

<http://somatosphere.net/2014/04/web-roundup-the-body-and-big-data.html>

Web Roundup: The Body and Big Data

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By Emily Goldsher-Diamond

This month's web roundup will take a brief look at the body in the face of big data. You may have heard that a panel from the recent [Theorizing the Web](#) conference held in Brooklyn [featured a dynamic talk by sociologist Dr. Janet Vertesi on pregnancy and big data](#). When Dr. Vertesi found out she was pregnant, she sought to hide this fact from the web, citing the tremendous value of pregnant women to marketers that utilize big data in the hopes of ever-expanding their profits. Dr. Vertesi's story of digital subterfuge and obfuscation was picked up by [Jezebel](#), [Forbes](#), [Salon](#) and [ThinkProgress](#), just to name a few. On one hand, the widespread interest in this particular story indicates that perhaps consumers are capable of resistance toward the seemingly ubiquitous forces of big data; however, the massive growth of self-tracking technologies that continue processes of data prosumption also complicate hopes for any embodied resistance on the part of users in general. While the Vertesi story certainly caught the eye of the mainstream media, it in no way represents the majority attitude toward technologies tied to the rise of big data.

[In fact, TrendWatching.com issued their April trend briefing, titled "The Internet of Caring Things,"](#) pointing out consumer movement away from the "internet of things" and towards technology that, in one way or another, provides care, and more surprisingly, allow users to care for the technology in return. This suggestion, ostensibly provided for an audience of marketers and manufacturers, moves the emphasis on thing-ness (ie. the consumption and even prosumption of digital goods and services) to the creation and maintenance of *relationships* between users and their technologies located somewhere between big data and the body. TrendWatch points to changes in the kinds of technology being sold (since 2005, sales have slipped for PCs but continue to rise for mobiles and tablets) and the increase of geotargeting and cloud storage as reason enough to believe that a paradigmatic shift in priorities is rapidly taking place. The report trumpets that "Caring objects...put people first." But what are caring objects? Linked are undeniably bodily pieces of tech, meant for wellness and health in one way or another: [FitBit](#), [Nike+ Fuelband SE](#) and the [NEST Smart Thermostat](#) are just a few items in the report.

Another way to look at the body and big data, especially in the face of

TrendWatch's "internet of caring things," is to consider a recent post published by *Men's Health* entitled "[How to Be Your Own Doctor.](#)" The short blog post simultaneously advocates for self-care while suggesting that the embodied patient/doctor relationship can be replaced by meticulous usage of self-tracking technologies like [UBiome](#) (which promises users that they too can understand the microbiome) and [Talking20](#) (their slogan is, "Your body is talking to you. Let's find out what it's saying"). Not only do these two particular platforms offer a kind of care using strategies pulled from both medicine and consumer technology, but they also cultivate the idea that using their services can offer knowledge better than what a doctor might possibly know. You can be better than well, because they know you, which means they know you and your body better than your doctor.

In many ways, big data, despite being a grandiosely named phenomenon, is surprisingly individual-centric. Over at Wired, [Matthew Jordan and Nikki Pfarr issue a call](#) for self-tracking gadgets that "address a second degree of meaning, where self-tracking helps motivate people toward self-improvement, and a third degree of meaning, where people can use data to make better choices in the moments when a decision is actually being made." This is in contrast to what they call the "first degree of meaning," which is bound to the "novelty of gratuitous behavioral data." The aforementioned technologies, from FitBit to UBiome, certainly indicate an interest in self-improvement and informed decision making. But Jordan and Pfarr take this call for meaning-making a step further, looking to platforms like [Crohnology](#) and [PatientsLikeMe](#), which have social aspects beyond sharable goals and rewards. While embodied relationships between doctor and patient might very well be replaced or supplemented by smart technologies that utilize big data to increase self-knowledge, Jordan and Pfarr advocate for "the quantified us," which creates embodied relationships between users grappling with similar experiences. We have long known that the web is fertile ground for the creation and maintenance of biosocial communities, but whether or not self-tracking can sustainably expand beyond the self is yet to be seen.

More links of interest:

Anthropology blog [Savage Minds](#) is doing awesome weekly [Around the Web](#) posts that cover everything from fertility and race to cross-cultural farting.

["This Woman's Online Heartbeat Will Make You Think About Big Data and the Quantified Self"](#) – Fast Company

["SA Consultancy Anthropology Launches, Aims to Create 'Meaningful' Marketing"](#) – VentureBurn

["Google and the Flu: How Big Data Will Help Us Make Gigantic Mistakes"](#)

– The Guardian

["Your Big Data is Worthless If You Don't Bring It Into the Real World"](#) –

Wired

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