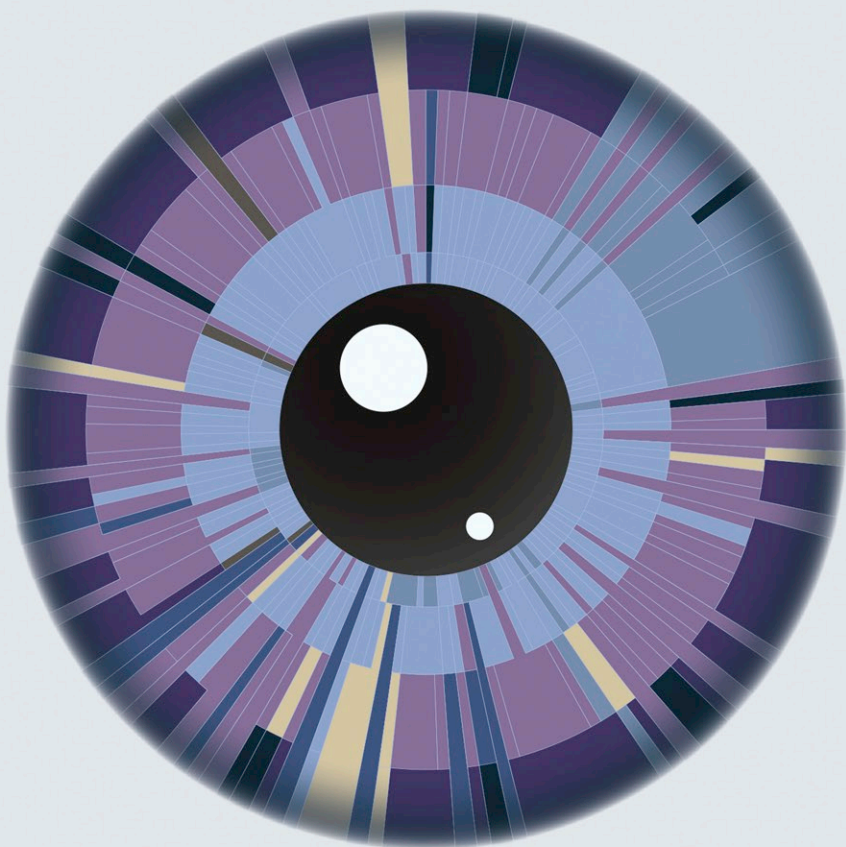# The Triumph of Profiling

The Self in Digital Culture

Andreas Bernard

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Profiles: The Development of a Format

An old political debate reopened when, within just a few months in 2012, the United States was shocked by two mass shootings, one in a movie theatre in Denver and the other at an elementary school in Connecticut. The question was whether there might be better ways to identify potential perpetrators in advance so as to prevent similar atrocities from happening in the future. To the familiar suspicious signs – the introverted nature of the predominantly male offenders, their social isolation, and their history of psychiatric treatment – was now added an additional criterion: the reluctance of the killers to participate on social media. As reporters were quick to point out, neither James Eagan Holmes nor Adam Lanza had a profile on Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn. Like the Norwegian Anders Breivik, who had committed a similar crime the year before, Holmes and Lanza refused to join the internet's omnipresent portals for communication and self-representation, and this refusal was being characterized as a warning sign. Recruitment managers at large companies reminded the public that it was now a common practice to look at the online profiles of job applicants and that an applicant's complete absence from social networks was highly peculiar. This opinion found support in a 2011 study conducted by the Canadian psychiatrist Richard Bélanger, who discovered a "u-shaped association" between internet activity

and the mental health of adolescents: "Health care providers should thus be alerted both when caring for adolescents who do not use the Internet or use it rarely, as well as for those who are online several hours daily."[1] In today's digital culture, as this discussion makes clear, it is now a matter of irritation when people of a certain age have neglected to create a public double of themselves online in the form of profiles, status updates, comments, and so on. In the Western world, this abstinence has even become the first indication of psychiatric abnormality, perhaps of a mental illness or possibly of a latent pathological impulse that might one day be discharged in a harrowing act of violence. Conversely, the regular use of social media is now regarded as evidence of good health and normality.

My reflections in this book about the status of the self in digital culture are concerned with the methods, services, and devices that have become ubiquitous and, in light of their daily use, have increasingly come to seem like a natural disposition. In the history of the representation of subjectivity, however, they are in fact an astonishingly recent development. Anyone who attended school or university just a quarter-century ago will remember how few options were available then for representing one's own personality, preferences, and convictions to the public – a patch on the back of a jacket, a few lines beneath one's yearbook picture, or an expensive personal ad that would run for just one day in the local newspaper. This minimal radius of publicity for anyone without constant access to the mass media was still the invariable reality at the beginning of the 1990s, and yet those years now feel like a distant and unfamiliar epoch.

In no time at all – Facebook became open to everyone in the fall of 2006, and there have been smartphones since 2007 and app stores since 2008 – a comprehensive digital culture has emerged whose manifestations have been studied, celebrated, or demonized by journalists and academics on an ongoing basis. The origins of this culture in the history of knowledge, however, have seldom been discussed (and when they have been, it has been from the perspective of computer science). The aim of this book is to trace back just such a genealogy in order to demonstrate how digital media technologies have been embedded in the history of the human

sciences. Ultimately, what is most striking about today's methods of self-representation and self-perception – the profiles of social media, but also the various locational functions on smartphones or the bodily measurements of the "quantified-self movement" – is the fact that they all derive from methods of criminology, psychology, or psychiatry that were conceived at various points since the end of the nineteenth century. Certain techniques for collecting data, which were long used exclusively by police detectives or scientific authorities to identify suspicious groups of people, are now being applied to everyone who uses a smartphone or social media. Biographical descriptions, GPS transmitters, and measuring devices installed on bodies are no longer just instruments for tracking suspected criminals but are now being used for the sake of having fun, communicating, making money, or finding a romantic partner.

A conceptual history of the profile in the twentieth century

In this regard, the category of the profile is especially instructive. As is well known, this element plays an essential role in any exchange conducted on social media. The profile of members on LinkedIn, Instagram, or Facebook – the place where they describe themselves and where their personal information, texts, photos, and videos are gathered – is the nodal point of interaction. Thus, even the earliest research devoted to social media placed the profile at the heart of its analysis. In her influential essays about Friendster, for instance, Danah Boyd repeatedly takes this element as her starting point. One of her pieces from 2006, co-written with Jeffrey Heer, begins as follows: "Profiles have become a common mechanism for presenting one's identity online."[2] To the creators of a profile, who are simultaneously its object, Boyd thus attributes a high degree of sovereignty. They enjoy complete autonomy in the public representation of their self, and the more original and comprehensive this representation is, the stronger the reaction it will entice from other users of the social network in question: "By paying the cost of carefully crafting an interesting profile," as Boyd and Judith Donath

concluded about Friendster in 2004, "one can make more connections."[3] In her essays, Boyd frequently describes the practice of self-formation as an "identity performance," and she stresses that this creative and productive activity has "shifted the Profile from being a static representation of self to a communicative body in conversation with the other represented bodies."[4] This is therefore the great promise of the format: It is a free and self-determined space in which its creators can set the scene with a desirable, more or less honest, and more or less polished public persona.

Yet despite all of this, it should not be forgotten that, a mere 20 to 25 years ago, only serial killers and madmen were the objects of such profiles. Over the past quarter-century, this form of knowledge – this pattern for describing human beings – has experienced a rapid and profound transformation. In light of its use today, it would thus be informative to engage with the historical semantics of the concept. In which contexts and at which point in time did the written profile emerge? Who was its author, who was its object, and why was it created? In the sense of a "short, vivid biography outlining the most outstanding characteristics of the subject," as the 1968 edition of Webster's dictionary defines it,[5] the term has a relatively young history (German dictionaries and encyclopedias would not adopt this definition until later on). In the early modern era, the word "profile" was first used in architectural and geological contexts and denoted the contours of buildings or mountain ranges; in the eighteenth century, it also came to mean the side view of a face. It was apparently not until the early twentieth century that the profile was understood in the sense of a tabulated or schematic outline providing information about a person.

If my impression is correct, the word first appeared with this meaning as a technical term in the work of the Russian neurologist Grigory I. Rossolimo, who published an article in 1910 titled "Psychological Profiles." In this study, which was translated into German after the First World War and adopted by a number of psychologists, Rossolimo designed a procedure for measuring certain aptitudes among children – their attention span, memory capacity, associative ability, and so on – on a scale of one to ten. At the end of this testing procedure, according to Rossolimo, all of the "data points,

which represented various levels of development, could be plotted on a diagram and connected to form a curve that would represent a detailed psychological profile" of the subject in question.[6] In Russia, these values were used above all to place children with behavioral problems into the appropriate types of schools. "The psychological profile," as Karl Bartsch noted in his adaptation of the method, "enables us to analyze and clarify the functions of the juvenile mind, and it reveals avenues toward the proper therapeutic and pedagogical treatment of diagnosed disorders."[7]

From the beginning, then, the epistemic interest of the profile consisted in providing evaluative information about the identity and behavior of deviant subjects. Bartsch, who refined the interpretation of Rossolimo's procedures and referred to his young patients as "psychopaths," asked the following about an ill-behaved child with a long history of behavioral problems: "Who can understand him without knowing his psychological profile?" He even calculated a precise relationship between a child's "profile curve" and how institutions should react to it: "All children from the age of 7 who do not achieve a profile score of 4," according to Bartsch's recommendation, "should be sent to a school for special education." What was always at stake whenever profiles were created – whenever, as the psychologist Fritz Giese wrote in 1923, "a sort of psychological cross-section could be drawn through human beings" – was the normality and healthiness of those being tested.[8]

Although the "psychological profile" in the sense outlined above went out of fashion around the year 1930, it soon re-emerged in a new context of knowledge from where it would go on to gain widespread popularity in the late twentieth century. After the Second World War, concerted efforts were made in the United States to get to the bottom of unsolved crimes (especially those thought to have been committed by repeat offenders), and these efforts led to increased cooperation between criminologists and psychoanalysts. Just as conventional police work sought to analyze the material clues left at a crime scene in order to come closer to identifying the perpetrator, by means of fingerprints or bullet shells, the forensic-psychological perspective began to concentrate on immaterial and emotional clues – on the question, that is, of

how such things as hatred, anger, rage, passion, or other eruptions of inner feelings might have left traces at the scene of a crime. Although this search for impressions left by the criminal personality – this practice of criminal-psychological ballistics – played a part in solving a number of spectacular serial crimes as early as the 1950s (for instance, the case of New York's "mad bomber," George Metesky), the method was first described as "psychiatric profiling" in a 1962 essay about notorious arsonists by the psychoanalyst Louis Gold.[9]

One major difference distinguished the "psychiatric profile" of criminology from the earlier use of the term in applied psychology: it was now the case that *unknown* persons were meant to be identified by means of this gathering of knowledge. The test was replaced by the manhunt, and a quantifiable scientific statement was replaced by a hypothesis. At this early stage, this new tracking technique depended on the charisma and almost prophetic intuition of individual forensic psychologists such as James Brussel. It was not until the end of the 1970s that "criminal profiles," as they are now known, were formulated in a systematic manner, and this development took place at a newly established division of the FBI called the "Behavioral Science Unit." Here, psychologists and criminologists were tasked with testing new methods in response to the rising crime rate in the United States. Ever since the 1960s, according to the FBI, not only had the number of unsolved murders been growing – statistics showed that cases in which the offender was unknown to the victim had increased from 10 to 30 percent of the total. Richard Ault and James Reese, whose foundational essay on the new method appeared in the in-house journal, the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, made the following observation: "As the crime rate grows in this country and the criminals become more sophisticated, the investigative tools of the police officer must also become more sophisticated. One such sophisticated tool … is the psychological assessment of crime – profiling."[10]

According to Ault and Reese, profiling would enable detectives to decipher the behavioral patterns and motives of criminals on the basis of clues left behind at the scenes of unsolved violent crimes. One of the directors of the Behavioral Science Unit summarized this strategy concisely: "Knowing 'why' will

often tell us 'who.'"[11] From the state of the crime scene, detectives could tell whether the offender's methods were organized or unorganized, and on the basis of this simple difference they could begin to narrow down the possible identity of the unknown criminal. Did he live in the immediate vicinity of the victim? Would his apartment be messy or clean? Were they dealing with an eloquent or socially excluded perpetrator? White or black? Fat or skinny (forensic psychologists were convinced that certain mental illnesses manifested themselves in ascetic eating behavior)? At the beginning of their pioneering article, Ault and Reese claim that a series of seven rapes, each with the same recognizable modus operandi, could be solved within a week after the creation of a criminal profile. The latter might contain some of the following conjectured information: "1) The perpetrator's race, 2) Sex, 3) Age range, 4) Marital status, 5) General employment, 6) Reaction to questioning by police, 7) Degree of sexual maturing, 8) Whether the individual might strike again, 9) The possibility that he/she has committed a similar offense in the past, 10) Possible police record."[12]

In 1980, the FBI's *Law Enforcement Bulletin* was devoted entirely to this new form of tracking. Ault and Reese's article is followed by several others in which the concept of the criminal profile is applied specifically to cases of arson or sexual violence. Moreover, the staff of the Behavioral Science Unit began to conduct a long-term series of psychological interviews with convicted mass murderers. In all of this, the ambition to distill individual mental features from a series of crimes was inextricably tied to the presumed illness of the offender in question. As early as 1962, Louis Gold remarked: "It is generally accepted that a person who sets a fire intentionally is committing an abnormal act. His reasoning at this time is perverse, distorted.... The roots of such perverse and aberrant behavior are deep within the personality and have some relationship to sexual disturbance."[13] Ault and Reese likewise underscored the following point: "It is most important that this investigative technique be confined chiefly to crimes against the person where the motive is lacking and where there is sufficient data to recognize the presence of psychopathology at the crime scenes."[14] Profiles were thus created only when no apparent meaning could be derived

from the crime itself; on the basis of chaotic crime scenes, they were meant to bring to light the rationality and comparability that the wild rage of the perpetrator had initially obscured. "Psychological profiling," as Anthony Rider noted about arsonists in particular, "should be applied only to those cases in which the unknown subject demonstrates some form of mental, emotional, or behavioral disturbance in the crime. Unless there is perceptible psychopathology present in the crime, a profile cannot be rendered on an unknown subject."[15]

For the FBI, the condition of possibility for the criminal profile was thus the insanity of the offender. The number of cases in which this new method was applied in the United States grew rapidly (in 1979 there were only 65, and in 1980 this number already surpassed 200), while in Germany the first criminal profile – commissioned, incidentally, by the FBI – was created in 1984.[16] The method did not receive widespread public attention, however, until the beginning of the 1990s, and this was largely due to the film *The Silence of the Lambs*, in which an FBI agent trained in psychology manages to convict a serial killer. In the wake of this movie, the work of the "profiler" became a phenomenon of popular culture. A few veterans from the Behavioral Science Unit, such as Robert Ressler and John Douglas, published successful memoirs, and their type of activity has since become a fundamental component of numerous crime shows on television, among them *Criminal Minds*, *Millennium*, *Cracker*, and *Profiler*.

What a brief conceptual history of the profile reveals at once is the fact that, for an entire century, this format has been used to describe individuals in situations involving tests or manhunts. In light of Foucault's fundamental insight that, since the late eighteenth century, knowledge about human beings has been generated predominantly by marginal subjects – that the question of how to track down identities or measure bodies was driven above all by the psychiatric registration of the sick and by the police's access to criminals – it can be said that this trend was consolidated in the knowledge format of the profile. Its object was someone under evaluation or being hunted, and its creators were representatives of state authority, police authority, or scientific authority. In the profiles of the twentieth century, the relations of institutional power were realized with particular clarity. To this

extent, the success stories of psychiatry and criminology can be told alongside the genesis of their registration and recording techniques.[17]

Even in the term's older semantic contexts, this constellation is already present. In its art-historical sense as a side view, the word "profile" had been used since the second half of the eighteenth century when attempts were made to systematize and classify certain categories of knowledge through representations of the human face. In the work of Johann Caspar Lavater, the silhouette in profile was transformed from a leisurely form of art into a cryptographic system whose proper interpretation could unlock the inner life of any man or woman. In his treatise *On Physiognomy*, which first appeared in 1772, Lavater left no doubt that portraits ought to depict the side of the face. As evidence for this thesis, he compared a physiognomically relevant profile drawing by Montesquieu with a less revealing portrait and declared that, in the latter, "the view of the painter, and thus the action of the muscles […] does not present to us the natural condition but rather something that is largely forced, stiff, or tense." This disadvantage of the frontal perspective is alleviated by profile representations because anyone who allows himself to be drawn in this manner does so, according to Lavater, "in large part because the eye of the painter does not govern him but rather looks upon him more naturally and freely."[18] Profile images thus enable greater objectivity and are therefore better suited for physiognomic interpretation. A century later, a similar argument was made by the Parisian criminologist Alphonse Bertillon when he presented his new system for identifying repeat offenders. This system, which he referred to as "anthropometry," involved a series of bodily measurements that were supplemented by profile photographs of delinquents. "It is the profile with precise lines," according to Bertillon, "that best represents the particular individuality of any given face."[19] He believed that this was the case because of the highly identifiable nature of the ear, the form of which differs from person to person and cannot be obscured by any changes of expression while a photograph is being taken. Lavater's and Bertillon's observations make it clear that, as a side view, the profile provided types of knowledge about analyzed and classified subjects that are similar to the

types produced later by the tabular and written format with the same name.[20]

The triumph of the self-made profile

The establishment of digital culture over the past quarter-century was accompanied by a massive redefinition and expansion of this format. Whereas Rossolimo's intelligence tests and the FBI's tracking methods were concerned with recording deviant behavior, the objective of today's profiles is largely to underscore the particular attractiveness, competence, or social integration of the person represented. As the debate over the media behavior of the mass murderers from 2012 demonstrated, the format now represents the normal instead of the pathological. How did this shift come about? In which contexts did the coerced personal description transform into something voluntarily created?

In the mid-1990s, when networked and interactive computers spread beyond the confines of American military authorities and hackers to become the global form of communication known as the internet, the technological conditions for creating public spheres changed in a fundamental way. The rapid growth of the "world wide web" and of commercial browsers such as Netscape made it possible for every user to publicize his or her own persona without engaging with the mass media's costly means of production. From the beginning, online "communication" meant not only the acceleration of exchanges between known people (i.e. the transition from letters or faxes to email) but also the ability to address previously unknown people via forums and platforms on the internet.

It was in this new and digital public sphere that the first traces of self-made profiles appeared. For instance, the website Match.com, which today has more than 30 million registered users, began its operations as the first online-dating platform at the beginning of 1995. The earliest version of the site contained the following advice: "Become a member by registering and placing your profile." In an advertisement from 1996, moreover, the company boasted: "Match.com features engaging member profiles."[21] In recent years, the sociologist

Eva Illouz has written extensively on the operating principles of online dating on Match.com and similar sites and has also focused on the profile as a format of self-representation. When registering, users have to answer dozens of questions about their physical appearance, interests, lifestyle, and values in order to provide other members with enough information about themselves and to furnish Match.com's psychologists with a sufficient amount of standardizable material. The hope of finding a "match" among the multitude of potential partners is synonymous with compatibility of two profiles. In her studies, Illouz is primarily interested in the ambivalence of the platforms between intimacy and marketability, between the exposure and commodification of individuals.[22] Regarding the genealogy of the profile concept, Illouz's research, which extends back to the turn of the millennium, is significant if only because it demonstrates how early on this format had established itself as the central form of representing the self in online dating. Only a few years before, the profile was still exclusively known as an instrument for monitoring delinquent subjects, yet in the world of online dating it quickly revealed its greater productive potential as a site for self-description.

Two years after Match.com's IPO in January of 1997, a lawyer named Andrew Weinreich introduced his idea for a website called SixDegrees.com. The goal of this site was not to bring together possible romantic partners but rather to build up a network of friends and acquaintances. Weinreich's presentation is preserved in a grainy YouTube video that, as of the fall of 2018, had attracted a mere 31 views. Such neglect is rather astounding because it is safe to say that this speech represents social media's moment of birth (at least as the term is understood today). Active from 1997 to 2001, SixDegrees was an online network that grew to 3.5 million users and 150 employees but, because of the slow and immobile internet connections of the late 1990s and the limitation of available data to texts, failed to generate lasting attention. This was quite unlike Friendster and Facebook – founded in 2002 and 2003, respectively – whose users had increasing access to broadband internet and digital cameras, and which thus mark the first chapter of social media's global success story.