

Leadership Letter for Global MIL

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Self Representation and Media Literacy

How we see ourselves and how we wish others to see us may be two different images, and media, particularly social media, encourages a differentiation that sometimes widens the gap between who we are and what we project to others. Today, the saying “To thy own self be true” may elicit various versions of self that make a true self hard to discern or engage with.

Identity today is wrapped up in notions of personal brands – values or lifestyles or points of view that we associate with and wish others to associate us with. There is an objectification of self that wasn’t usually possible in the past, when it was highly exceptional to be profiled or to have a readily-accessible public record.

But today, many aspects of ourselves -- our behaviors, attitudes, financial condition, politics and fashion preferences -- are constantly objectified, quantified, commodified, commercialized and monetized whether we know it or not – or whether we welcome such revelations. This is a profound shift, and one which people are often accepting without challenge.

We have been conditioned to measure inputs and outcomes and today, such measurement extends to the essence of who we are and how we relate to the world. Our credit scores determine what we may borrow at what rate, and who trusts us financially, and now, in China, this notion of scoring extends to a social scoring system that rewards certain behaviors – such as buying nappies for babies online, presumably as a responsible parent – or punishes others, for frowned-upon behaviors such as playing videogames for hours on end. (See Resources on p.12 for more information)

Furthermore, people are voluntarily contributing and promoting systems for profiling and quantifying themselves, as the popularity of Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and other platforms attests. Individuals are providing the data and the content for their profiles, and fueling enormous databases that measure, interpret, aggregate, report and score the information that individuals willingly share – generally with little notion of how the data will be used or monetized, or how we might control or profit from our own data.

In this issue, we explore new notions of identity from a sociological and psychiatric perspective. How we represent ourselves – to ourselves and to others – is essential to our humanity. By better understanding the impact of our mediated selves on our interactions and our self-image, we see how media influences the essence of our being.

Interview Highlights

Interview with Joseph E. Davis, Professor, Cultural Sociologist



Joseph E. Davis is Research Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia and Director of the Picturing the Human Colloquy at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. His most recent book, co-edited with Ana Marta González, is To Fix or to Heal: Patient Care, Public Health, and the Limits of Biomedicine (New York University Press, 2016). He is currently completing a book, tentatively titled, After Psychology: Biology, Suffering, and the Quest for Self-Mastery.

Center for Media Literacy (CML): Would you please tell us a bit about your research?

Joseph Davis (JD): I'm a cultural sociologist, which means I attend to questions of the symbolic and moral dimensions of human life and society. The moral involves our whole relation to the good, so not just matters of right and wrong in the narrow sense of a moral code, but also legitimate aspirations, acceptable ways of living, valued status attributes, and other types of social norms. Since these norms are often implicit and unspoken, a common research strategy is to identify places where the norms or rules become visible, such as when they are broken. I've focused on psychiatric categories—depression, social anxiety, and the like—for this reason. These categories illuminate what it means to be “normal” by defining what it means to be disordered or outside the norm. It's in the infraction—being anxious or depressed or attention deficit—that you actually see the rules and norms we live by. The norms of what it means to be a “good” self.

CML: In your work, you have discussed how the aspects of ourselves that we value have changed since the 1950s, from placing value on connection with institutions to more individuated self-expression.

JD: Yes. If we go back even further in time, to simple, small-scale societies, the problem of self-identification just never arises—everyone knows your name. But as society has grown more complex, institutions have become more fluid and changeable, and much of private life has become a matter of chosen lifestyles that people have to self-consciously define. Sociologists have observed a series of changes in the locus of the self or the personality structure since the 1950s. At first, the shifts were in response to changes in the modes of work and family life. Then, more recently, in terms of media, especially electronic technologies. Over this period, definitions of self have shifted away from being grounded in traditions or institutional identities—thinking of ourselves in terms of socially defined roles, like “father” and “professor”—to being grounded in terms of life choices made from among a number of options. Increasingly, people conceive of their lives as something they must create or make up with primary reference to their own preferences, desires, or choices.

CML: Can you offer an example of that?

JD: Think of high school. A high school age young woman recently told me that the ideal of successful “being”—a good self—was to be able to walk into the cafeteria and have everyone know who you are. Not that you know them, but they know you, like a celebrity. Some of this is in terms of familiar categories—star athlete, lead actor, best looking—but the obligation to stand out, to distinguish yourself from others, rests on everyone. Each, and at younger ages, is struggling to make up a life *out of themselves* that others will take notice of and even envy. Instead of imparting a way of life to our kids—the old parental task involving traditions and roles—parents now seem to position themselves as resource managers for their children’s “self-making” projects, like agents whose job is to foster their clients’ standing and interests. It is the child’s job to “find their passion” and then “live up to their potential.” But while no particular direction is given, there is the clear expectation of worldly success. The language of potential is about possibilities, not limits. “You choose your shtick but, darn it, you better be pretty good at it!” Perhaps not surprisingly, levels of anxiety and depression are off the charts for young people.

CML: Isn’t it sort of a delicate balance? There is that classic example of the child who was always told by his or her parents, “you are going to grow up and be a doctor.” And then, the child becomes an adult with absolutely no desire to be a doctor, but still feels compelled to meet the parental expectations.

JD: I think times have changed, though children of recent immigrants are an exception. In my experience interviewing college students whose parents had very particular expectations for their career choice—and such parents are now pretty rare—deviating from those expectations was not a great struggle. They reported little trouble telling their parents, for example, “That’s not working out, I’m going to be a journalist instead.” And, they reported that their parents accepted the change. What I have found, interestingly, is that when young people had actual, specific demands placed upon them, they had a much easier time negotiating those demands. It was the open-ended expectation—“We just want you to be all you can be”—that was far more difficult and unforgiving. How does one know if, or when, they are being everything they can be? This uncertainty is a source of great anxiety.

CML: Potential is not finite, so how does one know when they have reached it?

JD: Exactly. Am I living up to my potential? How would I know? There’s no blood test for potential. Instead, this talk creates an ongoing demand to optimize your performance—always having to achieve more. And since the seeming point of all the striving is not to let others or yourself down, there is a corresponding demand to make sure your accomplishments (failures are another matter) are well documented and visible.

CML: That’s interesting in terms of representation. Even very young people today are thinking about their personal brand. Instead of just living their experiences (including those that tie in to “living up to their potential”), they are thinking of how to represent those experiences on social media in order to publicize their self-created selves. In media literacy, we teach people that all

messages are created. We see that in action when, for example, teens post pictures of themselves at a really fun party, but not photos of themselves sitting at home the night of the party to which they weren't invited.

JD: As you rightly imply, Facebook, Instagram, etc. are ways to perform yourself. It's like we're acting in a play, where each of us portrays him or herself in desired ways, demonstrating and confirming the success of our self-making projects. We present ourselves in the best light. An analogous form of representation is the Christmas (holiday) letter. In Christmas letters, you hear about other people's kids. I have three children, two of whom have disabilities, so perhaps my family is particularly sensitive to this. These letters convey just how amazing other peoples' children are—off to Harvard!—and just how much fun they had on their family trip—to found an orphanage in Nepal. There is not much of struggle or suffering in Christmas letters. A lot of social media provide the same sort of forum for people to present a picture of themselves that's heavily curated and airbrushed. The humiliation of not being invited to the party is seldom included.

Curiously, even though we know this, we still use these representations as points of comparison. I've interviewed college students about this, and they know full well that what they see on social media is not a very accurate picture of people's lives. Yet, they still judge themselves against those carefully crafted images. It's very insidious. The sheer fact that something has been posted seems to give that representation a kind of reality. Our own life, which we know from the inside, so to speak, seems so mundane, so unimpressive by comparison.

CML: You touched on something interesting in your Christmas letter example. One of the questions media literacy teaches students to ask is how might different people interpret messages differently. If I'm writing about my child's scholarship to Harvard, or a family vacation in Nepal, how might that be absorbed differently by different audiences?

JD: That is a good question. I think it is fair to say that most of us—of all ages—don't really consider how people with different viewpoints or life circumstances might be affected by our messages, by our efforts at impression management. That management is for our sake, not theirs. I can see where media literacy education could help foster that kind of awareness.

CML: In terms of commodifying the self, we are creating this airbrushed life through social media platforms. Those images are being used to make important determinations about us. Employers check social media pages when deciding whom to hire. Customers search profiles when deciding with whom to do business. Even when choosing dates or new friends, people check social media platforms. Do you believe we are turning ourselves into something that is branded and sold?

JD: I do, and this process is increasingly shaping a way of relating to ourselves as a kind of object. Maintaining a Facebook page involves a form of disengagement. It's as though you're

looking at someone else, or, more accurately, at some *thing* that can be sculpted and molded from the outside, a persona or mask that you can put on and refine. We instrumentalize ourselves, our experience, and even others. I've interviewed students who go to parties for the sole purpose of photographing themselves at the party. The whole point is to circulate the pictures to their networks and enhance their image on social media. Instead of actually enjoying the experience or their class mates, they are capturing it for some quite different purpose.

CML: In a way, they are at the party, but working—working on their personal brand.

JD: Yes, and when we talk about the commodification of the self, those things that are being captured literally are being commodified with or without our permission. Businesses are looking at our sites and saying, “Oh, well, this is a guy who has six videos of himself hiking.” Then they bombard the guy with ads for hiking equipment. Many young people I've interviewed aren't concerned about that. They say, “Well, everything's public now. You are just going to have to deal with whatever consequences come your way. There's no sense in fighting it.” But that is wrong. Granted, I'm an old guy and not even on social media, but I still think there is room to resist. Do not acquiesce to this.

CML: We have a generation that's never known anything different. Part of the complacency may lie in that fact. There is a fine line between asking, “How might different audiences interpret this information differently?” and “How might different audiences *use* this information differently?” Basically, people are allowing themselves, in some ways, to become products to be consumed.

JD: Education can help us to fight back. We need to learn to ask the right questions and think critically about how we live. One small example: In her book *The Body Project*, Joan Jacobs Brumberg quotes from the diary entries of two adolescent girls who lived nearly 100 years apart. Each girl is making resolutions for how she will improve herself in the coming year. The girl living in the 1890s writes that she will listen more, talk less about herself, and interest herself more in others. For her, becoming a better person involves an inward change and more attention to others. The girl living in the 1980s, by contrast, writes about how she's going to lose weight, get new lenses, and work on her wardrobe and accessories. In this case, being a better person is focused almost entirely on one's self and self-presentation. In our twenty-first century commodified culture, it is not nostalgia to suggest that we need more exposure to alternative cultural values and moral visions. Constant self-reflexivity and performance is a trap. There are other ways to live.

I believe that an important part of media literacy is to be less dependent upon media – to pay attention to what gives us our humanness in a way that is experienced face-to-face – to get free of that mediated experience where everything is coming to you curated, and experience more of the everyday world. The more you are educated about media, the more you use it wisely. Sometimes, that means turning it off.

Interview with Andreas Bernard, Professor for Cultural Studies



Dr. Andreas Bernard is Professor for Cultural Studies and co-speaker of the Centre for Digital Cultures. He studied Literary Criticism and Cultural Studies in Munich and wrote his dissertation on the History of the Elevator at Bauhaus University Weimar (2005). He was a Scientific Assistant in Weimar (2002-2005) and at University of Constance (2007-2010). In 2012, he was a Fellow at Centre for Literary and Cultural Research (ZfL) in Berlin. Between 1995 and 2014 he was an editor and author of Süddeutsche Zeitung in Munich. He has authored several books, including: Persons of Interest: The Status of the Self in Digital Cultures (S. Fischer Verlag, 2017).

Center for Media Literacy (CML): Andreas, how did you become interested in this work?

Andreas Bernard (AB): A strange paradox prompted my interest in profiling. About 20-25 years ago, profiling was typically conducted by authorities like the police or scientists, trying to identify and classify subjects, like criminals and lunatics. Then, with the rise of the internet in the early 90s, something very radical happened. The way profiles were shaped turned around 180 degrees. Since then, people have increasingly documented their profiles voluntarily to advance their careers, social integration and friendships. I wanted to understand how it came to be that, in a few years, the history of profiling throughout the whole 20th century was being shaped in this very new way.

CML: What were some of the first signs that you saw of this change in profiling?

AB: There are some good examples in various fields. The first is online dating. Match.com is still, I think, the biggest online dating service. It has existed since 1995. A second example goes back to the early history of social media. In 1997, there was a website called SixDegrees.com. It was founded in New York and by 2001, it already had about 3 million users. The third field was focused on job searches. This started early, as well -- around the mid-90s. These applications changed the perception around profiling from something that was focused on classifying criminals to something that people do for themselves because it is beneficial to them.

CML: What kinds of attitude changes do you see now, and how has that influenced your point of view and your research?

AB: Now, self-created profiles are so ubiquitous that the absence of having one produces suspicion for younger people. For example, there were two terrible shootings in 2012. One was a shooting in a cinema in Denver, and the other was a school shooting in Connecticut. After those tragedies, people were debating about how these terrible crimes could be prevented by monitoring suspicious people in advance. There were new signs of suspicion that arose about the mental stability of these shooters because they didn't have profiles on

social networks. This is really a very big change, because in the 20th century, it was only criminals or lunatics who would have been profiled. Now, in the early 21st century, it's the other way around. It's true in the employment sphere, too. I've spoken with recruiters from large companies, and they say that now, if you don't have a profile on LinkedIn, it's absolutely impossible to get a job.

In the past, profiling people always meant to classify and identify dangerous people. Today, if a person says, "having a profile restricts my freedom," they are immediately suspicious.

CML: The whole idea of labeling and categorizing people with their profiles is not only an issue of privacy, but it is also about identity and how identity is labeled, accepted, rejected, included, or marginalized. In a sense, by sharing a profile, we're also making ourselves very vulnerable to the judgments of other people who are going to use that information. It's branding. But, because a profile is readily available, we are taking on a different kind of risk.

AB: If you're longing for something like secrecy, or mystery, or not being classified, or identified -- that has become very, very difficult. Today, you have to have profiles for reasons such as maintaining friendships and personal connections, and to have a sense of identifiability. On the other side, it is also a risk to put so much personal and private information into the public via the net -- through networks and profiles. Maybe younger people -- or most people -- aren't aware of what they are making public. My work is to bring these things into consciousness in terms of historical analysis.

CML: Profiling is an indicator of how participation in our society is being redefined by media and the technology that's available to us. Participation as a citizen has changed, and it's partially being defined by these profiles.

AB: Yes, because in our digital culture, you can find various spheres where you see the same tendencies. Not only are profiles visible, you also see the use of location services on smartphones. It's simple to track your own location, whereas in the past, these technologies and techniques were used to look only for criminals or enemies. In previous generations, measuring your heartbeat, blood pressure, sweating -- that was what a lie detector test did. Now, we measure these biometrics during a jog around our neighborhoods.

CML: So many innovations start with the military as tools of enforcement. Now, paradoxically, they're tools of empowerment.

AB: Exactly. How did it come to pass that the promise of self-empowerment and free identity is reached by using techniques that have their roots in enforcement and social control? It's an enormous paradox. People take part in voluntary profiling by the millions; these activities are now normalized. In the last 20 or 30 years, ideas of competition have been implemented in many fields where there wasn't any competition in the past. I remember when I was a kid, all the fast food restaurants began recognition programs for "the worker of the

month.” People started to be in competition all the time. For example, in schools and universities, we are constantly in competition. Then if you get a job, it’s only for one or two years, and you’re already in competition to land your next position. Since the 1970s, professional careers have become less secure, and that has increased the desire for quantification. One hypothesis of my research is to say that there is a connection between economic development and social development. The success of digital media and devices and their performance is so huge because they encourage the insecure self, which has to be constantly in competition for a new job, and remaining “on the market” for this and that. It supplies the insecure self with a system of measurement, qualifications and profiles that makes the self more secure – or that is the hope anyway. This is the parallel of development and economics since the 1970s, 1980s, as well as the development of digital media.

CML: It’s a commodification of the self.

AB: Absolutely.

CML: It seems that one of the downsides is – by labeling and cataloging – there’s less fluidity. It makes it more difficult to escape labels. The quantification contributes to a fixed idea of the self, almost like a product that can be measured, improved, perfected and solved.

AB: The commodification of the self is exactly what my research is about. Think of the novel *1984*. It was written in the late 1940s about an authoritarian regime that suppresses the people and makes them homogenous, which in turn makes them sad, fragile and exploited through ubiquitous displays and controls. What do we have today? Exactly the same ubiquitous displays and controls right on people’s phone or wristbands. But there is no despotic regime involved, because we submit to these controls voluntarily. That’s a shift that any culture or media critic could not have perceived 30 years ago. We submit to controls voluntarily, and we think it’s good for ourselves. But, the techniques come from a very disturbing tradition.

CML: The Chinese are now experimenting with a social control system via the internet. There, an authoritarian regime is attempting to impose controls over behavior through use of social media.

AB: If you look at the social score system in China, it works with a lot of voluntary features. For example, if you donate to an approved charity, your social score immediately becomes better. Even in China, you have a mixture of a despotic super-imposed financial structure along with mandatory external surveillance and internal voluntary surveillance.

CML: In regards to rule of law and personal property rights: what protections do we have, and what kind of movement is there toward further safeguards? When criminals and marginalized people were being pursued and profiled, typically, these records were very private, and only certain people had access to them. In that sense, there was, for lack of a better word,

protection. But today, it is the opposite. When we give out our data, we are giving it to companies or the government, and our data is circulated. How do you see that, Andreas?

AB: I have the impression that there is a deeper concern for dealing with data circulations and examining who benefits. But, there is still a big collective drive for self-commodification. Here's an example: let's say you went to a rock concert 20 or 30 years ago. You listened enthusiastically to the music, and you forgot yourself. You wouldn't have thought to save this moment and take a photo. But today, I saw a photo of people at a rock concert, and if there were 5,000 people in the audience, 2,900 had a smartphone in their hands. They were taking photos of the concert for their online profiles. We feel the need to constantly brand ourselves, label ourselves, photograph ourselves, commodify ourselves. It's just a new era.

CML: The question seems to be: if you don't commodify yourself, do you really exist in relationship to others?

AB: Yes, if you put your hashtag in front of everything you write on Twitter or Instagram, you also commodify the language. It turns into a keyword --indicate a trending topic. With the language of online hashtags, you can spot a single tendency. It's the aggregation that happens with advertisers seeking an audience. Then, that labeling and cataloging solidifies parts of our identity. We don't think of our identities as a commodity. But today, they are.



Media Literacy Legislation Signed in California!

CML has been actively supporting media literacy legislation in California, and this month, the dream was realized. Senate bill 830 introduced by Senator Bill Dodd (Napa) was signed by Governor Brown on September 17th. The bill calls for the creation of a website for teachers consisting of tools and resources for media literacy education. It's a first step and we applaud the efforts of Senator Dodd and all media literacy advocates.

Tessa Jolls on Texas Public Radio

CML's Tessa Jolls talks "media diet" on Texas Public Radio. The media conversation begins about eight minutes into the program. <http://www.tpr.org/po.../how-should-you-manage-your-media-diet>



Global Media and Information Literacy Week, Oct. 24-31, 2018 US Media Literacy Week, November 5-9, 2018

Media literacy educators and advocates will celebrate Media Literacy Weeks around the world this fall. Start to plan and spread the word about the importance of media literacy education.

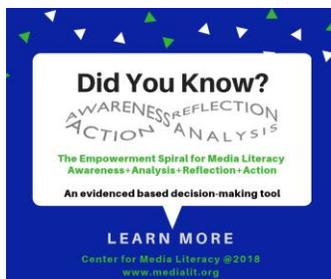


Global MIL Week: *Media and Information Literate Cities: Voices, Powers, and Change Makers*, contact: [UNESCO](#)

US ML Week: *Respect in a Digital World*, contact [NAMLE](#).

Infographics! Please Share

Did you Know? We are highlighting media literacy concepts and information in easy-to-use, easy-to-share formats. [Find more](#).



About Us...

The Consortium for Media Literacy addresses the role of global media through the advocacy, research and design of media literacy education for youth, educators and parents. The Consortium focuses on K-12 grade youth and their parents and communities. The research efforts include nutrition and health education, body image/sexuality, safety and responsibility in media by consumers and creators of products. The Consortium is building a body of research, interventions and communication that demonstrate scientifically that media literacy is an effective intervention strategy in addressing critical issues for youth.

<http://www.consortiumformedia literacy.org>

CONSORTIUM
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Resources for Media Literacy

Representation of Self and Media Literacy Resources

“The commodification of self,” Joseph E. Davis, *The Hedgehog Review*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2003.
<https://www.scribd.com/document/46046888/Com-Modification-of-Self>

[“No, China isn’t Black Mirror – social credit scores are more complex and sinister than that.”](#)
Ed Jefferson, *NewStatesmanAmerica*, Science & Tech, April 27, 2018.

[“The impact of technology on character education.”](#) Tessa Jolls, prepared for US
Department of Education, www.medialit.org, 2008.

[What Teens Really Think About Their Social Media Lives](#), Report by Common Sense Media,
September 2018.

MediaLit Moments

The Question of Polling

Polling, especially around election time, has always been big business but this type of information gathering is also widely used to get a sense of where the public stands regarding an issue, idea, or product. But who's doing the asking? How is the question phrased? And, how is the data presented to the public? These are all factors to consider when reading a poll and this is where questions about author, audience, and purpose can help you interpret the data.

A recent study by Common Sense Media found that teens, when asked, preferred Snapchat and Instagram to Facebook. The authors were intentionally studying teens, but what if you wanted to know about the whole population– would the responses to the same question be different?

Ask students to poll friends and family members about their favorite social media sites.

AHA! Who you ask makes a difference!

Grade Level: 6-8

Key Question #1: Who created this message?

Core Concept #1: Media messages are constructed.

Key Word: Author

Key Question #3: How might different people understand this message differently?

Core Concept #3: Different people experience the same message differently.

Key Word: Audience

Key Question #5: Why is this message being sent?

Core Concept #5: Most messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

Key Word: Purpose

Materials: Discuss the findings of the report on [teen social media use](#), as well as any other examples of polling you want to address (see [Pew Research](#) for more examples). FYI: Polls typically stick to one question with a multiple choice answer. Surveys ask multiple questions with broader range. Review the Key Questions/Core Concepts for Media Literacy.

Activity: Ask your students to poll 15 of their friends and family members --including varying ages and generations-- about their preferred social media sites. Ask students to write down the question they will use to poll their audience, and stress to them the importance of asking exactly the same question to each participant. There should be no attempt by the pollster to influence the responses. Have students tally the results and create a basic bar graph to share with the class. Does the data match their personal views or are they surprised? If they break down the data by age or gender, does the outcome change? Would the outcome change if there were more choices or if the question was phrased differently?

The Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions of media literacy were developed as part of the Center for Media Literacy's MediaLit Kit™ and Questions/TIPS (Q/TIPS)™ framework. Used with permission, © 2002-2018, Center for Media Literacy.