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Infotality: On Living, Loving, and Dying Through Information

Joel Michael Reynolds , The Hastings Center

Ethical analyses lag behind the phenomena to which they respond. The revolutions of the information age have exacerbated this age-old predicament, frustrating the plodding of philosophers and humanists set upon Minervic insights. Despite this, Danaher and colleagues (2018) provide a comprehensive and compelling analysis of the ways in which the rise of self-tracking technologies is shaping and will likely continue to shape romantic relations. Its merits notwithstanding, their article misses the larger ethical point: The lived experience of human living and dying—of our bodies, relationships, and ever-shifting constellations of havings, doings, and beings—is becoming increasingly mediated by generalized, statistical information, and this mediation is changing the contours of human experience at a fundamental, not incidental, level. I call this our *infotality*: the way we increasingly experience natality and mortality through the lens of statistical information.

I first argue against the authors' claim that the type of human practice in question is historically unremarkable. Drawing on the work of intellectual historian and philosopher Michel Foucault, I argue that infotality is indeed novel and is best understood as the historical product of biopolitics, healthism, and informatics. I then critique the authors' "stance of cautious openness," which misunderstands the aims of the technology in question and the fundamental ambiguity of the role information plays in the achievement of human well-being. Self-tracking technologies are not primarily designed to change behavior; they are designed to create and sustain the desire for their use, allowing recursive capitalizations of the information they procure, store, mine, and sell. I conclude by suggesting that infotality names a new way to fall for an old ruse: the promise that more information means more well-being.

INFOTALITY

The authors assert that the type of human practice at issue—quantifying actions in the service of preset, behavioral goals—is not novel. What is new, they suggest, are

the ends, ease, and scope self-tracking apps today offer for this old-age practice and specifically with respect to romantic relationships. In short, the nature of the human practice in question has not changed, only the possibilities of its actualization. This distinction, however, is misleading. The primary ethical issue raised by quantificational technologies is how statistical information is valued relative to experiential knowledge. It is neither simply a question of the means, ends, ease, scope, specific application, or intrinsic value of such technologies, important though that is, but of the very parameters by which we judge the meaningfulness of life. Each of the eight objections the authors discuss misses this larger point.

A second disagreement concerns the nature of such technologies. The authors suggest, though at times only *arguendo*, that the ends of such technologies are human behavior modification. I think that this is correct on the whole, but the specific ends the authors identify are not. These applications are not ultimately designed to create prosocial, romantic behavior; they are designed to create the desire for their continued use. In this light, how should one assess the authors' call for "greater empirical investigation of the effects of these technologies on our attitudes to others and on the utility of these technologies in changing behavior" (17)? My concern here is not ultimately about the specific ways in which we are mining and using data or about whether these technologies are good or bad. My concern is about the larger question of how these technologies and the types of information they provide are changing the structures of human existence. Critical social scientific and philosophical research suggests that these technologies are not simply tracking how we love, work, exercise, and so on, or altering the values of these activities (see Sharon 2017). They are in fact creating the very world in which we love, work, exercise, or do anything at all. That is to say, they are not just changing human possibilities; they are changing the conditions of human possibilities. If we are already in the thick of a

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shift in the very framework by which we judge our lives, then empirical investigation of attitudinal effects and utility will likely reflect nothing more than downstream results of that change, missing the heart of the matter and the shift in existential conditions that precipitated them.

As a recent consensus document concerning human cellular biotechnologies notes, “the pursuit of basic science is largely possible because of public financial support” (Wolpe, Rommelfanger, and the Drafting Reviewing Delegates of the Beings Working Groups 2017, 1053). This claim is presented as central to any ethical endeavor to evaluate scientific research, including that of basic science. As Danaher and colleagues note, but do not sufficiently take into account in their analysis, “Many of [these] apps and technologies . . . are made for commercial purposes” (4). Put more finely, the pursuit of self-tracking technologies is largely possible because of private-sector financial support aimed at securing and increasing the gains of shareholders in a volatile, global, demand-driven market. This context is essential, not coincidental or ethically perfunctory to the story one tells about self-tracking technology. I raise this concern because it is not reducible to what the authors discuss under the banner of the “neoliberalism” critique, which largely ignores the decisive historical forces at play. I now turn to very briefly place this concern in its broader historical context.

BIOPOLITICS, HEALTHISM, AND INFORMATICS

Whether with respect to friendly, filial, romantic, business, civic, or global relations, we have largely lost the ability to think about being-in-the-world outside of frames of health. In other words, the biomedicalization of both the public and private sphere has led to a totalization and reduction of human being-in-the-world to questions of health (Hallin, Brandt, and Briggs 2013). I refer to this as “healthism” (see Crawford 1980), though I am hesitant to characterize this phenomenon in the pathological terminology of obsession, as the Danaher and colleagues at one point do.

Healthism, in turn, is one result of what Michel Foucault calls “biopolitics.” According to Foucault, in the 18th century we moved from a social order in which power was centralized (monarchical rule by threat of the sword) to a social order in which it was decentralized (biopolitical rule by the state through “regimes of health” pertaining to population, hygiene, birthrate, life expectancy, and race) (Foucault 2008). Today, we are entering a new age as information technologies (e.g., smart phones) are creating a new configuration of power: the power of individuals to biomedicalize every aspect of their own life—from REM cycles slept to dutifully walked steps.

In concert with the advent and pervasiveness of biopolitics as a means of governance, one must also reckon with the rise of informatics: the private and public endeavors pertaining to digital information. Informatics has dried the paint of biopolitics, rendering each of us biocitizens, responsible for our health, our communities’, and the public’s at

large. Even with respect to models that combine individual and social factors, the determination of health is assessed through information abstracted from real, living individuals and then reapplied with broad strokes to real, living individuals and the many ways we group them: family, community, race, sex, dis/ability, state, nation, and globe. The quality of our existence is filtered through quantitative metrics aimed ultimately at the productivity of populations in an interminable contest between nation-states. This filter is so deeply embedded that we don’t see it, and even if we do, we often can’t see what’s wrong with it—even when it comes to a phenomenon like love. On my view, biopolitics, healthism, and informatics fundamentally shape both the conditions and meaningfulness of romantic relationships, including both that and the way in which they are experienced in terms of health.

SELF-TRACKING IN CONTEXT

It is well established that where and into how much wealth one is born are more determinate factors for one’s health than nearly anything else (Braveman and Gottlieb 2014; Grantham-Mcgregor et al. 2007). Settler colonialism, border imperialism, Western military-industrial complexes, mass incarceration, and state policing are the primary forces determining health patterns, both local and global, and the relationships that are supported or destroyed in their wake (Wolfe 2006; Nail 2016; Alexander 2012). Far from whataboutism, I raise these issues insofar as they are profoundly relevant for the “health” of romantic relations as well. Taken uncritically and without historical contextualization, self-tracking technologies feed into illusions of personal autonomy and numb us to the political revolutions necessary to meaningfully promote health and justice for all in the thrall of forces as perniciously entrenched and self-perpetuating as these.

Given the type of beings we are, we act and must act with incomplete information. Even if, in a hypothetical universe, we possessed all the information relevant for a given task or purpose or entire course of a life, it would not thereby amount to knowledge. The ultimate ethical stake of the “quantified relationship” is how the human condition is today shaped by a novel feature: infotility. Yet information is not knowledge, and knowledge is not wisdom. It is exceedingly difficult to cultivate what Aristotle called *phronesis*: practical wisdom or discernment (Aristotle 2000). And it is such discernment about the historical forces shaping both our values and their conditions that bioethics needs today more than ever. ■

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Love in the Time of Quantified Relationships

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Hygiene is an important aspect of intimate liaisons—including those related to quantified relationships (QR). Much like hygiene in the physical world, digital hygiene serves as prophylaxis for viruses and other undesirable contagions. In this context, digital hygiene refers the maintenance of proper cyber-habits, such as privacy and security, which promote digital health. And, like the real world, poor hygiene of some individuals in the virtual world leaves them and others open to risk. Privacy is an omnipresent concern in socio-technical systems, and this is no wonder, considering the wide variance in knowledge of cybersecurity topics and techniques across the population (Pew Research Center 2017) and the vast amounts of data that are collected, stored, and used for a panoply of purposes that are frequently hidden or otherwise obscured from end users. Yet this aspect of digital hygiene is explicitly ignored by the authors despite the claim that “there is no blanket objection to, or knockdown argument against, QR technologies” (Danaher, Nyholm, and Earp 2018, 9). Privacy issues are among the most, if not the most, salient and troubling issues that arise in this context; therefore, the authors’ analysis of the ethical issues of QR is incomplete, and their conclusion rests upon a straw man.

In their consideration of the moral status of QR technologies, Danaher and colleagues name eight objections to QR technologies and discuss all but one of them, claiming that privacy-related threats are already “widely discussed and debated in other contexts” (9), rendering further elucidation unnecessary. This is a rather weak rationale since ethics literature regularly sees commentary on matters that have been widely discussed, some of them for millennia, with an evolving discourse that may change tone depending upon context of the issue presented. Moreover, Danaher and colleagues in part define QR by its surveillance capabilities and characterize some of its covert technologies as “blatantly sinister” (6) yet still choose to ignore those aspects in their analysis. In the digital age, modern conceptions of privacy have become as decrepit as those relating to confidentiality (Siegler 1982), and as such require additional ethical scrutiny rather than less. The discourse on privacy requires reification to protect the vulnerable because there are a great many unintended consequences that result from the consumption of digital media and associated social technologies. To wit, the source that the authors offer as their example of the wide and rich privacy debate calls for a reconceptualization of

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