others to one's own status updates."¹² These different forms of actions and interactions produce different claims to identity which requires work by the user to achieve a coherent self. Thus, rather than just being used, social networking is the site of various interactivities that eventually constitute the user. This is a process that does not just require successful self-presentation, but rather a reworking and making coherent of elements that emanate from quite different others one interacts with. Cover groups these different forms of interactivity loosely regarding the technological frame of their realization in first, the maintenance of a "profile" and second, the more relational processes of friending, liking, tagging etc.

In Cover's framework, inspired by Butler, performatives are compelled by society.¹³ To an extent, this is also true in the Goffman-inspired theories of privacy summarized above. In both cases, individuals react to claims by the environment. However, the self-reflective, consciously self-presenting subject from these theories is just one of the forms of subjectivity that contemporary society compels us to be. What appears as critical distance from the former point of view thus is seen here as subjection to a certain set of social norms. "Social networking sites, and particularly their profile management function, can thus be understood as one tool or mechanism for attempting to be effective in articulating a coherent and recognizable self, much as diaries, journals, conversations or other communicated 'justifications' have been."¹⁴ The profiles, which are filled out by the users, thus are seen as an implementation of this particular form of subjectivity. This might be one of the reasons why discussions on informational privacy are often caught in terms of economic rationality, where it is debated whether it is in a person's interest to provide certain pieces of information or stage oneself in a particular manner. Here, the possibilities of other forms of subjectivity remain beyond the theoretical scope. Cover criticizes this in particular to gender identity and sexual orientations. Critics might object that, in the meantime, e.g. Facebook has reverted the limited choices it initially offered to many more options. This, however, presupposed a re-framing of the problem. Facebook announced the change on their website with the statement: "When you come to Facebook to connect with the people, causes, and organizations you care about, we want you to feel comfortable being your true, authentic self."¹⁵ Thus, the things that can be chosen to represent is enlarged in the name of "authenticity", which essentially means to prescribe a different, broader, but equally unreflected set of norms of subjectivation. In contrast, Cover emphasizes that a profile is a never-ending task of achieving coherence, which can even be troubled by seemingly banal social preconceptions, e.g. homosexuality and conflicting stereotypes about "interior décor", which require additional entries, posts, etc.¹⁶

The second group of activities, following Cover, links the subject of the profile more closely to others, along the lines of "identification and belonging".¹⁷ Links, "friends" online, etc. determine to whom we have increased visibility and thus, to whose social scrutiny we are especially susceptible. More importantly for Cover, however, these relations contribute to the performance of identity in the first place. This means that having "friends", answering to or sharing other's content also means to an extent an identification with these persons. That, in turn, entails a claim

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 180.

¹⁴ Ibid., 180–81.

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=567587973337709>. (Access 14.04.2017)

¹⁶ Cover, "Performing and Undoing Identity Online," 181.

¹⁷ Ibid., 183.

to belonging, which also invites scrutiny or “surveillance” by others.¹⁸ This second group of activities online can stand in conflict with the profile. Users can make comments about the subject enacted in the profile, pointing at inconsistencies. Furthermore, others can comment or otherwise give information about a user, thus challenging the content of the profile – possibly in a contradictory or incommensurable manner. Such contributions of others have three dimensions for Cover. First, users can comment on any current activity, thus making it appear in a new light or challenging the prevailing identity. Second, the internet provides an increasingly accessible archive of interactions. Thus, users can relate to elements from the archive, which potentially contradict the current forms of interaction and contents of a profile. Third, tagging re-contextualizes images and videos as pertinent to the performance of a particular subjectivity, even if it is not a direct comment on users’ interactions.

While Cover criticizes the idea of a coherent subject as imposing a particular form of subjectivity, through the surveillant or disciplinary gaze of others,¹⁹ he still sees coherence as the central normative requirement that structures subjectivity on social media. It is the surveillance of others “policing for incoherence” that prompts the work of subjectivation. Such a claim to a single, coherent identity is indeed a structuring element of digital media, especially regarding real name policies and the socio-technical pressure to unite all identities under one name. Sometimes, this is even connected to rather naïve ideas of a fairer, more transparent world.²⁰ However, this form of social identity is increasingly competing with other requirements, where mobile, flexible self-staging is central. Coherence does not play a role here; to the contrary an ever transient, always adjustable subject seems to be more important. This move is somewhat similar to the shift from discipline to control that has been described by Deleuze.²¹ Thus, what would have been seen as incoherence, or even blatant opportunism seems to be recognized as strategic or just realist take on the particularities of contemporary life and digital communication. Sometimes it is even socially demanded.

This ambivalence or co-existence of more individualist notions of subjectivity, which entail coherence, and more transient, flexible forms are at the center of Laurie McNeill’s analysis of social networks. She engages the concept of “autobiography”, which would conform to the view that on social media persons describe themselves, thus writing a form of autobiography – even if that just relates to the rudimentary form of filling out the forms that constitute a profile site. Similar to Cover, she problematizes this view using a socially constituted theory of the subject – however emphasizing the hybridity of both forms, rather than positing one as imposition on the other. McNeill notes that the narratives we encounter online very often support the idea that they are the self-writing of an autonomous subject, while at the same time to a significant extent being written “by the network, which consists of both other site members and the site itself,” i.e. technology.²² Thus, on the methodological level, she considers the subject online as a “machine-human coproduction.” These productions, however, “reenact highly traditional concepts of selves and narratives, and thus throw into relief the boundaries of ‘old’ and ‘new.’ Facebook builds on both human and posthuman concepts of the human subject in compelling, and arguably posthuman, life narratives, as its users produce and are produced by accounts of digital life.”²³ In consequence, both on the level of McNeill’s analysis of the production of subjectivity

¹⁸ Ibid., 183–84.

¹⁹ Ibid., 183.

²⁰ Johnson, “Privacy No Longer a Social Norm, Says Facebook Founder.”

²¹ Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control.”

²² McNeill, “There Is No ‘I’ in Network,” 67.

²³ Ibid.

and on the level of the forms of subjectivity that are enacted, the hybridity between individualist, independent and situated, conditioned forms of subjectivity plays a central role. She ties the first pole of that hybridity to profiles. They are templates for self-writing that presuppose a stable self that can be represented in the given fields and choices. As mentioned before, that is also embraced by social networking sites as parts of real name policies and the moralized demand to be authentic. Thus, Facebook's CEO proclaims: "Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity."²⁴ This also reflects a certain way of understanding what defines a person, for example in "asking after your tastes in music and books, Facebook insists such things matter in constructions of identity."²⁵ A view that Zadie Smith has sarcastically accused of just reflecting the world-view of a brilliant but shy Ivy League student: "Everything in [Facebook] is reduced to the size of its founder. Blue, because it turns out Zuckerberg is red-green color-blind. [...] Poking, because that's what shy boys do to girls they are scared to talk to. Preoccupied with personal trivia, because Mark Zuckerberg thinks the exchange of personal trivia is what 'friendship' is."²⁶

Of course, that design imports prevailing social norms regarding such as gender or the role consumption plays in establishing social identities.²⁷ Thus, McNeill summarizes: "What the site assumes as necessary or interesting information for Facebook members therefore reveals cultural values in action that construct the Profiled individual as a subject of late capitalist society, a figure far more human than posthuman."²⁸ The profile, however is only part of the complicated socio-technical construct of social networking sites. The central element of Facebook is now the timeline, a dynamically and algorithmically curated stream of content, as opposed to the static profile. The latter still is used as a filter or source of parameters for selecting timeline content. But that content is contributed both by the "owner" of the site and by others. Thus, McNeill quotes Facebook's according statement: "Now, you and your friends will finally be able to tell all the different parts of your story."²⁹ Not only the production of content, also the consumption and related actions like "liking" and "sharing" contribute to the online identity of others. McNeill emphasizes like Cover that users have little control over that content. But while Cover considers this a challenge to the simultaneously enforced norm of coherence, McNeill describes this as composite, networked portrait.³⁰ In part, the network selves are relying on others to verify their identity.³¹ They are also encouraged to engage with new persons by the layout of the site itself. Of course, people still look for friends who endorse the own contributions or friends who are attractive, and can taint the own appearance with that attractiveness. Accordingly, not only the content of others, but also the kind and amount of people one networks with are changing the identity of a subject online.

Another important element of heteronomy in this regard is the algorithmic automation of the site. Facebook's evaluation of the social graph, the automated collection and curation of content in the timeline subsumes both content created by oneself and others to a centralized control, that bestows the individual elements (texts, videos, pictures, links, etc.) with importance and new contexts. Again, encouraging new interaction, providing interesting or pleasant content are the aims of such curation. Thus, it again reflects a certain world-view, that however manifests

²⁴ Ibid., 68.

²⁵ Ibid., 69.

²⁶ Smith, "Generation Why?"

²⁷ McNeill, "There Is No 'I' in Network," 70; Ringrose et al., "Teen Girls, Sexual Double Standards and 'sexting': Gendered Value in Digital Image Exchange"; Cheney-Lippold, "A New Algorithmic Identity."

²⁸ McNeill, "There Is No 'I' in Network," 70.

²⁹ Ibid., 71.

³⁰ Ibid., 71–72.

³¹ Donath and boyd, "Public Displays of Connection."

itself through opaque and invisible processes in the background. Accordingly, the algorithmic elements cannot be directly translated as the execution of the intent of the owners of the site.³² This introduces an element in the creation of subjectivity online that structures others' judgment who we are, without however both these others and ourselves being able to fully grasp and reflect how this influence comes to be. Algorithmic processes, however, do not just co-curate the identity which is visible to other members of a social network or to ourselves when we visit the site. Most internet services create revenue through advertising and data mining. Thus, they create a second, highly protected profile from user's data, which is sold at high prices to their "real" customers: data brokers and advertising agencies. Thus, there is a second verdict who we are, usually tailored towards a particular question: are we a potential customer for this product? However, such data is parasitized in similar processes, that answer other questions, like are we a security threat? Should we get credit? Should we be allowed to fly?³³ The use of customer data as the main source of revenue feeds back on the way that users appear to others. The sites are structured in a way that they entice the provision of important or valuable data and also to ensure good placement and high visibility for ads and sponsored content.³⁴

Such elements challenge the liberal or individualist notion of the subject that structure the profiles in social networking sites in two regards. First, the subject is constituted by self-writing as well as contributions by others. Both of them are again processed in an automated and indiscernible way. This introduces various sources of heteronomy into the picture of autonomous self-presentation. Second, the subject is turned into a "process".³⁵ It is always contested, but not so much in terms of coherence, but rather regarding the constant requirement to engage, respond, share, and participate. "Should users fail to reciprocate, they risk alienating network members and violating the social norms of this particular SNS community, actions that [...] Facebook polices."³⁶ In a sense, claiming a stable coherent self that can be represented in a definitive form without constant needs for updates and social confirmation would contradict such social norms. Also, the advertising industry or other applications of data mining are not interested in a coherent self. The possibility to answer the particular question or query which is of current interest is enough in that regard. Rather than having detailed data of one person, this needs similar kinds of data from a huge number of persons in order to enable the statistical processes to function. Data miners are asking "what you are like" rather than "who are you".³⁷

However, McNeill does not see complete determination in such heteronomous source of subjectivity. It is still our activities that shape the content of Facebook, "they determine which posts we see in our News Feeds, what ads appear beside our Walls, and what actions we "need" to take to improve Facebook for ourselves and others."³⁸ Yet, the logic of that determination is not clear and not directly or intentionally useable to achieve desired self-presentations. This shows the essential hybridity – partially contradictory and unreconciled – of what McNeill calls the humanist, self-presenting subject, and the posthuman networked heteronomously constituted subject. Thus, the networked self, influenced by others as well as technologies, does not automatically decenter the individualist subject. As Cover shows, it can impose the requirement to

³² For a more detailed critique of that view, see Chun, "On 'sourcery,' or Code as Fetish."

³³ Matzner, "Beyond Data as Representation: The Performativity of Big Data in Surveillance."

³⁴ McNeill, "There Is No 'I' in Network," 76.

³⁵ Ibid., 73.

³⁶ Ibid., 74.

³⁷ Matzner, "Why Privacy Is Not Enough Privacy in the Context of 'ubiquitous Computing' and 'big Data,'" 98.

³⁸ McNeill, "There Is No 'I' in Network," 78.

“perform” a coherent subject, as well as in McNeill’s case the constantly responding, ever becoming flexible subject. That flexibility can be, in turn, enacted as individual responsibility or requirement, as well as a result of an “agency” that is now located with software and other users.

3 Arendt on appearance

The analysis by Cover and McNeill show that a self-reflective subject, who is in control of the respective self-presentation or staging, is problematic in digital media. Albeit, it can neither just be disregarded as a wrong or old-fashioned view of the subject, since the autonomous, “liberal” or “humanist” subject still structures important elements of interaction. The challenge for a theory of privacy to do justice to this situation amounts to a shift from privacy as protecting a particular form of the subject – the autonomous subject – to privacy as moderating function within these shifts and hybrids of different possible forms of subjectivation. Otherwise, the more “posthuman” forms of interaction are too easily denigrated as not caring for privacy at all. In this regard, Arendt’s thinking about the constitution of persons in interaction with others can be helpful.

The dangers of heteronomy are a prominent theme in Arendt’s work. She is still famous for her analysis of totalitarianism, which she saw as “far from wielding its power in the interest of one man” or a group of ruling ideologues. Rather, totalitarianism “is quite prepared to sacrifice everybody’s vital immediate interests to the execution of what it assumes to be the law of History or the law of Nature.” It applies this presumed law “without bothering with the behavior of men. The law of Nature or the law of History, if properly executed, is expected to produce mankind as its end product [...]”³⁹ Thus, she describes totalitarianism as the rule of the belief that there is one fundamental principle that can describe everything.⁴⁰ This ultimate source of meaning and necessity can eventually turn even the eradication of entire populations into logical necessities.⁴¹ Thus, totalitarianism is the becoming total of an external judgment where individual particularities have no possibility to resist. Even the totalitarian rulers can conceive of themselves as mere executors of necessity.

This analysis, although Arendt significantly refined it later, informed her entire political theory in the sense that she is highly suspicious of any form of natural or historical necessity. She was especially wary of economics as a statistical science, which tries to map human behavior with mathematical tools and derive the “best” solutions out of these models. Clearly, there is no threat of totalitarianism here. Still, Arendt finds elements of the structure of reading off the best solution of political problems from a description of nature and the world, which then just needs to be followed by human actors. In this case, the laws of nature are replaced by “statistical laws”.⁴² Thus, the solutions can be found in data, analyzed by sophisticated statistical tools. In this regard, Arendt is a forerunner of Foucault’s analysis of statistically driven biopolitics.⁴³ The critique of such forms of governance clearly inform many current calls for strengthening privacy. They problematize that our data is increasingly in the hands of banks, insurances, the welfare state, security agencies, and other governing bodies, whose increasing power is legitimized by access to data and methods to read it. Thus, verdicts about us – Do we get insurance? Are we eligible

³⁹ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 461–62.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 469.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 470–71.

⁴² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 323.

⁴³ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*.

for welfare? – are heteronomously formed based on our being part of a certain statistically modelled population.

Importantly, Arendt's antidote to this threat of external determination is not the autonomous liberal subject. This concept figures in *The Human Condition* as "Homo faber". An intentional, sovereign human being, who puts his⁴⁴ ideas into practice, using tools and resources. The way Homo faber appears to others is via the product he creates.⁴⁵ In light of the discussion above, one clearly has to add that one of these products – at times with a high market value – can be a well-managed impression towards others. Arendt shows that Homo faber still depends on the necessity she suspects. Sovereign or autonomous action is only possible if we have insight in the laws of our world, which guarantees that our acts will have the intended outcome.⁴⁶ It is a form of independence that is based on understanding and mastering one's condition. Homo faber's approach to the world is determined by the conviction that "Being and Appearance part company forever."⁴⁷ Thus, what he does gets meaning and justification from the insight into a hidden lawfulness of the world. This law can be discerned from a critical, reflective, removed standpoint, which Arendt discusses as "Archimedian" standpoint.⁴⁸ In contrast to the animal laborans, Homo faber himself is not immersed into these processes. He can stand in reflective distance to them, and use them. Nevertheless, it is the same form of determination which at the same time provides a guarantee for the success of Homo faber's endeavors – be it making tables or states.⁴⁹ For Arendt, this still fails to do justice to the fundamental situatedness of humans amongst others. This means acknowledging a reality of situated human beings.

Regarding interpersonal relations, which are pertinent to the discussions of privacy and social media, Arendt illustrates this view in her text *Thoughts on Lessing*. She describes her situation as a Jew in Germany during the rise of the National Socialist regime. To a large extent, for her, that was an external ascription. She recalls her being Jewish not as "a reality burdened or marked out for distinction by history" but simply "a political present which had dictated a membership through which the question of identity had been decided in favor of anonymity, of namelessness."⁵⁰ This is a total ascription, where one form of identity determines the person completely; in this case eradicating personality by anonymity, namelessness. However, Arendt cautions against all forms of humanism or other ideas that would guarantee independence from such ascriptions, thus trying to safeguard an essential personality or humanity. "[T]hose who reject [...] identifications on the part of a hostile world[,] may feel wonderfully superior to the world, but their superiority is then no longer of this world; it is the superiority of a more or less well-equipped cloud-cuckoo-land."⁵¹ The reality of such ascriptions have to be taken into account. For Arendt, a German and a Jew proclaiming: "Are we not both human beings [...] would have been [a] mere evasion of reality and of the world common to both at that time, they would not have been resisting the world as it was." Instead "they would have had to say to each other: A German and a Jew and friends."⁵²

⁴⁴ The male gender in this section is on purpose.

⁴⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 160.

⁴⁶ Matzner, *Vita Variabilis*, 122.

⁴⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 275.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁴⁹ Matzner, *Vita Variabilis*, 77.

⁵⁰ Arendt, *Menschen in Finsternen Zeiten*, 34.

⁵¹ Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, 26.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 31.

This combination of an inherent suspicion against definitive, objectifiable insights into the world with, not only its failure to protect against totalitarianism, but the possibility of harnessing this logic for abhorrent purposes informs Arendt's political thought also beyond discussions of totalitarianism and National Socialism. Her pluralized phenomenology, which she develops in *The Human Condition*, insists that being and appearing coincide. However, this is not just an ontological standpoint. To the contrary, it is an achievement, a political aim, it is the worldview that conforms to action, the highest, political form of activity in Arendt's view. It is a way of being in the world and with others that does not relegate responsibility to being, the state of the world or anything beyond that which humans do. She summarizes this as the starting point for her reflections in *The Human Condition*:

For us, appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance.⁵³

If being seen and heard by others constitutes reality, reality is not something that opposes or corrects heteronomous ascriptions per se. On the contrary, reality itself is based on what others perceive and – as we will see in a moment – also what they relate about their point of view. Thus, Arendt's political theory spells out differences in heteronomous ascriptions, rather than pursuing the simple dichotomy of heteronomy and autonomy. She distinguishes different forms of problematic and preferred forms of external ascriptions. In doing so, she aims at a common constitution of the world rather than an external determination. In other words, rather than looking for the one, definitive standpoint in order to counter discriminatory, violent, or even lethal “identifications on the part of a hostile world”, she democratizes all standpoints in order to produce a counterweight to a totalizing view.

While the quotation above is a general statement at the outset of Arendt's discussion of the public sphere, she immediately draws consequences for personality. Contrary to the view of expressing a true or authentic person towards others, based on the “forces of intimate life”, these have to be transformed for their appearance. This would still fit the view of an intentional self-presentation. However, later in her book *The Human Condition* Arendt spells out her take on the presentation of self in greater detail:

This disclosure of “who” in contradistinction to “what” somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this “who” in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. On the contrary, it is more than likely that the “who,” which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the daimon in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters.⁵⁴

⁵³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 179–80.

Here, she clearly acknowledges the attempts to achieve a person as a willful purpose. Yet, she gives others and their views primacy. Furthermore, these appearances do not stay with the persons who witness them. They “tell stories” about what has happened and only thus form a coherence of a series of events and give them meaning.⁵⁵ Thus, others provide far more than just possibilities to act, relations to engage in, among which we consequently can choose. Others’ stories relate individual acts, different appearances, and thus form within their “stories” a stable personality. Finally, others confront us with their version of what has happened. They derive claims from it, which they expect us to follow. These claims do not just pertain to individual acts. In a sense, others claim that we act accordingly to who we are – but who we are depends on how we appear to them. In the German version of *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes that “Der Ruf der Mitwelt,” or “the call of those who are in the world with us”, is what constitutes our identity.⁵⁶

Of course, depending on the respective situation, context and audience, the force of such claims and the possibilities to contradict or confront them differ.⁵⁷ Arendt’s discussion is rather abstract and must be particularly contextualized because many of the relevant interactions that constitute personality today are mediatized. Yet, as an abstract framework, Arendt’s position fits well with the analysis of digital media above. She provides room for heteronomy in the constitution of subjects, without reducing it to a social determinism. The interplay of the attempt to achieve a personality on “willful” purpose and the appearance that results from others allows to grasp the hybridity of subjectivity between human and posthuman modes discussed in section 2. In contemporary Western societies, most of the accounts that others will give of our appearance are probably in terms of the humanist or liberal coherent subject. Consequently, the claims derived from such accounts exert the policing force for coherence and self-control. Importantly, such accounts can come with the claim to further account for oneself – an element which is only latent in Arendt’s thought but has been made explicit in the works of Judith Butler⁵⁸ and Adriana Cavarero.⁵⁹ A mediatized, standardized way of such socially demanded accounts are clearly the profiles in social networking sites. They are a self-description, but, as McNeill and Cover show, one that answers to a presupposed conception who the self-describing individual is. The more post-human elements of subjectivation are cases of different configurations in which the accounts of an appearance reach the subject. They are less tied to a request to coherence and unity and give the subject more freedom to be who it is for others but also less possibilities to confront them.

This redescription of social media analysis within Arendt’s approach makes it plausible to apply her way of warding off problematic forms of heteronomy to the problem tied to the value of privacy. Rather than arguing for an autonomous subject that could resist external ascriptions, she introduces an element that manages those ascriptions: forgiveness.

4 Forgiven and the value of privacy

Arendt is well aware of the problems that arise from the power of the form of heteronomy that forms the core of her concept of personality. We need a remedy for this power, otherwise “our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never

⁵⁵ Ibid., 183–85.

⁵⁶ Arendt, *Vita Activa*, 302.

⁵⁷ Matzner, *Vita Variabilis* Ch. 3.6.

⁵⁸ Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

⁵⁹ Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*.

recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever.”⁶⁰ In Arendt’s theory, this remedy is forgiving. Forgiving, in her sense, does not mean that an act was not wrong. It means that the act, regardless what it was, will no longer play a role for who the person is – as least as far as the forgiving other is concerned. In a sense, “I forgive you” means: “For me, you will no longer be the person who did this.” Forgiving is a change in the way the person appears to others, it is a form of moderating heterogeneous ascriptions and the claims derived from them. However, forgiving is a very personal act, it depends on close relations and is an act that one can never claim, only hope for. Privacy, on the contrary, is established on a social level and as a normatively established claim. Yet, it has an analog function to forgiving. Privacy is the claim that specific appearances of a person should not play a role for who the person appears as here and now. It moderates the influence that other appearances of a person can have on the current appearance. This is more than just a phenomenological rephrasing of the concept of impression management. The way a person appears to others is structured by former appearances, which are linked to current appearances. This is essentially what “telling a story” means to Arendt. Thus, a person constantly becomes the person that has appeared elsewhere, has done other things, has been other persons for others. As described above, depending on context, this process is a combination of own and external contributions. Privacy structures this process normatively. It regulates which others appearances should be disregarded or not available in the first place as influence for the current appearance.

Contrary to forgiveness, which has only a temporal dimension, privacy has temporal and spatial or informational dimensions. It can encompass the right that things from the past no longer count for the appearance of a person, like the recently discussed right to be forgotten.⁶¹ Most of the time, however, privacy is realized in spatial or informational configurations which preclude that certain acts, events, or situations appear to others in the first place. The discussion of algorithmic processes above highlights that increasingly the way we appear to others depends on the appearances of others. I have mentioned that many current methods of data analysis do not aim at circumspect biographical knowledge, but rather at widespread, comparable data about many. Thus, the information that is available online about others is used to form new categories, new forms of subjectivity, which are in turn used in person’s verdicts about us. Furthermore, others get information about us because the algorithmic curation of their sites and “timelines” is incorporated into the way they perceive our appearance. This underlines why these methods are such a huge challenge to privacy. We have established norms in our societies based on experiences which kinds of appearance should be available to whom. This is complicated by algorithmic methods. They entail that as soon as digital traces of an appearance are available to a platform like Facebook, they could eventually be available to everyone using the platform as well as the advertising clients.

Privacy as the separation or disregard of appearances does by no means entail that the fundamental dependence of subjects on others is abrogated, that now the appearing subject can freely stage itself. Privacy just moderates the different appearances that are relevant for the stories that others can tell about the appearing subject. Of course, if others know less about the appearing subject, they might give more credence to the attempt of this subject to stage itself. This is, however, by no means a necessity, and not the most important effect of privacy. The important effect from an Arendtian point of view is that all the subjects who are confronted with the appearance can create their own account of what happens and who is acting. If they already knew,

⁶⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

⁶¹ Frantziou, “Further Developments in the Right to Be Forgotten: The European Court of Justice’s Judgment in Case C-131/12, *Google Spain, SL, Google Inc v Agencia Espanola de Proteccion de Datos*.”

so to speak, who the subject is, this would not be possible. Privacy thus conceived does not preclude the heteronomous elements of subjectivation analyzed by Cover and McNeill. In a sense, it provides the openness for such influence in the first place. Theorists of privacy have long argued that privacy is necessary to stage ourselves. Speaking with a grain of salt, we now see it is also necessary to “be staged”. Privacy enables the possibility that we interact with others, that others tell us who we are, co-determine who we are, in a way we cannot control without this influence becoming a totalizing force that spreads over too large parts of our lives. In this sense, this analysis of privacy is in line with Arendt’s theory of politics, since privacy protects the plurality of standpoints. As I have detailed above, it is this plurality, the valorization of all standpoints, that is Arendt’s remedy against one totalizing or discriminatory ascription. In terms of the appearing subject itself, privacy protects the fundamental possibility to change. With each deed, with each appearance, with each new encounter one can become someone else, without the past, without acts that happen elsewhere predetermining who one will be.

Of course, both in the context of digital media and elsewhere, not all points of view are equal – and neither should they be. There are accounts of our past which we rightfully have to be answerable for, otherwise privacy would destroy responsibility or accountability. There are also instances, and increasingly these are the big providers of digital services, where many of the interactions that lead to the subjects who appear in digital media are archived. These traces allow an external ascription that can claim to encompass a huge part of our lives. If privacy means to keep appearances separate, this is clearly one of its big threats. Compared to states and political institutions, which have the power to ascribe and thus can harness data to exert this subjectivizing force, these actors derive their power or claim to power directly from their access to processes of subjectivation that already go on among persons. Elsewhere, in a discussion of security agencies and their use of data, I have called that a “parasitical” power to subject.⁶² Thus privacy is not only asked for regarding entities that already have power, but can itself moderate the accrual of a power to subject.

This Arendtian analysis shows that the value of privacy can be grounded without recourse to the notions of an autonomous subject that are challenged by the analyses of subjectivity and digital media quoted above. On a more fundamental level, privacy protects the plurality of standpoints in society and thus the possibility for subjects to change, to become someone else – not only if that happens by autonomous choice but also in complex and mediated hybrids of heteronomous and autonomous elements.

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⁶² Matzner, “Beyond Data as Representation: The Performativity of Big Data in Surveillance.”

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