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Let's Move Beyond Critique—But Please, Let's Not Depoliticize the Debate

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Many of us have by now grown weary of the endless onslaught of new applications and gadgets for tracking and, somehow, improving aspects of our lives that we did not know were a problem. “App fatigue” may finally be upon us. But that is no reason not to take seriously the impact of the long arm of quantification into areas of valued human activities, such as intimate and romantic relationships—the focus of Danaher and colleagues’ article (2018). These authors want to subject the relatively new practice of relationship tracking to ethical inquiry, by identifying and scrutinizing the main objectives to this practice in the literature on self-tracking, and using this analysis to develop a roadmap for future research. This is an important goal. The problem is that Danaher and colleagues do not actually engage in a serious manner with the critical literature on self-tracking—and in so doing depoliticize a practice that cannot be dissociated from the larger political economy of datafication in which it is taking place. While I agree that critiques of self-tracking that reduce this practice to a disciplining and disempowering tool of neoliberal agendas need to be nuanced, this requires first a sober understanding of what that critique is responding to. Furthermore, the most compelling way to do this is to turn to the empirical reality of self-tracking. This is something that a growing number of social scientists, (empirical) ethicists, and philosophers are doing, so that the road map that Danaher and colleagues would like to see set up might already be implemented.

As Danaher and colleagues claim, self-tracking has received a predominantly bad rap in the social sciences and humanities literature in the past decade. Why? Most of this literature (which is by now a much richer body of work than Danaher and colleagues acknowledge) draws on Foucauldian perspectives, making it particularly sensitive to the disciplining and disempowering effects of self-tracking. Rather than fulfilling their promise of empowering users, critics argue that self-tracking creates

new moral obligations, the contours of which are set not so much by oneself as a free subject, but by others, such as public health authorities and commercial app developers. These critical assumptions certainly should not be taken for granted. But they must be seriously engaged with before being dismissed. Yet, by neatly isolating eight objections to relationship tracking, what Danaher and colleagues effectively do is fragment the broader sociopolitical landscape in which self-tracking takes place to the point that it eludes them as a consistent whole.

For example, one of the most prominent objections raised against self-tracking is what we can call the reductionist critique, or what the authors call “the measurement-management objection.” The reductionist critique holds that the quantification of experiences and behavior is an inherently reductionist process. Danaher and colleagues fail to grasp the core of this critique: applied to relationship tracking, this critique would not primarily take issue with how “pleasant” or “distracting” tracking might be, as Danaher and colleagues claim. This would indeed hardly merit critical outcry. Rather, the core of this argument is that self-tracking works on the basis of categories that act as proxies for complex and rich phenomena—“calories” as proxies for “health,” “mood scores” for “mental well-being,” “number of thrusts” for “good sex.” This involves two risks, according to critics. First, these proxies easily come to represent the definitive truth about the categories they set out to represent. Second, they become privileged over more subjective, intuitive ways of knowing (Lupton 2015).

This reductionist critique cannot be meaningfully dissociated from what Danaher and colleagues call “the neoliberalization objection,” and to which they give short shrift as the “tendency of technologies to privatize, and make individuals responsible for, what are at base more structural social problems” (16). This is indeed one dimension of the “neoliberal project” that critics have taken up. And as Danaher and colleagues argue, if this neoliberal objection is

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understood simply as a prioritization of the individual over the systemic, one might question if it is not based on a false dichotomy. To this, the authors retort that while relationship tracking may “impact individual behavior,” it “could be used to promote systemic solutions” (16). Certainly. And when understood correctly, this is precisely what the “neoliberal objection” and the broader critique on reflexive modernity uphold, from Foucault to Giddens, to more recent scholars in the self-tracking debate. These authors have described how an increased emphasis on individual responsibility for matters like health, education, and welfare seeks to transform citizens from passive recipients of state assistance into active, entrepreneurial agents who can take better care of themselves. It matters little whether this self-management is organized at the strictly individual level or at the group/community level (see, e.g., projects like the Dutch “participation society”). What matters is that responsibility shifts from governments to citizens, that causality is no longer located in conditions that states could influence, but in behaviors and beliefs that are under our control, and that this works via a modernist mind set that configures life as a project that individuals are responsible for crafting. In this framing, life, health—indeed, even love and intimate relationships—become something to constantly work on, optimize, and improve. As Eva Illouz writes in her illuminating sociology of love, the “agonies of love now point only to the self, its private history, and its capacity to shape itself” (2012, 4). It is within this framing that the promises of improvement and control of self-tracking become so attractive, and that the domains of operation of self-tracking (health, love, well-being) become microcosms through which to understand the processes of modernity.

I agree with Danaher and colleagues that the “neoliberal objection” requires some nuance. There is a risk here that categories such as “power,” “society,” and “discourse” become deterministic, causal explanations for desires, behaviors, and practices that we understand little about. Supplementing this narrow critical approach is exactly what a growing number of studies on self-tracking seek to do, in what we might see as a maturing of this scholarship (Ruckenstein and Schüll 2017). The argument here is that a focus solely on the broader power dynamics of datafication and quantification, while important, fails to recognize practices of noncompliance, resistance, and appropriation of those dynamics. Thus, many recent studies engage with the subjective experiences of data-generating individuals and groups, with the aim of articulating user-based explanations of why people self-track, how tracking effects their understandings of what is good, and what else gets transformed in the process of tracking.

For example, in our research into the ways in which members of the Quantified Self community ascribe value and meaning to their practices, Zandbergen and I found that the portrayal of trackers as “data fetishists” and “entrepreneurial selves,” who are motivated by a desire to control and optimize their experiences, is too simplistic (Sharon and Zandbergen 2016). We found that self-tracking is also often ascribed meaning as a practice of mindfulness, as a means of resistance against what are perceived as

oppressive social norms, and as a communicative and narrative aid. Similarly, other scholars have shown how self-tracking can be understood as an aesthetic practice (Sherman 2016), a practice that liberates users from a sense of fixed identity (Schüll 2016), and a practice that escapes the biopolitics of the health technology industry (Nafus and Sherman 2014), and that data often enhance rather than solely displace self-narratives (Ruckenstein 2014).

What such studies have in common is their attempt to counterbalance, or to enrich, critical accounts of self-tracking with empirical, ethnographic investigations into the actual ways that users practice self-tracking and how these practices become meaningful to them. While this may seem rather far removed from the discipline of ethics, it need not be. An “empirical ethics” approach to studying how people interact with technology is gaining popularity among philosophers and ethicists (Swierstra 2015). Here the study of practices, and how values are enacted in these practices, becomes the starting point for ethical and philosophical analysis. This approach, as I have argued elsewhere (Sharon 2016), is very productive because it renders visible alternative enactments of values such as autonomy, solidarity, and authenticity in self-tracking practices. For example, I have found that trackers often enact autonomy and personalization *à la lettre*, such as in highly individualized health regimes that go against public health campaigns. Also, that trackers enact new forms of solidarities, narrower yet potentially broader than those we are used to imagining as the basis for social contracts. And, that the use of self-generated data enables new types of authentic self-expression. Insofar as these practices problematize both the promises that app developers and public policy construct in relation to self-tracking (such as “better self-knowledge” or “user empowerment”), but also unexamined concerns of normalization and exploitation that run through “neoliberal objections,” identifying them enriches the discussion about the desirability of self-tracking.

Such studies go further than Danaher and colleagues’ analysis, in that they do not just begin to develop a road map for future inquiry—they *are* the inquiry. Most importantly, they do not depoliticize the discussion around these practices, but seek to foreground how and where broad politico-normative discourses of responsibility, self-optimization, and active citizenship are reproduced, resisted, or reinterpreted in actual practices. This is necessary if we are to achieve a fuller and more accurate understanding of the culture of quantification and the political economy of datafication. ■

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The Phallus-y Fallacy: On Unsexy Intimate Tracking

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In "The Quantified Relationship," Danaher, Nyholm, and Earp (2018) catalogue a number of ethical and social objections to what they term the "quantified relationship" and its attendant technologies. They typologize eight objections raised in the scholarly literature on the topic, including in my own work (Levy 2015), and scrutinize the validity and context dependence thereof. Based on their analysis, Danaher and colleagues advocate "cautious openness" (10) toward these tools, based on the possibility that, under certain conditions, they may be used to support healthy intimate relations.

Danaher and colleagues' piece is a welcome, thoughtful addition to the critical research on intimacy and technology. By delineating specific objections to the technologies at issue, the work brings precision to an area of tech criticism often characterized by inchoate anxiety around the "creepiness" of a given technology, but with insufficient attention to reasons and mechanisms. Sometimes such feelings are the product of the perceived infiltration of market logics into the sacred spheres of sex and love (Zelizer 2007); in other cases, they reverberate after a particularly egregious data breach or public gaffe (e.g., the 2011 revelation that Fitbit was inadvertently revealing intimate data about users' sexual practices (Loftus 2011)). Creepy feelings are often an important clue to look more

deeply at the technology at issue, and to determine what precisely raises our hackles about its use; however, too often, we end our ethical inquiry without completing this crucial analytic step, to which Danaher and colleagues pay close and deserved attention. And Danaher and colleagues' conclusion—that relationship quantification technologies have some acceptable uses and should not be vilified whole-cloth—resonates with the tenets of science and technology studies, which emphasize the importance of context and interaction between the social and technical worlds. Such recognition does not give technology a normative "free pass"—as technology historian Melvin Kranzberg (1986) famously put it, "technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral"—but implies that uniform celebrations or condemnations of particular technologies are unlikely to be analytically useful. Danaher and colleagues' conclusions accord with this point of view—in my estimation, correctly.

This said, I wish to draw attention to an aspect of intimate tracking that I believe deserves more thorough scrutiny. I suggest that the true scope of "quantified relationship technologies" in wide use extends well beyond those described by Danaher and colleagues, and that a more complete view of how technologies are used in the management of intimate relations affords us a

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