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Tracking Change in Data-Driven Autobiography: Nicholas Felton's Annual Reports, 2005–2014

Abstract: This article examines Nicholas Felton's self-tracking project titled *Annual Reports*, which he carried out from 2005 to 2014. In each instalment, the author offers a visually appealing presentation of a selection of data pertaining to specific aspects of his daily life, such as work, food, drink, travel, music, photography, etc. This article aims to examine this work as an instance of data-driven autobiography—an experimental form of autobiography whose structure and content are determined by the empirical data that has been systematically gathered—and to consider its capacity to register various aspects of change in its author's life, such as his work–play ratio, food and alcohol intake, and reading habits. The analysis is embedded in the context of a critical discussion about the quantified self (QS) movement and its positivist outlook on the possibility of enhancing one's self-knowledge through a close engagement with personal data. The article argues that while Felton shares the belief in the revelatory nature of data, he resists the naivety associated with so-called dataism.

Keywords: experimental life-writing, data art, dataism, quantified self, self-tracking, surveillance

As early as 2002, the media theorist Lev Manovich wrote of the contemporary condition as "being 'immersed in data'" and coined the notion of "data subjectivity". In the two decades since, self-tracking—also known as lifelogging—has become highly popular thanks to the increasing availability of wearable devices, which collect data related to health, wellness, and sport (Boldi and Rapp 189–90). Additionally, various smartphone applications supply their users with statistics on their activity patterns and preferences. This sudden access to empirical data promises the possibility of taking control of one's body and gaining greater self-knowledge. In *The Virtual Self: How Our Digital Lives Are Altering the World Around Us* (2012), Nora Young argues that "self-tracking is an extension of the broader project of 'making' the modern self" which involves "shoring up identity". In 2010,

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American journalist Gary Wolf, a co-founder of the "quantified self" movement, contributed an influential article to *The New York Times* titled "The Data-Driven Life", in which he declared that examining our daily activities "change[s] how we think about ourselves" (38). "Numbers", he observed, "are infiltrating the last redoubts of the personal" (40). "We are a culture drunk on numbers", adds Young in *The Virtual Self.*

This considerable change in how we understand ourselves in the age of informational abundance could not fail to affect contemporary practices of life-writing. In a chapter contributed to Julie Rak and Anna Poletti's *Identity Technologies: Constructing the Self Online* (2014), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write of the "computational self" that conceives of itself as a "quantification engine". They propose that contemporary subjectivity could be regarded in that respect as "a site of time-stamped data" (87). Madeleine Sorapure notes that "data becomes something of a mirror in which people see themselves reflected". She likens the process of interpreting personal data to autobiographical practice: "As in autobiography, subject and object, measurer and measured, are collapsed. Moreover, measuring and quantifying aspects of their lives via data gives the impression of objectivity; data becomes 'fact', which feeds into the presumption of truthfulness of autobiography" (270).

However, in order to be able to regard this kind of data-focused self-scrutiny as autobiographical practice, its outcome needs to be released; and for it to be noted by an audience larger than the immediate group of one's friends and family, it needs a platform greater than the author's social media. Despite the wide availability of the tools required to create such data-powered self-portraits, few such accounts have succeeded in attracting critical attention. Among the most acclaimed examples of such a work is Nicholas Felton's decade-long project comprising annual reports on the author's various activities in a given year, dominated by numbers and elegantly designed graphs and diagrams. This article aims to examine Felton's work as a data-driven autobiography and consider its capacity to register various aspects of change in its author's life. "Data-driven autobiography" is a term used but not defined by Sorapure in her brief discussion of Felton's project (270). I understand it as an experimental form of autobiography whose structure and content are determined by the data systematically gathered by the author. My analysis will be embedded in the context of a critical discussion about the quantified self movement and its positivist outlook on the possibility of enhancing one's self-knowledge through a close engagement with personal data. After introducing that movement, I shall consider information art and experimental life-writing as artistic contexts for Felton's project, which will be the focus of the remaining part of the article. The analysis of *Annual Reports* will begin with a discussion of the origin, focus, and form of the work. Later, I shall examine those aspects of the accumulated data that enable the reader to track the changes across Felton's decade-long project. The article will conclude with a consideration of *Annual Reports* as a data-driven self-portrait.

1. Quantified self

The notion of “quantified self” (QS) was introduced in 2007 by two editors of the *Wired* magazine, Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly, as an umbrella term for various self-monitoring practices enabled by self-tracking wearable appliances, such as “bracelets, smartwatches, sensors, fitness trackers or any other device that can measure biological attributes” (Lupton; De Moya and Pallud 941). Following a series of articles in *Wired*, Wolf and Kelly initiated meeting groups for QS enthusiasts and created a QS website, which identifies its audience as “an international community of users and makers of self-tracking tools who share an interest in ‘self-knowledge through numbers’” (Lupton; Quantified Self). As of February 2024, there were over seventy QS Meetup groups, including twenty-nine in the United States, thirty-two in Europe and five in Asia (Quantified Self). In *The Quantified Self: A Sociology of Self-Tracking* (2016), Deborah Lupton argues that although the QS movement is overtly concerned with monitoring mundane aspects of one’s daily patterns involving mood, diet, or sleep, it should be seen more broadly as “an ethos and apparatus of practices that has gathered momentum in this era of mobile and wearable digital devices and of increasingly sensor-saturated physical environments”.

The main motivation behind self-tracking is to gain “self-knowledge through numbers”—a phrase that has served as the QS movement’s catchphrase since its inception. The ancient maxim *nosce te ipsum* is evoked in the title of Wolf’s oft-cited article for *Wired*: “‘Know Thyself’: Tracking Every Facet of Life, from Sleep to Mood to Pain, 24/7/365”. Despite the philosophical overtones of both slogans, the knowledge acquired in the process is usually limited to physical parameters. The accumulated data enables the self-tracker—armed with the expertise of other members of the QS community[1]—to diagnose problem areas and then resolve those issues; in Melanie Swan’s words, “individuals are performing studies and then applying results to improve their quality of life” (93). A 2018 study by Dimitra Petrakaki, Eva Hilberg, and Justin Waring suggested that QS practices have a positive effect on “individuals’ empowerment by enabling better self-management, higher autonomy, more control and knowledge about one’s health condition” (De Moya and Pallud 941). Lupton adds that some QSers use self-tracking primarily as “a way of remembering and recording aspects of their lives” or merely to “satisfy their curiosity about the patterns in their behaviours” that they may discern.

Although data-gathering has become a virtually effortless and “painless process” (Young), critics have pointed to several potentially negative aspects—social and psychological—of committing to QS practices. Young recognizes the possibility

[1] According to Smith and Watson, the QS movement brought about the important shift from self-monitoring to “sharing such information for collectivized profiles of groups that serve as authorities on themselves” (88).

of a compulsive adherence to self-tracking,[2] which she sees as a reflection of the American "culture of relentless scheduling" and its "ideology of self-improvement". Jean-François De Moya and Jessie Pallud note that the omnipresent assistance of wearable tracking devices may lead to "dependence and enslavement". They also signal the possible use of such devices for surveillance purposes, which is why many recent publications have considered QS practices as a "threat to privacy" (941). De Moya and Pallud also suggest that the QS movement could be blamed for having contributed to the construction of "an information panopticon" (944). Finally, Elizabeth Rodrigues notes that, besides its "imbrication in larger political economies of surveillance", the movement has been criticized for adopting a "reductionist rhetoric of human selfhood". Those and other potentially harmful implications of an unreflective confidence in the truthfulness of data are analyzed by the emerging field of critical data studies ("Lives").

2. Information art and experimental life-writing

Although the release of Felton's first annual report in January 2006 preceded Wolf and Kelly's coinage of the "quantified self" and the launch of the QS movement by over a year, Felton's project, which continued until 2015 (the publication year of the 2014 report), was very much in dialogue with this social phenomenon and shared much of the movement's rationale. However, given Felton's background in graphic design and his work's conceptual and aesthetic qualities, it is also important to consider the artistic context of his project. *Annual Reports* could be viewed as part of the tradition of information art, also known as informatism and data art, which can be defined as a "field of electronic art that synthesizes computer science, information technology, and more classical forms of art, including performance art, visual art, new media art and conceptual art". It tends to draw its material from large amounts of data, which are then processed and represented with the aid of a computer (Hisour). As Mitchell Whitelaw argues in "Art Against Information: Case Studies in Data Practice", data art "draws data out, makes it explicit, literally provides it with an image" while asking about "data's constitution, potential, and significance".

Felton's predecessor in using information art for autobiographical purposes was London-based artist and designer Lucy Kimbell, who launched her one-year-long project titled *LIX Index* in April 2002. Its idea was to monitor and mark the shifts in the author's well-being from week to week in the form of a graph resembling a stock exchange index. Among the contributing factors were Kimbell's emotional, physical, and financial situation, the weather in London and global events.

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[2] Interestingly, similar concerns used to be raised about the supposed addictiveness of keeping a diary.

The index demonstrated dramatic variation—from the all-time low of −318,754.2 to the all-time high of +37,669.27. In her weekly commentaries, Kimbell explained the reasons for the sudden shifts in her well-being and addressed the imperfections of the index's methodology. *LIX Index* was commissioned by the Arts Council of England and Channel 4, which broadcast a short film about the project soon after its launch (Kimbell). Despite the evident parallels between Kimbell's and Felton's data-driven autobiographies and their temporal proximity, they have not been discussed in tandem by either critics or the authors themselves.

One more context in which I would like to embed my ensuing discussion of Felton's *Annual Reports* is that of experimental, genre-defying life-writing.[3] The practice of pausing once a year to take stock of one's life had been meticulously followed by the East German writer Christa Wolf from 1960 to 2011, the year of her death. Each year on 27 September, she wrote down what occupied her mind on that day, interspersing personal content with references to the social, political, and artistic context of the time. Wolf's annual diary entries were published as two volumes: *One Day a Year, 1960–2000* (2003/2007) and *One Day a Year, 2001–2011* (2013/2017). Felton's preoccupation with figures, which is absent from Wolf's project, is present in Gregory Burnham's rather obscure one-page piece titled "Subtotals" (1989), which reduces the author's life to a series of numbers, as exemplified by the work's opening lines: "Number of refrigerators I've lived with: 18. Number of rotten eggs I've thrown: 1. Number of finger rings I've owned: 3. Number of broken bones: 0. Number of Purple Hearts: 0. Number of times unfaithful to wife: 2" (Burnham 207). Burnham is consistent in combining the random and trivial with the intimate and revealing. According to David Shields and Elizabeth Cooperman, his "seemingly pointless data sheet … conveys in the most elegant shorthand that everything is significant and nothing is meaningful" (190). Among other unconventional, number-driven works of life-writing are Alan Bigelow's electronic work *My Life in Three Parts* (2013) and Steve Giasson's *Autoportrait* (2014), which is composed exclusively of numbers, whose significance can only be guessed by the reader.

3. *Annual Reports*—origin, focus, and form

Nicholas Felton's official website calls him "a designer, entrepreneur and artist". After earning a degree at the Rhode Island School of Design, he started work in the advertising industry and, as a side project, he began his data-driven autobiographical project. After six instalments of his annual reports, he was hired by Facebook, for which he designed its 2012 Timeline feature. He was also involved in the designing of other data-monitoring applications such as Reporter and Daytum

[3] Rodrigues argues that the origins of what she calls "data-driven life narratives" could be traced to such early twentieth-century American works as *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans* (1906), edited by Hamilton Holt, and Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (1909) ("Contiguous" 57).

(both of them for the iPhone) (Felton, "Biography"). Madeline Sorapure has called Felton "a personal infographic guru" (270). In a 2015 interview, Felton admitted that he had initially conceived of *Annual Reports* as "a quick project" to be shared with "friends and family"; the widespread interest it generated came as a complete surprise ("Tracing" 342). Throughout the ten years of self-tracking, Felton found that each report enhanced his "awareness of activities and habits on a daily basis", which, in turn, often motivated him to "improve [his] behavior." To a certain degree, he added, his meticulous recording of even the most trivial activities was meant to "defy death"—to save as much of his life as possible, also for the benefit of his descendants (345).

The initial report—*2005 Annual Report*—is composed of sixteen square pages, half of which present personal data and the other half contain illustrations. The cover image, which shows a bare-chested man during harvest, is followed by a stacked bar chart demonstrating Felton's work–play ratio for each consecutive week, which reveals that work dominates, except for a handful of leisurely weeks in February and October. From page three until the end, Felton intersperses an image illustrating a given category (Travel, Music, Photos, Books, Food & Drink, Miscellany, and About) with the relevant personal data. The travel section lists the names of states and countries visited (presented as a map and a pie chart, respectively), provides the number of flights taken (eighteen), their average distance, the total number of air miles, and the percentage of the distance to the Moon constituted by the latter value (25%). The reader may also learn that Felton went to seven countries in 2005, the longest stay being the one in Canada, which lasted eleven days. The music section is based on iTunes statistics and lists the most played artists and mixes, Felton's musical discoveries and the number of all songs played (16,862).[4] The next one offers a chart indicating the number of photos taken per country (the US, Morocco, and Spain occupying top positions), the ratio of digital to analogue photographs (3,754 to 0) and a pie chart of photographed subjects (cats constituting 1%). The book section provides no numerical data, only the best works in specific categories (Primo Levi's *The Monkey's Wrench* as the fiction pick) and several "honorable mentions" (including Jorge Luis Borges). The food and drink data focuses on favourite restaurants, meals, and refreshments. The author emerges as a lover of sushi and Stella Artois beer. From the miscellaneous section, the reader may learn, among other things, which websites Felton visited most often and the distance he ran during the year (218 miles). In a brief commentary posted on his website, the author explains that the original report was created "hastily" and based solely on the sources he had at his disposal when the year was over (Felton, *2014*).

There is no room here—or need—for detailed summaries of all ten reports. What I wish to outline are merely the shifts of focus and form in the ensuing editions.

[4] The statistics contained in this and other music sections of Felton's reports are most likely familiar to contemporary readers from campaigns such as Spotify Wrapped, which has been made available to the service's customers annually since 2016.

The 2006 report comprises fewer pages but contains far more data (systematically gathered throughout the year), which is compressed and rendered in the traditional rectangular book format. Several results evoke the poetics of Burnham's "Subtotals": the ratio of sent and received messages (2,823 to 2,899) and postcards (sixty to fourteen).[5] This report, as well as practically all others, is very much New York City-centred (304 days spent exclusively in Manhattan, *The New Yorker* being the most-read magazine). The 2007 report is a continuation and expansion of the meticulous data-gathering process initiated in 2006. Much more attention is paid to alcohol (968 beverages consumed) and caffeine intake. In this edition, Felton also introduced a pie chart detailing specific aspects of his "average day", such as the number of emails sent (15.9) and pages read (17.8) per day.

In retrospect, Felton regards the three initial reports as conveying "straightforward accountings", after which he began to try out "new lenses" for each year ("Tracing" 344). The 2008 report concentrates on distance. Among the data offered is the total number of miles covered by the author (38,524), his average speed (4.39 mph), as well as quirky trivia such as the number of miles travelled with a moustache (179). In his account of 2009, Felton focused on his 1,761 "significant encounters" with people, each of whom was asked to complete a survey about their meeting. Based on the 560 responses, Felton documented "a year of relationships, moods, activities, locations and experiences" (*2009*). Most encounters were with friends, took place in Manhattan or Brooklyn, and lasted approximately four hours. When asked to describe Felton's mood, his interlocutors indicated three hundred unique words, the most common of which was "happy" (used in seventy-six reports); as many as eleven words were synonyms of "tired". The *2010 Annual Report* was unlike any other before or after in that it did not concern Felton but his father, who had died that year, and covered the span of a lifetime. Although Felton could only use "the fragments of data [his father had] left behind" ("Tracing" 344), he managed to create a surprisingly detailed and multifaceted 24-page-long data-driven biography subtitled "The Paternal Report 1929–2010". Approximately half of the material is arranged chronologically (by decades), and the other half—by subject; thematic sections focus on genealogy, school reports, postcards, slides and photographs, passports, and places of interest on the world map. The closing two pages provide an array of arbitrarily selected numbers applying to Gordon Felton's lifetime, which resembles the underlying concept of "Subtotals"; the reader learns that he had had nine phone numbers and ten employers and had attended three baseball games and thirteen weddings.

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[5] One of the entries of "Subtotals" reads: "Number of postcards sent: 831; received: 416" (207). Burnham also includes similar comparisons of given and received kisses, compliments, and insults. It needs to be conceded, however, that in "Subtotals" many figures are most likely approximations, created to convey a certain effect—in this case of being a person who has given more than they have been offered.

The 2011 report was unique insofar as it covered two years, given Felton's decision to devote the entire space of his 2010 report to his father. The focus this time was on the extent to which the author's "behavior changed depending on who [he] was with" ("Tracing" 344), an idea inspired by Philip K. Dick's claim that "a person's authentic nature is a series of shifting, variegated planes that establish themselves as he relates to different people" (qtd. in Felton, *2011*). This time, the presentation of personal statistics was categorized by person, such as Mum, with whom Felton spent 325 hours at her house, had sixty-nine coffees, and listened to 679 songs. The account of 2012 is dominated by the data gathered with the use of Felton's self-designed Reporter app, which asked him questions (such as "Who are you with?" and "What are you wearing?") at specific, randomly scheduled moments during the day, while automatically collecting information about his location, the weather, photographs taken, and the like. Among the many findings are the probability (when pinged by the app) of being alone (43%) and of using a computer (30.8%). This report also provides detailed information about Felton's sleep habits, including the total number of hours he was asleep (2,814) and the proportion of the year he spent sleeping (32%).

In response to Edward Snowden's revelations about state-sanctioned surveillance, the 2013 report seeks to unveil "patterns and insights from a year of communication data including conversation, SMS, telephone calls, email, Facebook messages and physical mail" (Felton, *2013*). Of all the annual reports, this one seems the most packed with data, filled with innumerable figures in very fine print, and specialist charts, all placed against a very dark background, which evokes the ominous aura of totalitarian surveillance. Traditional text messages are revealed to have been Felton's most common communication medium (with just over 44,000 records), ahead of email, Facebook, regular mail, and telephone (only 320 instances). For all the media except regular mail, the number of messages received exceeds that of sent ones. Felton's communication records have registered over 7.6 million words, of which over 126,000 were unique words. The tenth and final report, released in October 2015, explores the self-tracking possibilities available in 2014 and testifies to the substantial change since the project's launch. In gathering data for this edition, Felton restricted himself to the widely available self-tracking applications.[6] The account is divided into four quarters of the year, and each section offers the same information, arranged by category. The final pages provide totals from which the reader may find out, among other things, that Felton spent 46.9 days listening to music, 6.8 days watching videos, and 15.4 days exercising.

What becomes immediately apparent to the reader of the annual reports is their consistently sparing use of text. Felton rarely formulates any metastatements, except occasionally at the beginning of a given edition (to explain the adopted methodology)

[6] His decision to complete the project by demonstrating the wide availability of the tools he had had to devise for his purposes could be interpreted as an assertion of a prophecy fulfilled and a logical end-point of his project.

and, in one instance (2008), at the opening of each section. Such comments tend to be one- or two-sentence long and are rendered in semiformal language. The most unusual statements are the facetious disclaimers in three consecutive reports (2006–2008) regarding the possible inaccuracy of the data concerning alcohol intake. In the 2007 report, Felton states, "Please note that due to the vagaries of the author's recollection while consuming alcohol, several drinks may have gone unrecorded". Otherwise, the use of text is confined to all kinds of names, brands, and titles, as well as the names of specific categories. In the latter case, the most common lexical patterns used are noun + past participle (e.g., "miles travelled" and "magazines read") and adjective + noun ("average fare" and "analog photos"). Whenever a larger block of text is featured, it is an enumeration of disconnected elements. As a result, the reports are not rich in literary merit and resemble a fairly raw presentation of data, whose interpretation is left to the reader.

All of the annual reports show Felton's great skill in employing cutting-edge design solutions. They have been widely praised both for their efficiency in conveying large amounts of data and for their aesthetic qualities. In *New Challenges for Data Design* David Bihanic observes that Felton successfully combines "multiple existing models for graphical data visualization", such as streamgraph, node-link tree, scatterplot and bubble chart, with his "original graphic proposals." He marvels at Felton's capacity for designing "very clean, consistent and minimalist visualizations" that, nonetheless, retain a "very distinctive and recognizable style" (qtd. in Felton, "Tracing" 349). The authors of *Reading Graphic Design in Cultural Context* note Felton's ability to integrate "emotive data" with "neutrality, complexity and clarity" (Lees-Maffei and Maffei 156). The apparent detachment and "cool objectivism" of Felton's accounts draws on the aesthetics of corporate reports (Davis and Hunt 149), which is signalled by Felton's artistic nickname "Feltron"—a fictitious corporation. Peter A. Hall and Patricio Dávila go so far as to call *Annual Reports* "a kind of parody of the 'aesthetics of administration'" (120). Between 2011 and 2017, consecutive editions were presented at various exhibitions (held by the Museum of Modern Art, the MIT Museum, SF MoMA, and many others) and design festivals (such as Graphic Design Festival Breda and Łódź Design Festival). Today, MoMA holds Felton's reports from 2006 to 2011 in its permanent collection. Later editions were available for purchase via the website feltron.com; the 2014 report had a limited run of three thousand copies, each available at the price of thirty dollars. Soon, all the released copies became collector's items (Sorapure 270).

4. Interpreting data, tracking change

When examining the data-studded contents of Felton's *Annual Reports*, the reader may wonder about the overall meaning of the information offered. Although individual nuggets of data carry some significance in themselves (for instance, the

title of the most played song or the average length of sleep), most of it generates a sense of bewilderment: what can one (the author, the reader) possibly make of all those charts and figures, if the 2013 report alone showcases thirty-nine of the former and over five hundred of the latter? With all the widely available technology in place, it has become much easier to collect and process complex personal data than to draw meaningful conclusions from it. Felton never articulates such observations, leaving the reader with aesthetically arranged but, otherwise, barely mediated data. The question of how seriously Felton takes his data and the project at large is difficult to establish in certain reports. On the one hand, the report devoted to his recently deceased father certainly plays an important role, which is to commemorate his life and pay some form of tribute to Gordon Felton.[7] On the other hand, the author occasionally makes playful remarks, such as the recurrent disclaimer in statistics on alcohol consumption that "an occasional drink may have gone unrecorded", or the inclusion of data that could only amuse the reader for being completely random.

Despite the occasional wink, Felton's attitude to his project was marked with a high dose of earnestness and idealism, which only becomes apparent in his epitextual commentaries. In an interview from 2014, the author admitted that, for him, the *Annual Reports* project was no less than "a search for TRUTH" ("Tracing" 342, emphasis original). "There is a thought within me", he continued, "that if I can record just the right data and display it in the right way, I may discover something … some crystalline structure, a higher order than I am able to experience" (342). This statement is cited by Elizabeth Rodrigues as proof of Felton's "more-or-less credulous approach to data collection and visualization as self-revelation". His metaphor of a "crystalline structure" evokes Sorapure's statement about the common perception of data as "something of a mirror" in which self-trackers "see themselves reflected" (270). José van Dijck has coined the term "dataism" to account for the belief, shared by many QS aficionados,[8] in "the objective quantification and potential tracking of all kinds of human behavior and sociality through online media technologies" (198). Anthony McCosker and Rowan Wilken, in turn, have argued that visualizations of big data are motivated by "a fantasy of knowing", a longing for "total knowledge" (qtd. in Rettberg 65).

Regardless of the extent to which Felton could personally be deemed liable to the dataist overconfidence in the significance of numbers, his outlook need not be shared by the reader of *Annual Reports*, who can interpret the data as they wish.

[7] Even so, the inclusion of some pieces of data—such as "Photos of Gordon's vices: 7 pipe, 2 cigarettes, 1 beer, 1 wine"—has a humorous undertone. The same could be said about setting the father's average location on the map throughout his life approximately in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

[8] Gary Wolf, the co-founder of the QS movement, has said, "For a certain type of person, data is the most important thing you can trust", and added, "Computers don't lie. People lie" (qtd. in Lupton).

Even if the data provided by Felton is insufficient to uncover any capital-letter truth about him (let alone "truth" rendered in all caps), it is certainly ample to establish many facts (or truths in plural) about his body, daily routines, work-life balance, and taste. In the remainder of this article, I shall examine an aspect of *Annual Reports* that—thanks to its extended timespan—this kind of project is perhaps better positioned to document than any other autobiographical form available, namely change. My focus will not be on the change-effecting events that took place in Felton's life (the loss of his father) or in the world (the election of Barack Obama, whose campaign slogan was "Change we can believe in") between 2005 and 2014 (and that are noted in the reports), but on the variation of specific parameters in time—within a given year and across consecutive annual reports. I will scrutinize several aspects of Felton's life that are frequently represented in his reports: his work–play ratio, food, and alcohol intake and reading habits. Finally, I will indicate how specific data could be viewed as a reflection of the changing world.

The majority of his annual reports contain information about Felton's professional life. However, in most editions, the author presents the accumulated data differently. The reader is shown, for example, stacked bars showing the percentage of time spent working every week in 2005, the percentage of free time versus time spent at work in 2008 or the probability of working when pinged by his app in 2012. That way, a precise comparison of the changes in Felton's habits is impossible for the reader, but the gathered data certainly offered that possibility to the author. The only reports that provide the same kind of information are those from 2006 and 2007; in the latter, Felton had fewer working days (277 to 284) and more holidays (thirty-eight to twenty-six days). The charts included in the 2007 report demonstrate that winter and late autumn contained substantially more working days than spring and summer. Nonetheless, October was the month with the most days off work; as the reader may glean from the photography section, that was the time when Felton took a trip to China and Nepal. One may conclude that the fragmentary information available about the author's work-life balance makes it difficult for the reader to draw any firm conclusions about the possible developments or shifts in that domain.

Food, referenced in all the reports, is undoubtedly a keen interest and a source of great enjoyment for Felton. As is the case with the work–play ratio, most information about diet and dining is presented differently each year, focusing on curiosities (tasting horse meat in 2007 or eating as many as twenty-eight types of fish in 2009). One may observe that, over six years, Felton considerably reduced the amount of meat in his diet. In 2007, meatless dishes constituted only 9% of all his meals, whereas in 2012 the probability of eating vegetables to consuming meat was 149 to sixty-three. Including in his report the information that his worst meal in 2008 was at a Burger King (in Salt Lake City) may be a tongue-in-cheek indication of his general dietary shift away from meat. Although Felton ate out regularly throughout the surveyed decade, one may note a significant rise in the number of

restaurants visited between 2008 and 2011 (eighty-one to 597) and then a decrease to 350 in 2012. It is also easy to observe Felton's changing affinities for specific food establishments. In 2005 and 2006, the East Village branch of Takahachi, a Japanese restaurant, was the one most visited by the author. In 2007, Takahachi Tribeca, which occupied fourth and second place in 2005 and 2006, became the most frequented restaurant (while Takahachi East Village came third). While Felton continued to visit the Tribeca branch regularly in the following years, the East Village restaurant became a rare destination (with only two visits in 2010 and 2011). Such observations may not be noteworthy for the average reader, but they might interest the data-gatherer themselves.

Alcohol consumption is also an aspect of Felton's daily life that he documented very meticulously. Although, again, much of the shared information is anecdotal (seven Bloody Marys consumed in 2008, 3 a.m. being the "booziest" hour in 2014), a clear tendency can be observed: Felton, who was twenty-eight when the project was launched and thirty-eight when he wrapped it up, drank less alcohol over time. In 2007, he consumed, on average, 2.7 alcoholic beverages per day, which amounts to approximately twenty drinks more in total than the following year (968). In 2011, the total number of alcoholic beverages dropped to 810 and then further down to 714 in the final report. This tendency is also confirmed by the reported decrease from 895.5 social drinks in 2006 to 573 in 2008. The data presented by Felton also shows shifts in taste. Whereas in the two first editions Stella Artois was his favourite alcoholic beverage (with as many as 293 bottles consumed in 2006), its consumption steadily declined until 2012, when he only had it three times.

Half of the annual reports offer a summary of Felton's reading, which includes both quantitative and qualitative data. The number of books read (including those unfinished) declined from twenty in 2007 to fourteen in 2008 and 2012. When comparing the first and last reports that feature an account of his reading (2005 and 2012), one may notice a preference shift from highbrow literary fiction to genre fiction and bestselling non-fiction. The former is represented by works of Primo Levi (his books are mentioned in the first three reports) and Jorge Luis Borges, while the latter—by a techno-thriller, a science-fiction novel, Walter Isaacson's biography of Steve Jobs, and several books on design. In the early reports, one can also find such acclaimed works of literary fiction as David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*—a winner of the Whitbread Book Award. However, what appears to be a testament to the evolution of taste may, in fact, only be a brief phase; the data from only five reports is insufficient to make any definitive statements about any lasting changes in Felton's reading habits.

The last aspect of change to be addressed is the data that could be interpreted as symptomatic of sociocultural or technological shifts within the surveyed decade. Regarding media of communication, one may notice a radical increase in the number of text messages sent and received between 2006 and 2013. In the former,

the corresponding figures were 2,823 and 2,899, whereas in the latter they were 18,131 and 25,895. The number of received postcards declined from fourteen to thirteen in 2006 and 2007, after which they disappeared from the reports altogether. Among the other signs of the times signalled by Felton's data is the superseding of analogue photos by digital photography (648 to 6,115 in 2007), of cinema by Netflix (eighteen to thirty films watched in 2007), and of CDs by downloaded albums (two to fourty-six in 2008). Furthermore, Felton's very project can be conceived as evidence of the rapid rise of self-tracking, which was a catalyst for the QS movement whose launch and peak occurred within the decade encompassed by *Annual Reports*. The great increase in the availability of self-tracking technology is, as has already been noted, the focus of Felton's closing report.

5. A data-driven self-portrait

If Felton's extended self-tracking project offers limited insight into the changes that occurred in the course of the documented decade, it is a result of his decision to privilege the thematic variety and attractiveness of the showcased data over the monotony of providing the same parameters displayed over time. That feature, however, is not inherent in data-driven autobiography, which enables its author to track their changing preferences in multiple domains. If some of the indicated changes in Felton's life seem trivial, it is more a consequence of Felton's decisions regarding which data to accumulate than of the intrinsic limitations of such data-focused projects. While Nora Young justifiably argues that the "computational view of the self doesn't leave room for that which is not reducible to being computed", there are many personal—and potentially revealing—parameters that could have been tracked and presented in the reports, such as the incidence of thoughts about ageing and mortality, the persistence of the sexual drive, or of the author's ideological stance on certain socially divisive subjects (for instance, by answering the same set of multiple-choice questions every year), to name but a few.

Annual Reports are not personal in the way that autobiography is often expected to be—for one, the reader will not learn anything about Felton's romantic or sexual relationships—but enough information is shared to form an image of the author. In lieu of the definitive "TRUTH" (which Felton admitted he wished to attain through his project), the reader can glean multiple small truths: that Felton is tech-savvy, well-off, sociable, and keenly interested in art, travel, and food, as well as a confirmed New Yorker. His data-driven self-portrait is multifaceted, not reducible to a single idea or narrative. In that sense, it conforms to Rodrigues's observations that "self-tracking technologies model the self as an assemblage of discrete experiences and physical states" ("Lives") and that "the epistemology of data plays a role in representing selves as provisional and precarious" ("Contiguous" 70). Felton should be recognized for succeeding in averting several of the earlier indicated pitfalls

of dataism: his self-portrait does not feel reductionist; his data-gathering is not presented as compulsive to the degree that he fixates on the same strict metrics, as he varied these from year to year and ultimately was able to terminate the project; nor does he appear to fall victim to apophenia by detecting meaningful patterns in seemingly arbitrary fluctuations in the data. Also, Felton is not intent on fully controlling the interpretation of his self-portrait. Although he chooses which data to include and how to present it, the wealth and arrangement of information is such that no conclusions are forced upon the reader, who is granted a lot of interpretive freedom. At a time when data-gathering evokes primarily sinister associations, Felton's project can serve as a reminder that self-tracking also has a benign side—if not profoundly revelatory, then at least harmless, occasionally illuminating and amusing, for the data-gatherer and their audience alike. Felton's persistence in cultivating annual reports for ten years and their widespread appeal are proof that—in Young's words—"[t]here is pleasure to be had in data"—"the pleasure we take in patterns, an almost aesthetic experience."

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