'22 Push-Ups for a Cause': Depicting the Moral Self via Social Media Campaign #Mission22

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Abstract

Introduction

In 2016, the online cause #Mission22 went viral on social media. Established to raise awareness about high suicide rates among US military veterans, the campaign involves users posting a video of themselves doing 22 push-ups for 22 days, and on some platforms, to donate and recruit others to do the same. Based on a 'big data' analysis of Twitter data (over 225,883 unique tweets) during the height of the campaign, this article uses #Mission22 as a site in which to analyse how people depict, self-represent and self-tell as moral subjects using social media campaigns. In addition to spotlighting how such movements are mobilised to portray moral selves in particular ways, the analysis focuses on how a specific online cause like #Mission22 becomes popularly supported from a plethora of possible causes and how this selection and support is shaped by online networks. We speculate that part of the reason why Mission22 went 'viral' in the highly competitive attention economies of social media environments was related to visual depictions of affective bodily, fitness and moral practices.

Web 2.0 Culture: Self and Mass Depiction

Web 2.0 culture such as social networking sites (eg., Facebook; Instagram), the advent of video sharing technologies (eg., YouTube) and more recently, micro-blogging services like Twitter have created new and transformative spaces to create, depict and display identity. Web 2.0 is primarily defined by user-generated content and interaction, whereby users are positioned as both consumer and producers, or 'produsers' of Web content (Bruns and Schmidt). Challenging traditional "broadcast" media models, Web 2.0 gives users a platform to produce their own content and for "the many" to communicate "with the many" (Castells). The growth of mass self communication, supported by broadband and wireless technologies, gives unprecedented power to individuals and groups to depict and represent their identities and relationships to a potential global audience.

The rise of user-generated communication technologies dovetails with broader analyses of the changing contours of self and identity in late-modern times. Individuals in the early decades of the 21st century must take charge for how they depict, portray and self-tell as distinctive, unique and individual subjects (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim; Giddens; Bauman). As contemporary lives become less bound to the strictures of tradition, community and religion, the self becomes a project to be worked out and developed. These theorists suggest that via processes of individualisation, detraditionalisation and globalisation, contemporary subjects have become disconnected from the traditional coordinates of community and are thus faced with the imperative of self-construction and reinvention (Elliott and Lemert).

More recently, theoretical and empirical work has attempted to interpret and evaluate how networks of mass self-depiction powered by new digital and wireless technologies are reshaping identity practices. For some theorists, like Bauman (*Consuming* 2) and Turkle, Web 2.0 is a worrying trend. Bauman suggests in the "confessional society" – think reality TV, talk shows, social media – people are compelled to curate and reflect upon their lives in the public realm. These public acts of self-depiction are part of a move to treating the self as a brand to be consumed, "as products capable of drawing attention, and attracting demands and customers" (Bauman and Lyon 33). The consumer quality of new communications sees *connections* replace *relationships* as social bonds become short-term and brittle. Turkle makes a similar argument, suggesting that our preoccupation with online curation centres on controlling our identities and depicting "perfect" versions of ourselves. The result is diminished forms of intimacy and connection; we preach authenticity and realness but practice self-curation and self-stylisation.

A more positive body of literature has examined how Web technologies work as tools for the formation of self. This literature is based on more close-up and detailed readings of particular platforms and practices rather than relying on sweeping claims about technology and social change. Following Foucault, Bakardjieva & Gaden argue that personal blogs and social networking site (SNS) profiles constitute a contemporary technology of the self, whereby users employ Web 2.0 technologies in everyday life as practices of self care and self-formation. In a similar way, Sauter argues that SNSs, and in particular Facebook, are tools for self-formation through the way in which status updates provide a contemporary form of self-writing. Eschewing the notion of social media activity as narcissistic or self-obsessed, Sauter argues that SNSs are a techno-social practice of self-writing that facilitate individuals to "form relations to self and others by exposing themselves to others and obtaining their feedback" (Sauter 836). Other research has explored young people's sustained use of social media, particularly Facebook, and how these sites are used to tell and archive "growing up" narratives and key rites of passage (Robards and Lincoln).

One area of research that has been overlooked is how people use social media to construct and depict moral identity. Following Sauter's arguments about the self work that occurs through networked self-writing, we can extend this to include the ethical self work performed and produced through online depictions. One exception is work by Hookway which analyses how people use blogs – an earlier Web 2.0 form – to write and self-examine their moral experiences. This research shows how bloggers use blogging as a form of online self-writing to construct a *do-it-yourself* form of morality that emphasises the self, emotions, body and ideals of authenticity. Hookway highlights the idea that morality is less about obedience to a code of rules or following external laws to becoming a particular moral person through a set of self-practices. Paralleling broader shifts in identity construction, people are no longer bound to the inherited guidelines of the past, morality becomes a project to be worked out, designed and depicted in relation to Others (Hookway).

In Foucault's terms, morality involves a process of ethical self-stylisation – an "aesthetics of existence" – based on "the ethical work of the self on the self" (Foucault 91). "Care of the self" involves a "set of occupations" or "labours" that connect and link the self to the Other through guidance, counselling and communication (Foucault 50). For Foucault, self-creation and self-care imply "care for others" as individuals perform a mutual concern with achieving an "art of existence". This is a reciprocated ethics that obligates the individual to care for others in order to help them care for themselves.

This stylisation of the ethical self has been drastically reshaped by the new opportunities for self-expression, belonging and communication offered in our digitally networked society. Digital worlds and spaces create new multi-media modes for individuals and groups to depict, perform and communicate particular moral identities and positions. Web 2.0 technologies are seeing the boundaries between the private and public sphere collapse as more people are willing to share the most intimate part of their moral lives with a diverse mix of strangers, friends, family and associates.

The confessional quality of online spaces provide a unique opportunity to analyse "lay morality" or everyday moral understandings, constructions and depictions and how this is co-produced in relation to new technological affordances. Following Sayer (951), morality is defined as "how people should treat others and be treated by them, which of course is crucial for their subjective and objective well-being". Morality is understood as a relational and evaluative practice that involves being responsive to how people are faring and whether they are suffering or flourishing.

In this article, we use the #Mission22 campaign – a campaign that went "viral" across multiple social media platforms – as a unique site to analyse and visualise lay moral depictions and constructions. Specifically, we analyse the #Mission22 campaign on Twitter using a big data analysis. Much of the empirical work on online self construction and depiction is either purely theoretical in the vein of Bauman, Turkle and Sauter or based on small qualitative samples such as the work by Lincoln and Robards and Author A. This article is unique not only in investigating the crafting of moral depictions in Web 2.0 forums but also in the scale of the textual and visual representation of mass moral self-depictions it captures and analyses.

Big Data Analysis of #Mission22 on Twitter

In order to empirically examine the #Mission22 campaign on Twitter, we used the Twitter API to collect over three months of tweets that contained the campaign hashtag (from 20 Aug. 2016 to 1 Dec. 2016). This resulted in a dataset of 2,908,559 tweets, of which 225,883 were non-duplicated (i.e., some tweets were collected multiple times by the crawler).

There were 3,230 user accounts participating during this period, with each user tweeting 70 times on average. As Figure 1 shows, a sizeable percentage of users were quite active at the height of the campaign, although there is clearly a number of users who only tweeted once or twice. More specifically, there were 1,232 users (or 38%) who tweeted at least 100 times, and on the other hand 1080 users (or 33%) who only tweeted two times or less. In addition, a tiny number of 'power users' (18 or 0.006%) tweeted more than 400 times during this period.

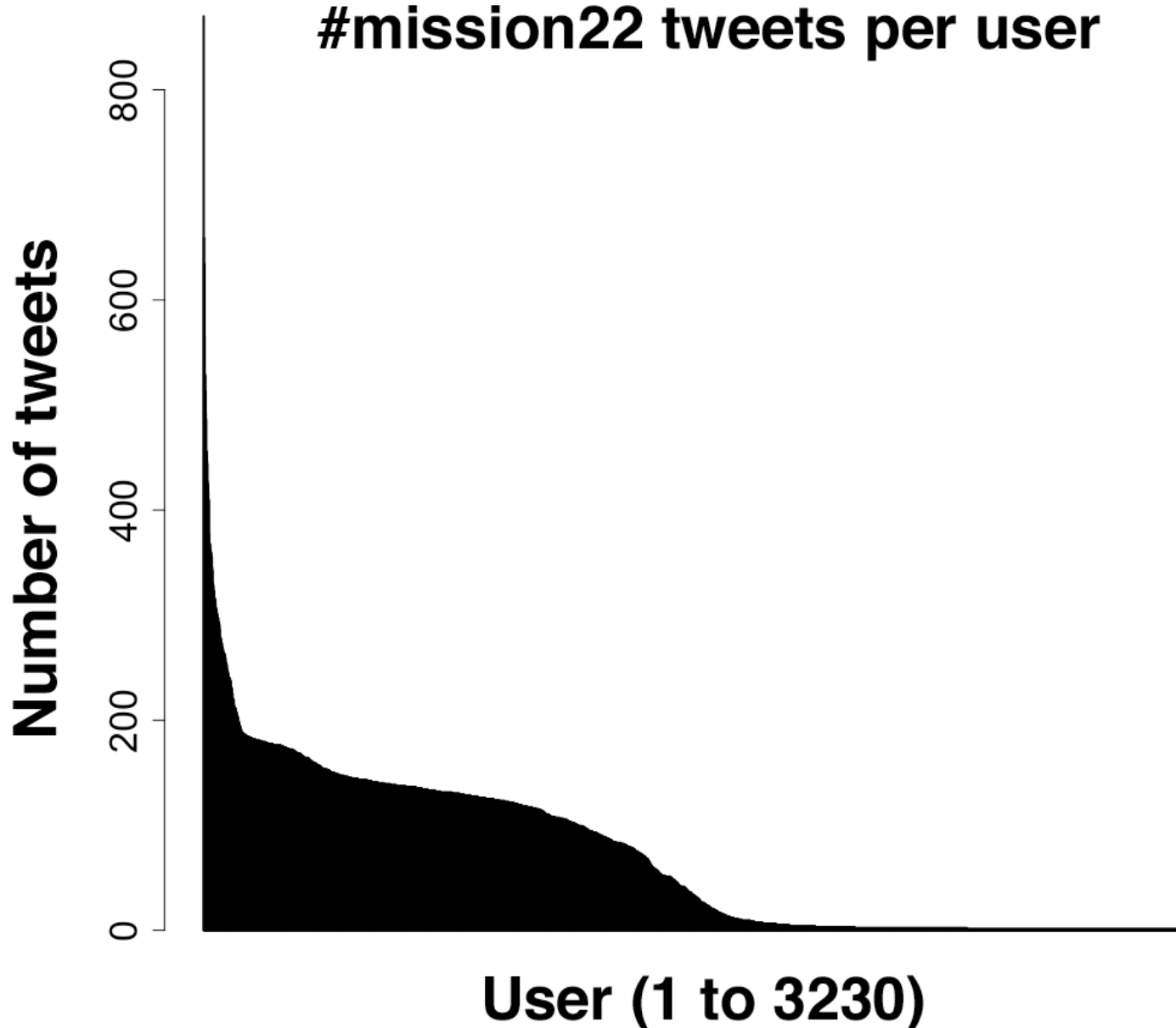# Frequency Distribution of #mission22 tweets per user

Figure 1: Frequency distribution of #Mission22 tweets for each user in the dataset

To get a sense of what users were talking about during the campaign, we constructed a wordcloud out of the text data extracted from the tweets (see Figure 2). To provide more information and context, usernames (preceded with @) and hashtags (preceded with #) were included along with the words, providing a set of terms. As a result, the wordcloud also shows the user accounts and hashtags that were mentioned most often (note that #Mission22 was excluded from the data as it, by definition of the data collection process, has to occur in every tweet). In order to remove meaningless terms from the dataset we applied several text processing steps. First, all terms were converted to lowercase, such that "Veteran" and "veteran" are treated as the same term. Next, we applied a technique known as term frequency-inverse document frequency (tf-idf) to the tweet text data. Tf-idf effectively removes terms that occur so frequently that they provide no interesting information (e.g., the term "mission22"), and also terms that occur extremely infrequently. Finally, we removed English "stop words" from the text data, thereby eliminating common words such as "the" and "and".
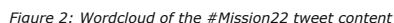
Figure 2: Wordcloud of the #Mission22 tweet content

As Figure 2 shows, the most frequent terms revolve around the campaign message and call-to-action for suicide awareness, including, for example, "day", "veteran", "support", "push-ups", "band", "challenge", "suicide", "fight", and "alone". A number of user accounts are also frequently mentioned, which largely relate to the heavily retweeted users (discussed further below). Furthermore, alongside the central #mission22 hashtag, a number of other popular hashtags were in circulation during the campaign, including "#veteran", "#americasmission", "#22kill", and "#22adayis22toomany". Table 1 provides the top 50 most frequently occurring terms in decreasing order.

Table 1: Top 50 words in the #Mission22 tweet content (decreasing order)

1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50
day	@mrbernarded	long	@uc_vets	nothing
veteran	#veteran	better	@kappasigmauc	every
support	everyday	believe	@ucthetachi	mission
push-ups	challenge	today	take	help
@sandratxas	suicide	haul	one	#22kill
@defensebaron	veterans	awareness	just	say
@the_uso	fight	accepted	@piedmontlax	#veterans
@nbcnews	alone	ptsd	good	weakness

band	vets	22k	wrong	#nevertrump

cimmunity [sic]	#americasmission	shoutout	god	will

A surprising finding of our study is that the vast majority of tweets are simply just retweets of other users. The number of retweets was 223,666, which accounts for about 99% of all tweets in the dataset. Even more surprising was that the vast majority of these retweets are from a single tweet. Indeed, 221,088 (or 98%) of all tweets in the dataset were retweets of the following tweet that was authored on 2 March 2015 by @SandraTXAS (see Figure 3). Clearly we can say that this tweet went 'viral' (Jenders et al) in the sense that it became frequently retweeted and gained an increasing amount of attention due to its cumulative popularity and visibility over time.
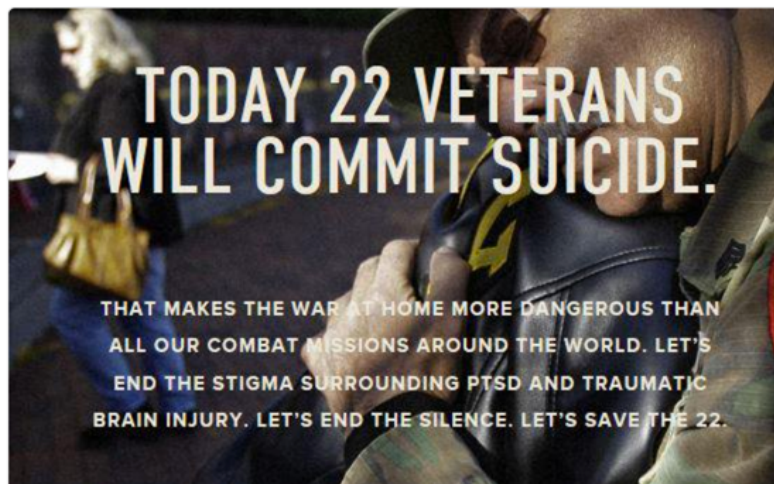
Figure 3: #1 most retweeted #Mission22 tweet – @SandraTXAS (https://twitter.com/SandraTXAS)

This highly retweeted or viral #Mission22 tweet provides a point of departure to examine what aspects of the tweet content influence the virality or popularity of #Mission22 tweets during the height of the campaign. To do this, we extracted the next nine most retweeted tweets from our dataset, providing an analysis of the "top 10" retweets (including the @SandraTXAS tweet above).

Figure 4: #2 most retweeted - @mrbernarded (https://twitter.com/mrbernarded/status/776221040582295553)

This tweet was retweeted 715 times in our dataset.

#Mission22 @Mission22 · 18 Nov 2016
You Better Believe, We're In This For The Long Haul! You Are Not Alone In This
Fight | #Mission22 #AmericasMission #Mission22Salute🇺🇸🇺🇸🇺🇸

Figure 5: #4 most retweeted - @Mission22 (https://twitter.com/Mission22/status/799872548863414272)

This was retweeted 317 times in our dataset.

UC Theta Chi @UCThetaChi · 8 Oct 2016
The challenge was accepted today. 22k for our Vets. Shoutout to @UC_Vets &
@KappaSigmaUC #Mission22

0:13

Figure 6: #4 most retweeted - @UCThetaChi (https://twitter.com/UCThetaChi/status/784775641430384640)

This was retweeted 180 times in our dataset.

Pam Keith
@PamKeith2016   👤+ Follow

Good GOD!! Did he just say this?! He is so
wrong! PTSD has NOTHING to do with
weakness. #Mission22 #NeverTrump

Max Steele @maxasteele
This is insane. twitter.com/anamariecox/st…

RETWEETS	LIKES
16	20

9:08 AM - 3 Oct 2016 from Miami, FL

Figure 7: #5 most retweeted - @PamKeith2016 (https://twitter.com/PamKeith2016/status/782975576550305792)

This was retweeted 121 times in our dataset.

Figure 8: #6 most retweeted - @PiedmontLax (https://twitter.com/PiedmontLax/status/770749891698122752)

This was retweeted 105 times in our dataset.

Figure 9: #7 most retweeted - @PiedmontLax (https://twitter.com/PiedmontLax/status/771181070066692098)

This was retweeted 78 times in our dataset.

Jack Barker @PatriotBrother · 1 Dec 2016
The struggle to live is real when no one cares.

#Mission22
#22ADayIs22ToMany

On this day, nobody knew
A soldier would join
That sacred crew
Sadly known as the 22.....

Service takes them far away
Writing letters home "I'm alive, hey!"
Victors of battle, awards well reaped,
Silently fighting demons did creep....

Smile on his face,
Tears in his heart,
Looking for answers,
But where to start

Others quietly whisper
Something's not right,
I wonder what I suppose,
Ill ask another night

Chasing a pill,
A high or a drink,
No one can imagine,
the nightmares he thinks

So now the time has come to end
The pain, I wish it weren't true
Full of regret,
As I become one of twenty two

Figure 10: #8 most retweeted - @PatriotBrother (https://twitter.com/PatriotBrother/status/804387050728394752)

This was retweeted 59 times in our dataset.

alex.gotayjr
@alexgotayjr

[Follow]

Suicide doesn't take the pain away. It transfers
it to those who love them.
#Mission22

RETWEETS	LIKES
10	16
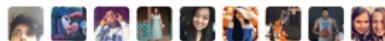
7:08 PM - 14 Oct 2016

Figure 11: #9 most retweeted - @alexgotayjr (https://twitter.com/alexgotayjr/status/787112936644849664)

This was retweeted 49 times in our dataset.

Chris Jacobson @csjacobson89 · 5 Sep 2016
Day 22 **#22PushupChallenge!** Beautiful Labor Day for vets&suicide awareness. @022KILL @Mission22 #22kill #mission22

Figure 12: #10 most retweeted - @csjacobson89 (https://twitter.com/csjacobson89/status/772921614044233729)

This was retweeted 45 times in our dataset.

Discussion

This article has provided the first "big data" analysis of the #Mission22 movement that went viral across multiple social media platforms in 2016. We began by arguing that Web 2.0 has ushered in profound changes to how people depict and construct identities that articulate with wider transformations in self and identity in conditions of late-modernity. The "confessional" quality of Web 2.0 means individuals and groups are presented with unprecedented opportunities to "mass self-depict" through new communication and Internet technologies. We suggest that the focus on how Web technologies are implicated in the formation of moral subjectivities is something that has been overlooked in the extant research on identity and Web 2.0 technologies.

Filling this gap, we used the #Mission22 movement on Twitter as an empirical site to analyse how contemporary subjects construct and visually depict moral identities in online contexts. A central finding of our analysis of 225883 Twitter posts is that most engagement with #Mission22 was through retweeting. Our data show that retweets were by far the most popular way to interact and engage with the movement. In other words, most people were not producing original or new content in how they participated in the movement but were re-sharing – re-depicting – what others had shared. This finding highlights the importance of paying attention to the architectural affordances of social media platforms, in this case, the affordances of the 'retweet' button, and how they shape online identity practices and moral expression. We use moral expression here as a broad term to capture the different ways individuals and groups make moral evaluations based on a responsiveness to how people are faring and whether they are suffering or flourishing (Sayer). This approach provides an emic account of everyday morality and precludes, for example, wider philosophical debates about whether patriotism or nationalist solidarity can be understood as moral values.

The prominence of the retweet in driving the shape and nature of #Mission22 raises questions about the depth of moral engagement being communicated. Is the dominance of the retweet suggestive of a type of "moral slacktivism"? Like its online political equivalent, does the retweet highlight a shallow and cursory involvement with a cause or movement? Did online engagement translate to concrete moral actions such as making a donation to the cause or engaging in some other form of civic activity to draw attention to the movement? These questions are beyond the scope of this article but it is interesting to consider the link between the affordances of the platform, capacity for moral expression and how this translates to face-to-face moral action. Putting aside questions of depth, people are compelled not to ignore these posts, they move from "seeing" to "posting", to taking action within the affordances of the architectural platform.

What then is moving Twitter users to morally engage with this content? How did this movement go viral? What helped bust this movement out of the "long tail distribution" which characterises most movements – that is, few movements "take-off" and become durable within the congested attention economies of social media environments. The Top 10 most retweeted tweets provide powerful answers here. All of them feature highly emotive and affective visual depictions, either high impact photos and statements, or videos of people/groups doing pushups in solidarity together. The images and videos align affective, bodily and fitness practices with nationalistic and patriotic themes to produce a powerful and moving moral cocktail. The Top 50 words also capture the emotionally evocative use of moral language: words like: alone, fight, challenge, better, believe, good, wrong, god, help, mission, weakness and will.

The emotional and embodied visual depictions that characterise the the Top 10 retweets and Top 50 words highlight how moral identity is not just a cerebral practice, but one that is fundamentally emotional and bodily. We do morality not just with our minds and heads but also with our bodies and our hearts. Part of the power of this movement, then, is the way it mobilises interest and involvement with the movement through a physical and embodied practice – doing push-ups. Visually depicting oneself doing push-ups online is a powerful display of morality identity. The "lay morality" being communicated is that not only are you somebody who cares about the flourishing and suffering of Others, you are also a fit, active and engaged citizen. And of course, the subject who actively takes responsibility for their health and well-being is highly valued in neoliberal risk contexts (Lupton).

There is also a strong gendered dimensions to the visual depictions used in #Mission22. All of the Top 10 retweets feature images of men, mostly doing push-ups in groups. In the case of the second most popular retweet, it is two men in suits doing push-ups while three sexualised female singers "look-on" admiringly. Further analysis needs to be done to detail the gendered composition of movement participation, but it is interesting to speculate whether men were more likely to participate. The combination of demonstrating care for Other via a strong assertion of physical strength makes this a potentially more masculinised form of moral self-expression.

Overall, Mission22 highlights how online self-work and cultivation can have a strong moral dimension. In Foucault's language, the self-work involved in posting a video or image of yourself doing push-ups can be read as "an intensification of social relations". It involves an ethics that is about self-creation through visual and textual depictions. Following the more pessimistic line of Bauman or Turkle, posting images of oneself doing push-ups might be seen as evidence of narcissism or a consumerist self-absorption. Rather than narcissism, we want to suggest that Mission22 highlights how a self-based moral practice – based on bodily, emotional and visual depictions – can extend to Others in an act of mutual care and exchange. Again Foucault helps clarify our argument: "the intensification of the concern for the self goes hand in hand with a valorisation of the Other". What our work does, is show how this operates empirically on a large-scale in the new confessional contexts of Web 2.0 and its cultures of mass self-depiction.

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