

## Governing Our Sick Souls, Mutilating Our Bodies

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The appropriation of social media as a means of corporeal annihilation,  
resisting the neoliberal logic of self-optimization

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### Abstract

The theory of governmentality assumes a logic of self-optimization and self-regulation to be characteristic of neoliberal societies. This research paradigm has been widely used to analyze social and political phenomena (biopower and biopolitics) and has also been productively applied to cultural phenomena, such as media technologies which can be interpreted as tools to promote and produce narratives in accordance with the idea of leading a valuable life for the common weal. There are digital phenomena, however, which do not seem to follow this logic of optimization, but on the contrary offer instruments of self-destruction and annihilation. In particular anorexia, the deliberate infection with HIV, suicide and the mutilation of bodies contradict this allegedly universal will to improve. Within the theoretical framework of governmentality, the limits of the universal ideal of self-optimization (N.B. a normative system of values) become visible, as these phenomena are extraordinary examples of an oppositional appropriation, resisting the powers of set values being exerted on post-modern subjects.

### Keywords

governmentality; body; self regulation; digital media; social media

### Discussion

The Foucauldian notion of governmentality (Foucault 1991) describes a complex mode of power exercised through self-regulation of supposedly ‘free’ subjects in neoliberal societies. Subjects are produced and produce themselves within a framework of *Life Politics* (Giddens 1991) around questions of how to live valuable and morally justifiable lives against the background of the common weal. A universal and paradoxically free “will to improve” (Li 2007) necessitates subjects to succumb to the prevalent regime of power, urging us to “govern our souls,” even “life itself” (Rose 1990, 2007).

While pathological minds and bodies have always been intensely subjected to power and politics, they have become much more visible in recent years: Coping with depression; watching your sexual health; preventing cancer; healthy lifestyles and the war against obesity; pre-implantation genetic diagnostics in in-vitro-fertilization; calculating genetic risk and proactive breast amputation; optimization of self through therapy; or biopolitics and incentives for reproduction. They all have in common that they inherently perpetuate normative schemes of self-regulation and self-optimization and along the way stigmatize certain allegedly ‘deficient’ identities or social groups entirely.

Due to these developments the concept of governmentality and ideas around a neoliberal logic of optimization, life politics and biopower have in recent years become increasingly influential (e.g. Nadesan 2011, Walter 2012). They have proved to be fruitful points of reference for many cultural phenomena with the internet in particular, as its rise is generally said to be closely intertwined with discourses of liberation, power and knowledge. This becomes particularly visible in phenomena related to the notions of the self and the body. The initial narrative of liberation attached to networked communication in the 1990s (discourses of ‘free’ virtual communities bodies and identities) has in light of governmentality been succeeded by a counter-narrative of biopower. Digital culture is in this

respect seen as a means of subtle self-regulation, towards the optimization of the body and the self and as a consequence can on a larger scale be interpreted as a neoliberal way of government.

While the media, especially television, have come under scrutiny for promoting narratives of desirable selves (e.g. Gergen 1996) and at the same time provide powerful technologies of the self (Foucault 1988), digital media seem to slowly become an even more powerful site of enforcing sharp self-regulation. They appear to be closely linked to governmentality's mechanisms of producing, controlling, diagnosing and perfecting 'deficient' selves and bodies: (1) Universal measuring of defined parameters of a 'normal' body (weight, hours of sleep, calorie intake, etc.), promoted for example by the QuantifiedSelf-Movement, corresponds to the idea of self-health-management; (2) the idea of depression preventing the self from being a productive part of society (Teghtsoonian 2008) is mirrored in digital technologies of mood management (e.g. MoodScope.com); (3) the use of social networking sites in HIV awareness campaigns adds digital media technologies to the instruments of self-regulation for already heavily governed subjects (e.g. Elbe 2009, Schenk/Singh 2012); or (4) the idea of sexual liberation is contradicted by the tendency of an ever more powerful homogenization of sex and love (Illouz 2007; c.f. O'Brian/Shapiro 2000).

### **Thesis**

Within the framework of governmentality theories, however, there are (digital) phenomena, which seem to contradict this widely-diagnosed logic of optimization and can thusly be interpreted as valid forms of resistance in their own right – albeit the thought of self-regulation still plays a major role.

The idea of an in any sense 'deficient' self or body, it must be noted, is always a normative concept, in this case being valid only in terms of a neoliberal assessment of the value attributed to subjects as commodities. These selves and bodies are measured against the backdrop of predefined ideas of perfection (beauty, health, productivity, happiness, fulfillment, fertility etc.) and are products of the mechanisms of power described by governmentality theories. Within this theoretical framework, a self needs to necessarily find its place within pre-existing semiotic and performative discourses and structures of power/knowledge (Foucault 1980, Butler 1990). In other words, only by appropriating existing systems of representations (and thus power), do we succeed in becoming subjects. Succinctly put, appropriation in this sense seems in part to equal subjugation.

There are, however, ways of appropriating digital media which renounce the normative notion of optimizing the self. In these cases, subjects may be said to use social media as a technology to construct a self – indeed still in a regulatory manner, yet not in a neoliberal logic of progress, but instead a defeatist logic of annihilation. This refractory construction of self bears subversive potential (cf. Butler 1997), as it resists the dominant narratives and measuring marks of how to live a 'good' life. Examples of this are:

1. The Pro Ana movement which maintains a considerable digital social network promoting the qualities of anorexia: A powerful regime of self-deprecation and self-annihilation is imposed while highly relying on the subject's will to self-regulate.
2. Suicide forums and manuals which give detailed advice and counseling on how to end one's life most effectively.
3. So-called bug-chasing-networks which enable people to find HIV-positive partners in order to deliberately get infected with the HI virus. This can be interpreted as subjects deliberately seeking to adopt an identity which is widely regarded as 'abnormal' and 'pathological'. This pursuit of becoming an 'other' means resisting dominant narratives of a desirable self.
4. A new amateur culture of participatory pornography ostensibly reinforces the notion of sexual liberation. However, the exposed bodies succumb to highly regulated performative acts, their corporeal integrity being visibly mutilated.

These phenomena illustrate a counter-narrative against neoliberal homogenization. Even though the regulation of self undeniably still plays a major role, the narrative of optimization seems in these cases to have been inverted. Subjects choose to construct a self within narrative patterns the dominant discourse denounces as destructive, pathological, dangerous and utterly wrong. This choice reflects a will to improve in a different direction (which is equally legitimate) and can thusly be seen as a form of resistance.

Social media sites in this regard seem to offer a unique environment for the regulation of self to become extraordinarily powerful. Here the mechanisms of governmentality, regulation and resistance find themselves combined with a medium which carries a bias of the non-fictional (the 'real' self) and offers detailed taxonomies of the self. There are two reasons in particular the theorization of social media needs to be broadened in this respect: First, through new mobile media such as smartphones and tablets, the documentation and regulation of the self in digital social media has finally become truly ubiquitous; and second, this real-time documentation triggers new forms of public certification of the self, authentication and surveillance.

## Conclusion

The examples discussed are part of a counter-narrative to the logic of self-optimization. They cannot be simply dismissed as part of an 'abnormal other,' on the contrary, they need to be acknowledged as cultural phenomena of resistance against dominating (and necessarily judgmental) ideas of optimization. While the idea of neoliberal biopower can in no way be discarded altogether, its reach does in no way seem to be universal. In this respect, the role of social media as tools of regulation/resistance needs to be revised.

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