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Towards a 'minor data' manifesto

Jacek Smolicki & Alberto Frigo

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Not big and not small data

Before moving to a discussion on the concept of minor data we find it important to explain how the term relates, or rather how it differs from existing terms that have emerged in the context of ubiquitous data circulation and accumulation. Big data describes data sets so large that their analysis requires complex algorithmic processing.[1] To a large extent big data is formed by data points deriving from digital network devices, or more specifically everyday interactions with increasingly digital and networked technologies. Among streams that contribute to big data are undoubtedly ones coming from numerous quotidian devices, smartphones, applications, and social media services. Lev Manovich argued that network technologies and interfaces (such as web 2.0 or social media platforms) have been intentionally designed to accelerate the accumulation of personal data.[2]

This is done precisely to increase the amount of data points from which different patterns can be extracted by corporations operating on the back end of these services. From such a perspective data appears as something attributed primarily with utilitarian and quantifiable value, if certain computational operations are performed upon it.

In contrast to big data the term small data has lately emerged. Small data attempts to emphasise the issue of agency and control over data sets that in the context of big data can be seen as a subject of a gradual dissolution. In other words, small data highlights the problem of the unavailability of direct insight and comprehension of data, the loss of control over its distribu-

tion and applicability.[3] The idea of small data is about decreasing the scale of accumulation and analysis of data so a more direct managerial power over data sets becomes possible. As previously mentioned, with the term minor data we do not want to offer a counter-proposal to the two phenomena mentioned above. The term minor data is a suggestion for an alternative or parallel perspective on living with data where the problem of quantity and control is addressed through a shift to qualitative and aesthetic dimensions of data collecting practices. In other words, with the term minor data we want to bring attention to other, alternative purposes, motivations, and imperatives for collecting personal data that can move us beyond the discussions on utilitarian and economical ends. Similarly, we believe that through minor data we can propose a perspective that tackles the despair with which network digital technologies have been recently inscribed with due to revelations by Edward Snowden, more generally through an extensive exposure of our digital data practices to surveillance mechanisms.

In this light minor data can be seen as an attempt to reclaim the agency over one's data flows through a development of and a commitment to more individuated and hence less vulnerable techniques for capturing everyday life. It is about developing a dialect or a conduct for using available devices in a way that goes in parallel to big data economy – by that we mean a larger industry or ecology comprising network technologies, readymade gadgets, applications, and social media that are designed with an intention to capture people's everyday lives, to utilise them as material for different reasons and commercial benefits. We see minor data as a practice of generating meaning out of life that expands the utilitarian and short-term value of digital data.

Manifesto

1. Minor data is a practice aiming to overcome the messy and unstructured nature of data production and consumption practices by highlighting the value of a mindful commitment to crafting a personal framework for recording and organising one's data.
2. Minor data practices rely on a creative appropriation of available technologies of record that result in the formation of a particular representation of everyday life that can be mediated beyond the technological possibilities of today.

3. Minor data practice is performed by the means of an ascetic adherence to self-developed rules. This consistent performance can be seen in terms of a persistently performed, manual, human algorithm that goes parallel to or at times evades the data aggregating computational algorithms increasingly orchestrating people's everyday lives. Minor data is a way of reactivating one's life by purposefully rejecting the reliance on third party algorithms, software, and services and instead crafting individual conducts, therefore acquiring a level of empathy with the contemporary human condition.
4. Minor data builds on a reduction and limitation of engagement in social (media) frameworks as well as the dynamics of contemporary techno-culture favoring immediacy, constant upgrading, and renewal of the self. In this sense minor data is about redirecting the effort toward a development of more autonomous and durable frameworks for personal data collection which might facilitate an active form of criticality towards contemporaneity.
5. Minor data is a sampling of everyday life in a consistent and integral manner. As opposed to data practices pervading today and which often focus on yielding an immediate result, an important attribute of minor data practices is their long-term perspective. The value emerging from such practices is extended into the future and can be located in its cultural and archival potential and ability to germinate new meanings.

Method

We will begin by introducing ourselves and the artistic methodologies we utilise in our everyday practices. For many years now we have been developing different ways to manually monitor our lives and the surrounding reality. In 2003 Alberto started photographing every object his right hand uses. In 2008 Jacek began systematising his archiving practices, such as recording soundscapes around him. Out of these very simple ritualistic documentary practices we are now both committed to more extensive projects. Alberto's work can be seen at <http://2004-2040.com> featuring 18 ways to record his reality and Jacek at <http://on-going.net> featuring 12 activities.

As part of our doctoral research related in both cases to our own practices we came across the Quantified Self, a movement gathering people interested in self-monitoring. We got curious and took part in their initiatives, having also an opportunity to enrich the discourse by presenting our per-

spectives. While much academic work is now dedicated to the discussion of the privacy implications and the surveillance aspects that Quantified Self gadgets, life-logging,[4] and the big data industry, throughout this paper we will bring forward our own perspective as practitioners who have been using manually-assembled media to monitor our lives far before it became fashionable and automated. In order to extrapolate these thoughts we decided to go into the Swedish countryside for a walk. While conducting our own self-monitoring practices we used a smartphone to record our conversation. We ended up pausing on top of a granite cliff facing the mild winter sun and overlooking a big frozen lake with long distance skaters. In the next section we will present a transcription of our dialogue. 'J' stands for Jacek and 'A' stands for Alberto.

A: Yes, *minor data* is indeed some kind of an assemblage of techniques or technologies that are arising, I guess that minor individuals like us start playing with. In this respect my practice of monitoring, recording, or developing this kind of minor technique to document my life, as well as Jacek's, come a little bit before this whole trend of self-monitoring lives.

J: One other interesting reference of a more distant, academic, or theoretical nature is the notion of minor literature that was developed by Deleuze and Guattari who wrote about the subversion of dominant lingual structures.[5] As their case they elaborated on the writing practices of Kafka during the time when Prague was occupied by Germans. The inhabitants were forced to start using German as their main language. Of course, if you wanted to continue your career you would have to adhere to the new condition and adopt the new language. What Kafka did was learn the language, but not in a highly methodological way. He was playing with the deficiencies of his language skills. Or perhaps while writing he was not even fully aware that he might be subverting the norms of the language. This dissonance with the norms of the language allowed him to deliver his messages in an unconventional, somewhat encrypted way which you as a reader would understand only if you had a particular sensitivity to the context. Therefore not knowing the rules (or intentionally going around them) does not mean that you are a worse practitioner. You can deliberately use the fact that you are not a professional, that you do not have an exact comprehension of the norms of grammar, but you subvert it and use it in a kind of poetic way to transcend the reality. This is how we understand this concept in the context of digital technologies.



Fig. 1: Alberto's photo of his right hand holding the smartphone used for recording the dialogue. Author's private archive.

A: Yes, my point of reference would be this distinction between what we now think about life-logging technologies and quantified self and privacy-infringing technologies. I would call these the technologies of the 'homo-faber'. The more precarious and marginal techniques of individuals like us, who set up a kind of assemblage of different technologies and create media, perhaps those like Jacques Ellul or Marshall McLuhan would identify these

more as technologies of magic in which people adhere to a certain formula and ritualistically and performatively repeat these practices over time.

J: As Alberto mentioned the interest in these kinds of practices come primarily from our own activities. Our practices have become gateways to realising that what we are doing is not really a very singular type of practice. We have identified – and particularly Alberto, who has been in the field for a long time – a number of very interesting practitioners who remain rather unknown, as they perform their data collection and archiving practices in seclusion or rather reclusion, thus they have not become a part of the big trends, debates, and frameworks. If their presence resurfaces these practitioners are easily labeled with the stereotype of self-obsessed narcissist – someone who is hoarding data as a commodity, unthinkingly following life-logging. By coining this term [*minor data*] we want to make a cut to such a categorisation and introduce another way of looking at these kinds of practices.

A: Yes, I was going to suggest that Jacek could mention a few of our discoveries. We met people that have been conducting these kinds of practices before digital media ever took place. For example, we are particularly inspired by the work of the Polish housewife Janina Turek, who after her husband was deported to Auschwitz in 1942 started recording different events in her life in 700 hundred different notebooks; events such as presents she gave, people she met, television programmes she watched. These kinds of practices go against the kind of showing off, quantifying practices we see nowadays. They have a stronger intimacy and perhaps they come even closer to what Freud would call a death drive to overcome some kind of a trauma.

J: There is a valid point in looking at *minor data* practices from this perspective, as it makes you realise that they are not necessarily focused on achieving some concrete goals, some kind of a betterment of your performance, a well-being if you will. They constitute a parallel dimension of your life. You do not necessarily assign any economic or practical value to them. It is more like a form of stubbornness and persistence that allows you to overcome some deficiencies and failures. It is like a supporting device, but definitely not something that helps you achieve certain short term goals in your life [cf. Quantified Self]. That is at least how I see it.



Fig. 2: Janina Turek's notebooks as gathered in her family house. Courtesy of Janina Turek's family.

A: Yeah, the Latins would call it *cupio dissolvi* or some kind of willing. Not really to become immortal, as for instance the father of life-logging Gordon Bell would call it: record everything just in case, to make your existence immortal. It is more a poetic approach in which you engage in your local reality and you slowly dissolve into it in a way. It is also, indirectly, a political message. I think what Jacek and I are really doing is neither confronting, thus rejecting, this new data trend nor being enthusiastic about it. Rather, we are creating our own autonomy, an autonomous framework in which we are not part of the algorithm or against the algorithm, but we act like algorithms. We are performing it and become like it. At the moment Jacek is recording sound, I have been sitting down and taking videos of the landscape under certain rules; we are sort of taking it onto ourselves, becoming empathetic with this dehumanising algorithm that is pervading our life, and then we are sort of discovering another level of humanity by performing it. It is absurd to say but there is maybe something to be thought in this new kind of *minor data* alternative that we are bringing in with our experience.

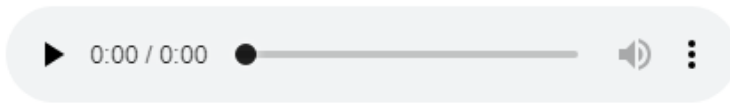


Fig. 3: The audio recorded by Jacek. Every day he records at least one minute of sound.



Fig. 4: The video taken as part of Alberto's project. Every time he sits in a public space he records video for four seconds, centering the camera on the vanishing point.

J: Also, to position this practice in a more media-historical context, we can say that if one looks at the history of media technological developments oftentimes the very first reception of given technological inventions was what Stiegler would call a poisonous reaction (consider for instance the introduction of the postal industry). Actually, I would say that at the very beginning there might be a short explosion of enthusiasm, and this is quite

soon followed by a recognition of the negative side, the toxic and poisonous side that people start to criticise. Then within time, when the poisonous dust settles, people embrace the technology which becomes naturalised into their everyday life. It becomes taken for granted. The same applies to self-tracking and life-logging devices. If at the beginning they were enthusiastically seen as devices with only positive functions (early debates on life-logging which pictured such technologies as helping people advance their memory capacity and increase their skills in accessing and processing information), the criticism that followed soon after rendered the same technologies violent and destructive, particularly if conveyed in relation to network technologies and data economy.

It seems like it is hard to move beyond this axis established by pessimism on one end and enthusiasm on the other, the poisonous versus remedial/curing nature of technology. But I think that there are ways for becoming immune to this oscillation, or perhaps not immune but conscious about their magnetic forces. Some kind of a goal or a conduct which is consistent and stubborn might allow one to walk in a more balanced way in the field established by these polarities. This balanced position might come from what I would call a purposeful ignorance, or as I mentioned earlier not knowing enough about how the device 'is supposed' to serve you. We can find cases of amateurs who use technologies in completely different ways that go beyond simple rendering of technologies as either helping us or blocking us from something (artistic utilisation can be seen as pointing in such direction). The term *minor data*, to return to it again, is about looking into these kinds of pockets – (a)historical developments of tracking technologies and practices that we believe can be pointed at to overcome this radical way of defining the role of technology, also tracking technologies as they are approached in a different way by individuals.

A: I do not know if I am adding anything new to what Jacek just said, which kind of nicely concludes the relevance of the practices we are talking about. Perhaps I will now bring a new aspect of our practices in relation to much hyped practices of quantifying, life-logging, and so forth. This is perhaps that the practices that we are interested in, the practices that we have intuitively come to perform without really knowing or anticipating today's much criticised trends, these practices are constrained in a particular framework. We do not envision this open, endless black star in which we throw data inside and it gets eaten up and swallowed and there is a constant need for data to be produced/consumed. We have some kind of an aesthetic

goal, and maybe now I am speaking more for myself than Jacek, but we design some kind of a framework and we do plan a final way of deliverance reaching an end to this framework. I see this perhaps in life-logging and quantifying self that the thing (point of these practices) is different as years come – new sensors arrive, earlier logs are disrupted, there is more you can track, there is a higher resolution, while I think our act is an act of resistance. We are married to certain media, to a certain framework. We are craftsmen. We have to keep up with them and we also have to confront the constantly rising progress and the new devices. So it is also this poetic that emerges from it, of doing something over time while things frenetically change.



Fig. 5: Alberto Frigo's renovated barn in the Italian alps, under construction now to showcase his project.

J: What you said is very interesting and makes a point of difference with what we can call unstructured or non-rigorous practices, where people document their everyday lives in a very random way or in accordance to ontologies of third party platforms like social media, which determine the way you document through their very architecture and also the fact that you are constantly exposed to other enunciations and other content flowing around. Remaining in such a flow is addictive and might determine if not limit possibilities for developing a more individuated aesthetic of living

your life and documenting it. By constraining yourself and following some rules we believe that you can not only develop a more reflective approach to reality and technology that is so much embedded in our reality but also create some kind of time capsule that represents a life of an individual. It is a time capsule that can serve in the future since it is made in a consistent way, in a kind of archival way (and archiving is all about consistency). So you might deliver a message that is more informative. Even though it follows your own language it is much more informative because the consistent language can be much more easily decoded.

A: In this respect the metaphor I sometimes use and that academia often dissuades me to use is the Rosetta Stone. We are creating a depiction that is not so descriptive, for viewers or listeners to get their heads around the kind of data that we record. We are very rigorous in creating these different languages in which we record and we present them together without providing meta-data among them. I think the aspect that emerges from it is similar to a lot of avant-garde films, but in particular the Russian constructivists. We are creating a medium which in itself has the potential of allowing viewers or whoever experiences it in the future to perhaps generate an infinite amount of meaning. So people might be going to the fantastic cabinet that Jacek has created in printing and making tangible his own work, or they might go to the little barn in the Alps where I am working to store my own digital archive. If by chance they stumble upon these archives they might, out of curiosity, build new meaning out of what they will understand by scavenging through them. This has already occurred if we look at the work of Vivian Maier, also an outsider, also living as a minor, as a babysitter in Chicago recording not only photographs but people she talks to and headlines and trash bins – elements of life collected in a little storage place. She was later unable to pay for it and her material was sold. By the way, now we are standing still. We stopped walking for a long time and we are in front of a pine tree. I have the idea of this cone falling from a pine tree and distributing its little seeds all around.



Fig. 6: An archival cabinet hosting a selection of materialised data from Smolicki's On-Going Project (www.on-going.net).

J: Yeah, I think now we moved from the present to the future. We have been talking lately about the concept of digital legacy and we think that perhaps a strong value that the practices we talked about can contribute is precisely this rigorous and reclusive character. Here I want to turn to Janina Turek again. Her practices were secretly kept. If they were openly known perhaps she would have been perceived as some kind of obsessive-compulsive person with a disorder that makes her accumulate exceptional amounts of information. What I am trying to get to here is if at the present moment practices that we are interested in are seen as some kind of quirky, idiosyncratic, maybe irrelevant, artistic things that stick out from the reality. Paradoxically, in the future they might be seen as much more valuable and informative than the mass of non-rigorous data collection practices. It is also practically working towards the future, trying to single-mindedly, against the odds and against the currents of today, build something that we

believe might open up a little window or tell you something more constructive about this time – not necessarily today but in the future.

A: That's why perhaps it is important not to be prejudiced against all practices involving current technologies and to make a further differentiation between hoarding and storing. For example, this Janina Turek did not conduct any sort of hoarding in her apartment. She was very tidy. She had her notebooks well-kept in a closet in her bedroom. It is necessary to differentiate between manual practices, for example our own, and the effortless practices of automated devices like the ones that the life-logging industry produces; and a further differentiation between the technology that provokes enthusiasm between makers and the techniques or assemblages of minor individuals like us who intuitively and following a more precarious feeling have undertaken.

J: One of the questions could also be: in terms of the outcome, what is the difference of such an automatic record with a manual one? Why do we think the manual one could be of larger value? I think the reason could be that there is this belief among life-loggers who use more automated devices that passive accumulation gives you more objective knowledge about your life since it does not involve any choices. It documents you from outside and thus it represents your life accurately. This is exactly what brings us to the 19th century perception of the archive as a passive device that accumulates all traces of human activities and thus create objective knowledge. As we know there is no such a thing as an objective archive. Every archive has its own politics involved and thus every device like for life-logging or an application or service aggregating data, if it is to be considered as an archive, has its own politics or ontology that directs the way the recording is constructed. I think it is an easy trap to think of the passive as bringing you better knowledge. Another point of criticism could be that we think of digital memory as something we utilise to store our memory. We delegate our memory there, and there it is seated to be subsequently recalled in exactly the manner it was experienced. As we know, memory works in a completely different way. You never store the impression as it happens, but you store its trace, and once you recall you do not recall the exact event but rather certain feelings around it filtered through where you are now. It is always a generative process. Minor practices embrace this fact, that since there is no objective reality around you and you can't capture anything in an objective way you allow yourself to be even more speculative in the way you approach reality and record it. By pushing this subjectivity even further

you ensure that you have something particular at hand, something that requires your presence or requires your personality in order to unfold and decode it. You need to spend some time putting out some effort, or as Alberto was talking about earlier to bring someone to your little barn or somewhere close to your archive and get into a conversation that allows you to regenerate the experiences that your archive encrypts.

A: Is there any aspect that we did not talk about that you think is relevant? Now we positioned ourselves outside of this larger debate and this criticism, and then we presented the concept of *minor data*, and we presented what meaning it can produce in the future. We presented our everyday struggle, not only with the technology but also maybe with academia, and with all other frameworks. In whichever framework we try to operate with we always come to a clash, and perhaps this is the thing that makes us critical, being that we stick into our ascetic or aesthetic framework.

J: One more thought on this kind of dichotomous attitude to the technologies and different circles of quantified self-movement and the kind of critical theories, media theories, and hackers that are in despair when it comes to technology. We don't want to step aside from these two debates but paradoxically we want to get engage and understand their points by joining those communities. A good example is that instead of sticking to the traditional academic mode of writing ethnography which is based on first observing some group and then doing some literature overview, we actually step into their community and become them for some time. We participated in conferences and we are invited to present our perspective that is critical to some of the aspects of the quantified self, yet we are very much embraced and perceived as not people who try to contest what they are building but more as trying to enrich, perhaps to poke them a little bit and point at other directions. The exhibition that Alberto and I curated in June in San Francisco at the time of the Quantified Self movement conference is exactly our way of understanding how discourse, whether academic or non-academic, could be happening; to be temporarily embraced in the discussion as an active member of the community, and by that means to present alternative perspectives.



Fig. 7: A photograph from the exhibition the Art of Self-tracking featuring works of minor data practitioners. San Francisco, June 2015. Photo from the authors' archive.

A: Yes, we don't necessarily enroll in any fascistic way to any kind of fraction. We are very much aware of the transformation in which we are living and we are accepting the fact that we are very transitory. The only thing that we will adhere to is our practice. Further on, as life will progress, changes will occur in society and we will try to keep up with our practices.

Authors

Jacek Smolicki is a cross-media practitioner interested in the intersection of art, technology, and archiving. He is currently a PhD candidate and researcher at the School of Arts and Communication at Malmö University, where he is a member of the Living Archives Research project. For the last several years Smolicki has been committed to a set of documentary practices utilising various recording techniques to construct a multifaceted record of contemporary everyday life (www.on-going.net). One such practice is a one-minute record of soundscape executed every day since July 2010. His other cross-media practices include such forms as interactive installations, sousveillance art, soundwalks, site-specific memorial art, immersive soundscapes, and performances (www.smolicki.com). He has exhibited and pre-

sented his works in Madrid, Moscow, Helsinki, Stockholm, San Francisco, and other cities.

Alberto Frigo is a PhD candidate in media and communication studies at Sodertorn University in Sweden. He has been project leader at MIT in Boston and has taught at Tongji University in Shanghai. Frigo's early interest in lifelogging has resulted in <http://2004-2040.com>, a 36-year depiction of himself and his surroundings. The project includes a record of his activities based on the photos of all the objects his right hand uses. Exhibited worldwide, the project was awarded the prestigious Prix Ars Electronica in 2006. As part of his PhD thesis Frigo investigates the making of meaning of manually-compiled lifelogs such as the one he is creating.

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Notes

- [1] Cukier & Mayer-Schönberger 2013.
- [2] Manovich 2007
- [3] Bonde 2013.
- [4] Bell & Gemmel 2009.
- [5] Deleuze & Guattari 1986.