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Vulnerability Disclosures: Zine Writing in the Age of New Media

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ABSTRACT

In what is known as the digital age, the possibilities for self-publishing personal narratives are wider than ever before. At every turn there is an invitation to "share" what we are thinking in status updates, tweets, posts, and re-posts. In the giddy pace of this technological innovation, it may seem as if print-based modes of sharing, such as zine writing, are outdated, or even redundant. However, I will argue here that zines—as print publications—gain new significance in what N. Katherine Hayles, in *Writing Machines*, has termed our "contemporary media ecology." Zine writers experiment with diverse visual, tactile approaches to expressing personal narrative through the paper body of the zine. Furthermore, personal zine writing offers a way for writers to create vulnerable disclosures with a limited circulation. In the context of increasing alarm about surveillance and security breaches online, this aspect of zine materiality becomes very significant.

When I was diagnosed with adult Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) at the ripe age of thirty in the middle of a demanding PhD, I hunted hungrily for stories of people living with this disability. However, I could not find any that satiated my curiosity. What I found online were how-to guides which gave lists of smartphone apps you could use to ring shrilling alarms between tasks in order to break a dreamy state, and instructions to swim laps in a pool, swallow Omega-3 tablets, and chew goji berries to improve concentration. Or I found forums of people comparing their experiences with the latest medication. I was looking for stories that were messier, and a little more complex. I wanted to understand, what is the lived experience of being inside an ADD mind? And what is this idea of having "too little" attention anyway? How can a perceived lack of concentration be created by the environment that you live in, in the form of unreasonable demands for attention?

Finding none of these stories, I decided to write my own as a way to come to terms with what had happened to me. I started a blog and I wrote the first entry, and many more after that. In the midst of wrangling with footnotes for my PhD, the fresh immediacy of the blog page really appealed to me. I could write anything I wanted, scrawl it down, and no committee would judge its worth afterwards. While I liked the idea of random Internet trawlers stumbling on the blog (to date, it has one unknown follower), I was very worried about giving out the link. To have ADD felt (and feels) like a stigmatised, vulnerable position within academia, which could jeopardise my chances of future employment. I felt like once the link was known, it could no longer be controlled, but could be copied, and copied, and copied. I would have no say over who was reading my work. Of course, I could have made it "private," but that would foreclose the possibility of any unknown fellow ADD sufferers finding it.

Shortly after having started working on the blog, I decided to attend the Berlin Zine Festival for the purposes of my research. Zines are non-professionally produced personal manuscripts. The paths of distribution for these paper texts intersect with and diverge from the electronic highway, as they are distributed via online "distros" as well as at concerts, alternative book shops, and zine festivals.[1] They come in all shapes and sizes, and range from print runs of one to several

thousand. The provenance of zine writing has been traced back to the 1930s (Duncombe 11) when science fiction fans would write reviews, commentaries, and fanfiction about the books they were reading. In the 1990s zines became prominent as a medium which was central to the evolution of the Riot Grrrl movement (Piepmeier 10). In this movement, third-wave feminists used the medium to express the intersection between their political perspectives and personal experiences.

Today zines cover as many diverse subjects as you could imagine. Just in my collection I have some several hundred copies, with topics ranging from chicken farming to raising children as a transgender mother to living with chronic pain to Lebanese cookery. Theorists of the field have consistently struggled to create a firm definition for what zines are and are not, as there exists such a diversity of content and form (Duncombe 14). Two features that distinguish zines within that diversity is that they are self-published without external censorship or approval, and that they are published on paper. In the last two decades, the genre of the personal zine ("perzine") has grown increasingly popular. Perzines relay narratives from a first-person perspective and are often so intimate that they read like diaries.

Inspired by the irreverent frankness of the perzines I had read, I decided to create my own zine, based on my blog about ADD, for the occasion of my visit to the Berlin Zine Festival. I quickly cut-and-pasted a cover and photocopied it at the public library. Then I printed and formatted the text, stapled it all together and highlighted the title in pink. Now I had my first zine: *Too Much, Never Enough: Musings on AD(H)D, Academia and Life in a Wild Mind* (see fig. 1 and fig. 2). With trepidation, I dropped it off to be sold at the zine festival. Whenever anyone picked up a copy and browsed through the pages, I felt like they were looking into the heart of me, so vulnerable and so exposed. Nevertheless, I suddenly had an instinct to start giving people I knew the zine, even when I had not wanted to send them a link to the blog. Somehow, the text in the zine was safer, more controllable: it

1. A distro is a small online shop, often run by volunteers, which buys zines from individual zine makers and sells them on to the public. A zine festival is a meeting of zine makers and readers where zines are sold and traded.

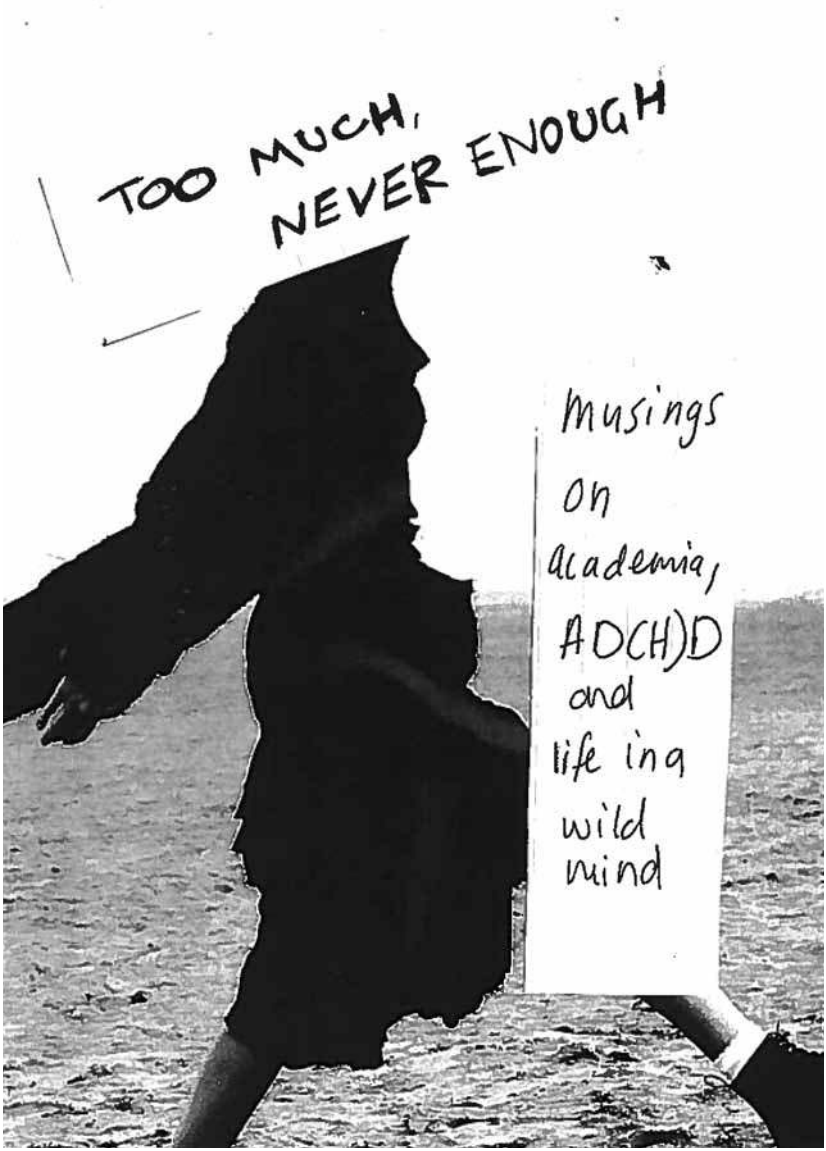
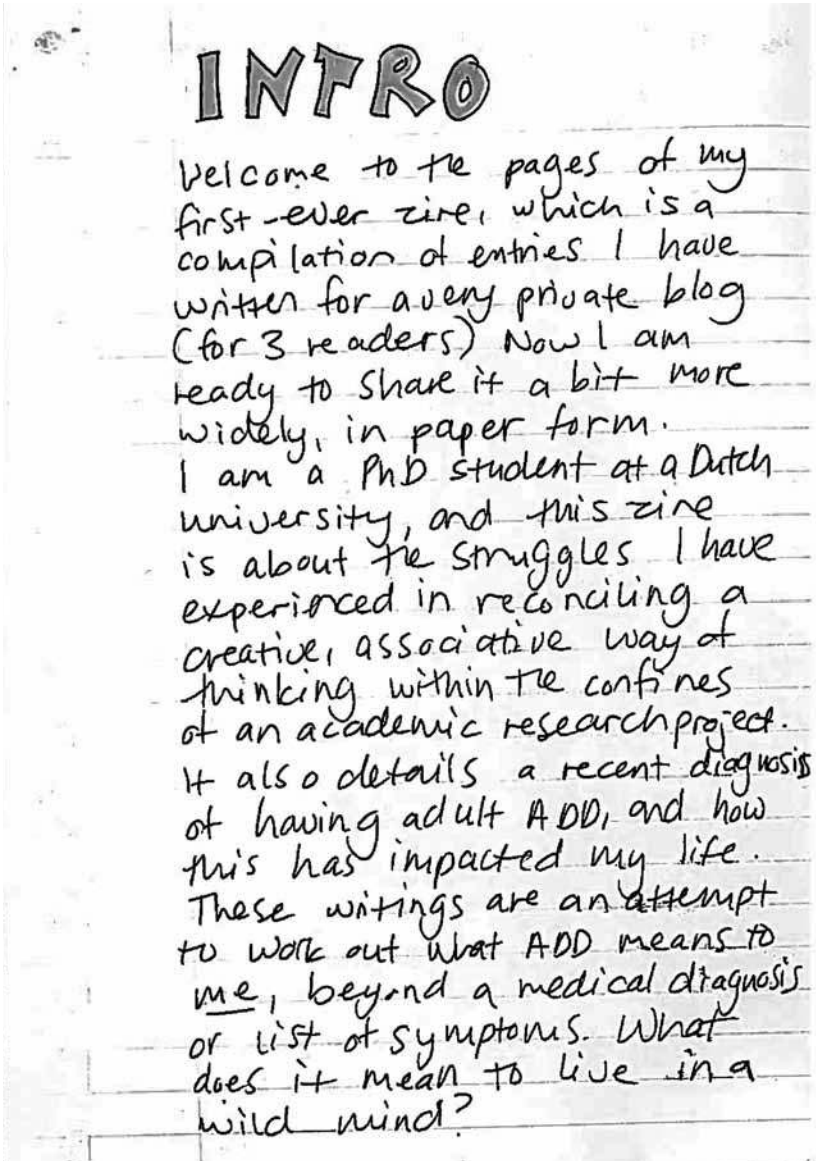


fig. 1. Cover of *Too Much, Never Enough* by Sara Rosa Espi.



INTRO

Welcome to the pages of my first-ever zine, which is a compilation of entries I have written for a very private blog (for 3 readers). Now I am ready to share it a bit more widely, in paper form.
I am a PhD student at a Dutch university, and this zine is about the struggles I have experienced in reconciling a creative, associative way of thinking within the confines of an academic research project. It also details a recent diagnosis of having adult ADD, and how this has impacted my life. These writings are an attempt to work out what ADD means to me, beyond a medical diagnosis or list of symptoms. What does it mean to live in a wild mind?

fig. 2. Page of *Too Much, Never Enough* by Sara Rosa Espi.

was contained, and could not go *viral*. I am careful about what I tell people, and some had not known at all what I was experiencing. Others had not been able to grasp what ADD was, and how to respond to my diagnosis. Handing them that zine was a way to share all of that with them, a perfect shortcut.

In writing about my ADD diagnosis, I had a compelling wish both to share my thoughts with other people, and to control who would read the text. In writing the zine, I felt able to create a limited circulation for my text, knowing that the potentially stigmatising content could not travel very far as I had made so few copies, and only distributed them to friends and at the zine festival.

In this article I examine the practice of zine writing as a paper-based mode of self-expression, which exists alongside the many new Internet-based modes of self-publication. I will argue that we need to understand our digital media ecology as containing also paper-based "old media" which is imbued with new meanings and uses in the light of the digital. Examining the specific materiality and distribution practices within zine writing allows us to understand what I will refer to as "media divergence," which describes the practice in which writers choose to communicate distinct kinds of information using different media, depending on their purpose.[2] What drives zine makers to want to work in a "slow" medium (Rauch), rather than a fast one? How (and why) do zine makers appropriate "old," awkward, and inconvenient technology? What are the unique material possibilities for expressing personal narrative through zines? How does social ritual affect how zine makers envision their use of technology? While the answers to these questions are numerous, in this article I will focus on just two aspects of media specificity in zine writing in a digital age: the creative possibilities for designing the zine, and the ways that writers can limit distribution and evade surveillance.

2. Media divergence is a term that was developed in the communally-authored article: Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Sara Rosa Espi, and Inge van de Ven. "Visual Text and Media Divergence: Analogue Literary Writing in a Digital Age."

Zine Writing in an Age of New Media

In *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (1988), Carolyn Marvin suggests that our understandings of "new technology" are problematically limited. Writing even before digital media like the Internet took on the status of the "new," she anticipates current debates about these labels. Marvin suggests that "new media" should be understood as:

> The use of new communications technology for old or new purposes, new ways of using old technologies, and, in principal, all other possibilities for the exchange of social meaning, [which] are always introduced into a pattern of tension created by the coexistence of old and new, which is far richer than any single medium that becomes a focus of interest because it is novel. (8)

The messy and "rich" landscape of communications technology which Marvin points to here is oversimplified in a deterministic account of media history, which presumes that media users will want to engage with only the newest and most efficient technologies.

In this rush to embrace an "age of new media," the demographic of the selective or non-user of digital technology like the Internet becomes almost invisible in academic research (Katz and Rice 101; Wyatt). If digital technology is faster, better, and more innovative, it does not seem relevant (or even plausible, perhaps) that someone would choose not to use it.

The fact that access to digital technology is possible only to a minority of the world's population (Ginsburg 4; Klinenberg and Benzecry 7) does not hamper declarations that we now live in a globalized "digital age." The discourse of the "digital divide," while acknowledging that access to digital media is not in fact universal, also conceals a "neo-developmentalist" (Ginsburg 5) agenda that imagines the "first world" users of digital media as existing on the forefront of modernity, with "the rest" of the world waiting to catch up. Even where there is access to digital media, the quality and reach of that access is not "democratic." In fact, the hierarchical structures of class, race, and

gender which structure power and access "in real life" are reproduced in cyberspace as well (Nakamura; Gomez-Pena; Nguyen; Piepmeier; Chow-White; Boyd; Hargittai). In universalizing the users' experience of digital media, these structural inequalities are violently erased.

I emphasise the problem of the universal user and the implicit ethnocentrism behind this notion because this problem is key to understanding media divergence in zine writing. In a technologically determinist reading of media it is impossible to understand why someone would choose not to use what is most contemporary and up to date. If the user does not fall into the problematic "digital divide" (Ginsburg 5), and could choose to belong to the world of modernity, then the obvious explanation is that they must be somehow regressive, displaying nostalgia or a puritan nature, and staring willfully into the past by taking part in a "slowly deteriorating and gradually vanishing tradition" (Neef and Van Dijck 7). In order to understand the particular motivations of the media-divergent user, these teleological understandings of media use will need to be unraveled. This can only be achieved if we "provincialise" (Chakrabarty, qtd. in Coleman 489) our studies of media use to account for the situated experience of the users. Just as it is problematic to envision a universal user in relation to digital media, the same is true for zines and users of "old media."

Unlike the large percentage of the world that does not use computers or the Internet, simply because they do not have access to that technology, the zine makers I have worked with all had access to computers and the Internet.[3] This means that these zine makers make the *choice* to publish their zines in the medium of print, as well as (or instead of) online.[4] In a previous article I, together with Kiene

3. I cannot claim that all zine makers who I have been in contact with or read zines from have easy or unrestricted access to digital publishing tools and the Internet. However, seeing as the zines I study come from the Netherlands, the UK, Germany, Australia, and the US, I can confidently assert that these zine makers could all access digital technology in some form if they so wished, in public institutions like libraries if not on home computers.
4. It is my experience that zine publishers often also communicate prodigiously online with blogs, websites, *We Make Zines* profiles, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, etc. In addition, many dimensions of zine distribution depend on online publicity/distribution hubs/publication of zine events. Emphatically, this is not a case of zine printing instead of or against digital media, but rather as part of a sophisticated, thoughtful combination of the two.

Brillenburg and Inge van de Ven, have argued that this choice should be considered as an instance of media *divergence*; media users express experiences in different media because of what the specific materiality of different media forms makes possible (Brillenburg Wurth, Espi, and Van de Ven). Media divergence in this sense draws on N. Katherine Hayles' definition of "media specificity" ("Print is Flat" 67). In her important work, Hayles follows McLuhan in insisting that content and media form cannot be understood in isolation, and that the form of a medium is also its content. Therefore, we need to understand media as having a *specific* materiality:

> Central to repositioning critical inquiry, so it can attend to the specificity of the medium, is a more robust notion of materiality. Materiality is reconceptualised as the interplay between a text's physical characteristics and its signifying strategies, a move that entwines instantiation and signification at the outset. This definition opens the possibility of considering texts as embodied entities while still maintaining a central focus on interpretation. (67)

Drawing on this concept of media specificity, I argue that just because content *can* travel across media does not mean that it *should*, or *will*. In other words, just because the content of zines can be written on blogs, does not mean that zines will disappear, because the unique materiality of the zine is formative of the content that is expressed. The fact that the zine is made on paper, self published, and distributed through specific rituals all contributes to what is expressed through its pages. As I will show in the next section, the paper materiality of zines is foregrounded in the design of the publication as a strategy to express personal narratives.

Materialising Personal Narratives in Zines

Zine making is a creative endeavor in that there is a great freedom of choice in how to create your design. Zines are not tied up to any particular technology. There are no special skills you need to master,

or templates to follow (Freedman 2). Zines range from the scruffy and scrawled, to the polished and professional, using techniques like screen printing, letter-press printing, and mimeograph printing. The arduousness of printing even the most scrappily wrought zine also means that there is an intent behind the words, a design (even if that is to have no design) that can appear to be missing from a blog post written at whim. In the examples that follow, zine writers have used form to reveal personal, intimate information to the reader, using the visual design to evoke the confessional tension between sharing and withholding information. These design decisions are considered to be integral to, and not supplementary to, the storytelling in the zine (Poletti, "Auto/Assemblage" 88; Piepmeier 79).

The first aspect of any zine that we encounter is the cover. This cover can act as a barrier to the information inside, and symbolise the way that zine writers both confess and attempt to withhold information. Zine coverings can also demonstrate vulnerability. At the Berlin Zine Festival, I picked up a tiny, square-shaped zine, which fit into the palm of my hand. The front cover read only *#10* by Sky, and the back cover read "I let go of all fear and doubt and life becomes simple and easy for me." Intrigued, I pushed off the paper clip and opened it up. The opened flap revealed a head, and a torso outlined in brown (see fig. 3). By opening the torso to the right I could see the pane underneath, an image of a crossed pair of arms. On the right-hand side the text on the inside pane read "I accept others the way they are." Opening the middle pane to the left revealed the text "I love myself the way I am." In the center pane was a picture of a pair of knees, pulled up against the body. When I folded that final pane down a big brown heart was revealed, on a figure standing with their arms open, everything exposed. The author has folded the zine so that it becomes a metaphor for opening up, slowly allowing the reader to access the confession contained inside, one pane at a time (see fig. 4).

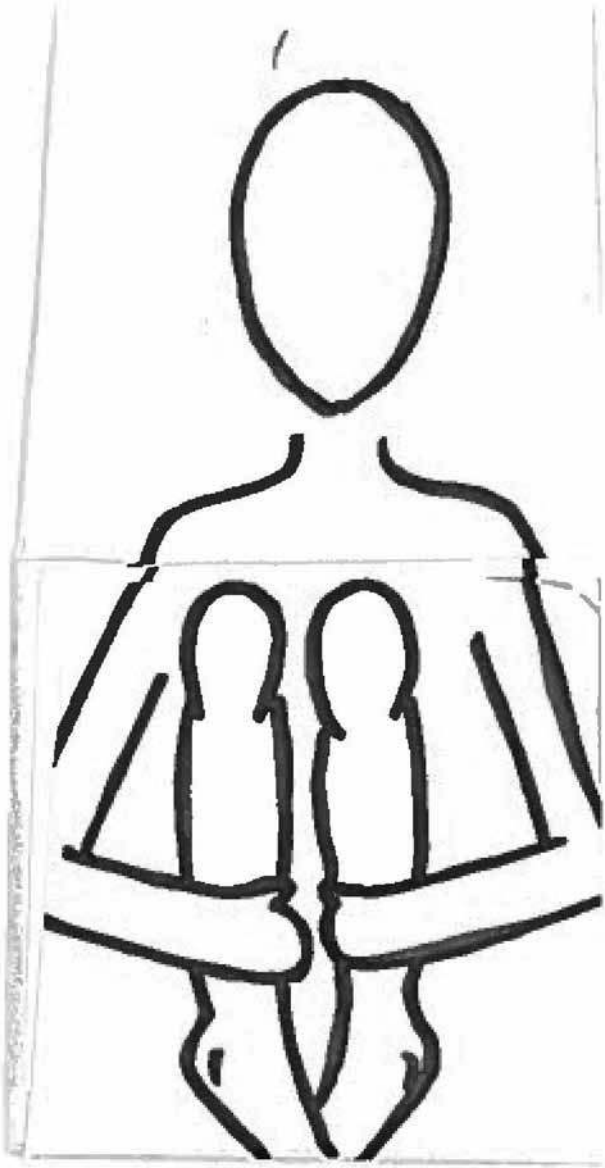


fig. 3. *#10* by Sky (folded).

fig. 4. *#10* by Sky (unfolded).


I accept others
the way
they are.

The representational strategy of simultaneously revealing and hiding personal information in zines becomes clear when we look at the example of *Doris*, an autobiographical zine written by Cindy Crabb. Crabb gives the reader insight into her daily life, her emotions, and what is happening around her. Especially important to Crabb is to situate her anarchist beliefs within her personal history and context. The image taken here is from issue 25 of *Doris*, titled *Questions* (see fig. 5). In this issue, Crabb answers questions that are sent in by her interested readers who would like to know more about her life. In the excerpt that I will analyse, Crabb sets up an intimate confessional space, while at the same time making the information difficult to access.

In response to the question "What Are Your Secret Habits?" Crabb creates a handwritten response in eight small drawn panels. For each "secret" she reveals, she includes one of her characteristic cartoons by way of illustration. In this format, Crabb reveals that secretly she likes to wear a tiara when she feels "ugly," and when she "feels bad at everything" she likes to saw wood with a chain saw. In this response, the reader is drawn into an intimate engagement with Crabb as she reveals to us her vulnerable emotions (that she feels bad and ugly sometimes) and even more revealingly perhaps, her coping strategies: that she has developed unconventional methods to console herself.

While these vulnerable disclosures could arguably be published on a different medium such as a blog, the foregrounding of analogue materiality makes the zine a particularly apt medium to express them. The layout of the page contributes to the intimacy of the reading. It is written in the author's own pretty hand, revealing her presence, her trace (Derrida, qtd. in Neef and Van Dijck 63). The handwritten, casual appearance of the zine brings up associations of diary writing, the ultimate transmission of secrets to the page. The spacing of the secrets across the page is uneven, encapsulated within panels with crooked borders and of different sizes. The secret "When no one is around, I listen to new country music" is squashed in between two panels, while "Sometimes I prune back my moustache so it's not so big" is placed in a small panel in the middle. Right at the end of the page, bottom right corner, Crabb reveals her deepest secret: "I guess my biggest secret habit is that I pray. Not to an all-knowing God and not to any culture

fig. 5. "Questions" from *Doris 25* by Cindy Crabb.

I've stolen. Just to something, some part inside me or to whatever force gives me ESP with my sister" (12).

In this part of the page, the writing has become cramped in order to fit into the corner. As we get to the secret which is most significant to Crabb, it becomes most hard to read. With its irregular layout, the page of secrets cannot be read quickly but must be scrutinised carefully in order to make sure that we have captured everything, unlocked every snatch of text. This alternative layout represents the unique capability of graphic narrative to create complexity on the page through the meeting of image and text.

As Anna Poletti has pointed out, the accessibility of the zine medium is often confused with its message (*Intimate Ephemera* 29). The fact that *Doris* is created by hand, messily put together, and typed can seem like evidence of an unedited, open communication. It is important to remember that this authenticity is staged, mediated by the author rather than inherent to the form. While Crabb's "secret habit" page seems like an authentic, private communication because of its appearance (handwriting, uneven lines) and because of the quirky specificity of the secrets themselves, Crabb also playfully questions the very concept of a secret through the act of revelation. By confessing to her whole community of readers, she is essentially making these *public* secrets, a contradiction in terms. In addition, her use of frivolous cartoons as illustration subverts the seriousness of the confessional, making this a light-hearted confession.

While reading Crabb's zine may feel like stumbling upon somebody's diary, it differs from a diary in that it is designed to be read by others, creating a "currency of intimacy" (Piepmeier 75) because she is choosing to share something so personal. However, zine texts cannot be read by just anybody. As printed objects with small print runs and unconventional distribution pathways, zines are usually only found by people "in the know": people who belong to a certain subculture where zines are created, or otherwise by people who are looking for them specifically. The fact that zines circulate among these selective paths and cannot be easily copied means that writers publish them to a constricted, limited public of readers. This mode of restricted publishing is unusual in digital publishing, where the format of the

sites is designed for "sharing" rather than privacy, and where personal narratives become "content" which is commodified by whichever platform they are published on.

Vulnerability Disclosure: Personal Narrative as Data

The specific experience of vulnerability that we undergo each time we post something online is captured beautifully in the term "vulnerability disclosure," which is a technological term to describe a leak in the security system of a website. This phrase is also very apt for describing the vulnerability of those publishing online, where "leaks" are intentionally, not accidentally, built into the design of digital platforms. Social media researcher Zizi Papacharissi suggests that in our contemporary media ecology, privacy is now a luxury commodity. Privacy is defined by Papacharissi not as "secrecy," but rather as "personal autonomy" in deciding what to share (84). She argues that as individuals we have always had to share aspects of our private selves in order to be social. What is new in social networking sites is that the autonomy to decide what is revealed, and to whom, is eroded by incomprehensible and hard-to-navigate "privacy guidelines" which serve to collect and then commodify personal information:

> It is not just the personal information that is traded, but also the right to privacy in return for a formula of sociality and publicity presented by the social network site. Byte by byte, our personal information is exchanged as currency to gain digital access to our own friends. In this manner, personal information is commercialized into the public realm, with little input from the individual in the process. (84)

When a personal note to a friend congratulating her on a new pregnancy results in an influx of adverts for nappies and midwife services on your newsfeed, it becomes tangibly evident that your personal information has been scanned for key words and commodified as data, even though the scanning program may have misread in whose body the fetus was

located. It may seem harmless to get unwanted baby adverts, but the larger implications are dire. It is evidence of our location within a system in which surveillance has become common, constant, and mundane.

This system represents the disciplinary apparatus of what Deleuze has termed a "control society." Deleuze claims that disciplinary control is no longer asserted primarily through institutions such as the school, prison, or hospital. Modifying Foucault's theory for a neoliberal age, he argues that control is asserted through dispersed, unenclosed modes of perpetual surveillance which are made possible by computers, in which information is "harvested" continuously, and individuals are treated as "dividuals" or data:

> The numerical language of control is made of codes that mark access to information, or reject it. We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals become "dividuals," and masses, samples, data, markets, or "banks" […]. The societies of control operate with […] computers, whose passive danger is jamming and whose active one is piracy and the introduction of viruses. (Deleuze 5–6)

Deleuze's tracing of the transition of individuals to "data" shows how personal narrative becomes "content." Essentially, with the publication of data on social networking sites we lose the possibility of choosing our publics, or directing communication to a specific, counterpublic readership (Warner 86). While a site like *Facebook* may offer the illusion of such control by allowing the user to choose which information will be seen by which friends, we are always aware that there are other "eyes" present—those of a surveillance apparatus. This apparatus has the right to give our information both to commercial companies, and also to the police or other such disciplinary authorities. In the fever pitch of fears about terrorism, it has now even become suspicious *not* to have a *Facebook* account and voluntarily offer yourself up for such surveillance.

While zines leave a paper trail, they leave no record of location or author unless the author chooses to share this information. This means

that it is a medium which offers a possibility for anonymity, something that is increasingly under threat in online publishing. When the Internet first emerged for widespread public use in the early 1990s, it was theorized as a realm in which individuals could experiment with and inhabit multiple, shifting identities. Referring specifically to role-playing games like MUDS, Sherry Turkle claimed that the Internet made possible "the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion" (12).

The role-playing games which Turkle spoke so rapturously about in the 1990s are still available on the Internet, but arguably the wave of Web 2.0 social networking technology has ushered in a new understanding of the Internet and identity. Now the playfulness with which people experimented with identity has given way to the need for an "authentic" digital identity, one that corresponds to who you are in real life. This issue has become fraught again in reference to *Facebook*, where a new policy change has meant that users are now required to use their real names. This has caused tumultuous resistance from queer and transgender users among others, who for reasons of safety may not be able to use their real name.[5] For those users who have an alternative or stigmatized identity this demand to be "authentic" can make the sharing of personal narratives online a true "vulnerability disclosure." With the erosion of the possibility for choosing what to share, with whom, and when, it becomes almost impossible to circulate counterpublic narratives safely.

In contrast, in zine writing it is possible to write anonymously, and "off the grid." As paper publications, zines are very difficult to commodify in the form of data. That fact is continuously frustrating to researchers like myself, attempting to make authoritative quantitative claims about zine production. Perhaps there were thousands of zines published in print runs of twenty, which were distributed and then disappeared. It is impossible to tell. While this elusiveness may be very frustrating for researchers, it is also testament to the fact that in zine writing at least, content is not "logged." Mimi Nguyen points to this

5. See Emanuella Grinberg, "Facebook 'Real Name' Policy Stirs Questions Around Identity."

"untrackable" quality of zine writing as being key to why she still works in this medium:

> [Zines] shape a different relationship for me to creative and intellectual labor. I am not compensated for my labor-time, I don't receive quantifiable forms of recognition in terms of numbers in circulation or for professional promotion. That's why the Race Riot zines are still the best things I've ever made. No matter how numerous the copies or readers are, its impact is unquantifiable, discontinuous, and untrackable. (Nguyen, "(Un)productivity in the Digital Age")

This analysis of zine writing in the context of developments in digital publishing offers a new perspective on media divergence, and the choices of writers to use zines to communicate personal and sometimes subversive narratives. Not only does the material body of the zine offer a wealth of representational possibilities for expressing personal narratives, the materiality of the zine also facilitates the creation of a limited, counterpublic readership.

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