

LINES

Sarah muses about some of her links to others

My foetal life was a privileged one. Not only has my mother closely watched over it, but both she and I enjoyed support from caring relatives and the formidable means of modern medicine. Thus, long before my birth, my mother's medical records had store up about me a hundred lines of text of observations, test results, diagnostic findings and decisions. Not to mention the thousands of lines of ultrasound images, which were also placed on the social network page of my mother where she received advices and encouragements from close ones as well as from specialists.

Barely out of the womb, the confirmation of my vital signs allowed the opening of my very own medical record. I must admit that, for some time, it was identified by the bland first name... "Baby". Still, it was with the creation of this file that I finally became a "patient" in my own right after months of medical care.

My noisy exhausting birth was quickly followed by another more subtle but no less decisive one: that of a new citizen. It took place by the registration of a few lines on a form for the vital statistics registrar. This seemingly minor gesture immediately made me the bearer of numerous legal rights and benefits - and later of obligations - among this society where by chance of history and genetics I entered life.

These privileges and duties incidentally change in as much as the recorded date of my birth makes me cross the threshold of a new period of my life. This was the case, for example, when I reached the age of vaccination, then that of pre-school education. Today, adolescence makes me successively reach the ages when I become authorized to see certain movies at theatres, to borrow new categories of books at the library, to participate in particular sporting and cultural activities or to drive increasingly demanding classes of vehicles. The age to go to medical or psychosocial consultation without the permission of my parents. The ages when I become increasingly responsible for the consequences of my actions under civil, penal and criminal law. Soon, coming of age will mark the day of legal emancipation from adults' tutorship. I will also acquire then the right to vote and even to offer my own candidacy for various elected offices. The list goes on and on since the rules or by-laws where age is the criterion come by the thousands. Each time, the shift to a new status in my dealings with others will be certified

by a line on some official card or other document, often as short as only eight or even six characters that specify a day, a month and a year.

The vital statistics registry where my birth was recorded also specifies the persons who identified themselves as my parents. By these few lines, they are thus recognized with direct responsibilities and authorities over my health, my well-being and my education. My parents. Officially recognized as such by the State for which the registry is administered. Also recognized by the most diverse organizations around the world to which a certified copy of this record could have been presented. The official entry in the passports of Mom and Dad reassured public carriers, customs, hotels, police, pharmacists and others whom we met while traveling.

Other descent lines compiled in the same vital statistics registry equally inserts me in a web of formal and informal relationships extending beyond my grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Thus, as soon as I breathed my first air the registration of the death of a relative could have, by law and will, made me a beneficiary of an inheritance. Or in an even more terrible occasion, to witness transfer into other hands of the custody of the orphan that I would have become. Similarly, no sooner had I suck my first milk that every new birth registration of a new member of these lineages extended my own family responsibilities, if any.

Meanwhile, once my parents officially gave me full name they were already using it to fill the many other forms ... in my name, literally. Registration of these few words made me "insured person" of the public system and of the private insurance company covering payment of my healthcare and medication. The same way, my parents named me "beneficiary" of their life insurance policies, savings accounts and other assets. Then, I became "patient" of a paediatric clinic, and future "child" client of a day-care centre. Each appearance of my first and last names on the lines of a form made me acquire a new status in relation to someone else.

What about the countless appearances of my name in the texts, images and videos exchanges between my parents and their relatives. Several found themselves on websites, some on restricted pages, others on public pages, thus explored by the search engines and reachable by anyone around the world.

Obviously, I understood all those details only later. That was when I learned not only reading, writing, draw and photography, but also the very nature of words, numbers, sentences, sounds and images. What they can represent. How they can be handled. And most importantly, for what they can use in our dealings with each other.

This is how, for example, my parents, my teachers and other people explained to me my school report card. What are the meanings of each of these rows and columns of marks, notes and comments. Who produces each of these elements, how and why. How these talk about me, but not just me: these rows and columns equally speak of other students in my class, of my teachers and of my school. How I can - and should! - use the content of the report card to focus my learning. How my teachers and parents can and should use it to guide me and help me to be successful. How they were used by the end of each year to decide on my promotion to the next grade level and my access to specific courses. To decide on my admission to my current secondary school study program. Possibly for my admission to postsecondary schools and programs. And then, to decide on my hiring, my promotion, my salary.

Similarly, I was explained how the school principals compile report cards of all my class, of my whole level, of the entire establishment in order. How they use these compilations to assess the strength of groups, the numbers of gifted students and of those in difficulty, the work of teachers and other professionals, the best possible allocation of available personnel, facilities and money. How compilations of educational outcomes are also used to rate my school and ranked it among others. How in return the classifications given to my school bring many to qualify the value of my own academic performance. How parents use the ratings to choose the school where they will admit their children. How education professionals do the same to check at which school they would prefer to work. Just as universities and employers do to select among persons who have submitted applications. How school authorities, government, parents, researchers, journalists and other citizens to use compilations, scores and rankings and other statistics to judge the performance of the schools and their principals, of the means at their disposal, of the curricula and, ultimately, of the government's work. Sooner or later, information about myself will be used to judge, to decide.

Often, I happened to witness discussions between adults or students about the new report card. Often fiery debates. Is the meaning assigned to each mark clear and adequate? Do these marks have any practical significance? Should the report card indicate if a student has achieved or not certain educational goals and with what level of success? Or should it rather sort students in relation to each other? Or both? Is the report card primarily aimed at the teacher, the parent, the student or the school authorities? Do the ratings of a school match up well with its reality? Why do the ratings, rankings and statistics produced on a same school by different organizations often contradict each other? Is such information helpful or harmful? To whom and how? What exactly do the figures on graduates, absenteeism and dropout rates or performance of country's students in international tests tell us about the state of our education system? Even on the state of our whole

society? Thus, information about myself cause as many questions and arguments than answers or knowledge.

It's truly fascinating. So many people, me included, interact through the report card. Mine and those of my classmates. So many people formulate so many opinions or conclusions and take so many decisions through the marks and annotations that the ballot aligned horizontally and vertically. So many others again decide or conclude from all those statistics that these marks permit to produce. So much that I am often caught by vertigo when I contemplate my latest report card and try to gradually decipher its contents.

The report card is but one example. My parents, school, various sites and publications, classmates are constantly teaching me how to detect around me the signs of use of personal information. The questionnaires I am asked to complete. Fields' boxes to be filled on my web profile pages or publication. Slips and receipts I am given. The litany of statistics being quoted and explained to at school or in the media. Cookies which my web browser allows or disallows the storage on my computer. Captivating files about sports players and teams or about entertainment celebrities.

My parents in particular relentlessly try to teach me "the value of information." The one that we give. The one that we share. The one that buy or produce at expensive cost. The one we prefer to keep to ourselves. The one that becomes the basis or the pretext for a decision. The one that marks a life forever.

My teachers encourage me to identify what relationships others establish with me through the handling of information. Through this form, am I a "client" here? A "member" of a group or association? A "study subject" of a serious research organisation or just a "curious reader" of a magazine submitting to some psychological pseudo test? A "petitioner"? A "citizen"? A "potential customer" whose name or attention will be sold?

Then they train my reflex to recognize on the same form: Who decided on the questions, categories and choices of answers? Who decides on the meaning of the words and numbers that I put in or select? Who decides on their use? Who decides on the consequences of one response compared to those resulting from a different answer? Who decides? Is it me? Is it the clerk who helps me fill the form? Those who designed the document, the service or activity, the electronic device or program? Democratically elected officers? Unknown technocrats? Sponsors firms? Each a little?

Then my teachers leads me to wonder about who learns more about the other through this information? And possibly learn what? Then, who can decide what about the other?

I am constantly shown the benefits of building me up throughout my life a contacts list full of colleagues, friends and relations. Of establishing and maintaining good school grades, a good credit rating, good personal and professional references. Of controlling as much as possible what I publish about myself. Especially on the web, through message and posting services, discussion forums, blogs, albums, meeting and socializing spaces, or games in which I participate. I am also pressed to check regularly what others communicate or publish about me. I am being explained how to react if lies or errors come out.

I am being taught how to generate from various sources of statistical information that will help me to support or contradict an idea, an argument, a project, an analysis... and, of course, how one can bring these statistics to talk accordingly!

My parents particularly cautioned me against the false mirror of statistics. "Sarah, always remember that you are a unique human being! Never a mere statistic, nor a profile, nor a label!"

Never mind the average age of the first kiss, first sexual intercourse or first car. Don't care about predictions about life expectancy, educational or professional success (or failure) rates, average likelihood of marriage and divorce or the supposed improbability of finding a mate once passed the 60, 50 or 40 years mark. Or even the 30 years one! All these percentages and averages that flooded my reading and conversations embody neither normality nor fate. Indeed, these numbers do speak of my world, my generation or my gender. But not of me in particular. "Despite your teenage doubts, you must never seek in them the answer about who you are or who you will be." My parents insist on my condition of free and unique human being. "Never let anyone define you in statistical terms. Never let anyone decide about your life solely on a category appearing in a form or a template. "

By dint of such teachings, I could only realize how I move about in a world that is organized through various forms of writing, various forms of information. Increasingly, because the world still keeps on its digitalization and computerization. Relentlessly.

I become conscious that am not only a member of a society where information prevails.

My own existence is information life cycles. It is completely crossed over by them.

The smallest of my actions might cause a trace in the form of information items. This smallest of gestures can precisely be the act of producing some information. Or it may require of me, another person or a machine to handle certain information items. A few lines then define, embody and support some part of the relationship established between me and others. Between others and me. Other lines feed my decisions. The same lines or

other ones feed their decisions. Various devices can carry our respective acts, our relationships and decisions over very long distances. They can multiply them ad infinitum. Save them for only a fraction of a second or in perpetuity, long after our mortal bodies will be gone. Forms and machines' programs mark out; channel our actions, our relationships and our decisions. They regulate them with increasingly staggering efficiency.

I understand that I grow through countless lines of text, signals and programs.

A substantial part of the world and a substantial part of me can be found between these lines.

Conversely, a fair share of the understanding of the world and of myself comes out of the handling and interpretation of these same lines.

In a word, I find out that all my life I will have to learn to live between the lines.