

Article

Survival of the (Data) Fit: Self-Surveillance, Corporate Wellness, and the Platformization of Healthcare

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Abstract

The emergence and proliferation of smart sensor technologies has enabled the self-tracking of everyday life in an unprecedented manner as the logic of quantification and datafication extends to diverse aspects of life, including education, work, and healthcare. This development is epitomized by the numerous corporate wellness programs that are based on the use of self-tracking tools. Faced with increased competition, Fitbit, one of the most popular brands in wearable self-tracking devices, recently launched the Fitbit Care platform. Its aim is to establish itself as the leading actor in employee corporate wellness programs by providing comprehensive offerings that include self-tracking tools, apps, digital interventions, and personalized health coaching. Focusing on the Fitbit Care platform, this paper examines the intersection of self-surveillance, corporate wellness, and healthcare, highlighting the socioeconomic inequalities propagated by the ideology of dataism that privileges those who are able to engage in activities that generate desirable data.

Introduction

Many people nowadays use digital tools to track their lives. Smartphone apps and wearable devices have swamped the market, enabling users to monitor, track, record, and quantify many different facets of their lives. These include physical activities, food and other consumption habits, emotional and mental states, sexual behaviour, and financial and social interactions. This tracking generates huge amounts of data. The simplicity of use as well as the inexpensiveness of these devices have played an important role in the growing popularity and adoption of self-tracking (Prince 2014). According to Lupton (2016: 2), self-tracking refers to “practices in which people knowingly and purposively collect information about themselves, which they then review and consider applying to the conduct of their lives.”

Established in 2007, Fitbit has since become one of the most popular brands in the field of activity trackers and wearable devices. Fitbit professes that its products motivate users to reach their health and fitness goals by allowing them to track activities such as exercise, sleep, and weight. The company is also one of the pioneers in the use of activity trackers in corporate wellness programs. In September 2018, the company introduced their latest offering, Fitbit Care. This is a health platform that combines the brand’s wearables and self-tracking devices with personalized digital interventions such as challenges, social groups, and guided workouts, as well as the type of health coaching and virtual care that provide users the opportunity to receive personalized care plans to manage their health issues. Fitbit Care is thus a comprehensive program

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that is available to users who are signed up to a Fitbit-supported corporate health and workplace wellness plan, known as Fitbit Health solutions. Fitbit has also established a strategic partnership with one of the biggest health insurance providers in the USA, Humana, which will adopt the Fitbit Care platform as their primary health solution. Thus, Fitbit Care comprises an exemplary amalgamation of self-surveillance practices, corporate wellness plans, and the platformization of healthcare, which this paper aims to scrutinize and deconstruct.

Self-Surveillance

Self-tracking can be best characterized as a form of self-surveillance. For Albrecht and Michael (2013), self-tracking and surveillance are two sides of the same coin; but, because self-tracking has been promoted as an empowering technology that promises to make people healthier and happier, it has been more easily accepted than traditional surveillance technologies. Gamification is an important dimension in the wider population's acceptance of contentious surveillance technologies like self-tracking (Whitson 2013). In fact, personalized approaches that are based on the data generated and that incorporate gamification elements ensure that normative and disciplinary practices do not appear externally imposed but internally driven (Sanders 2017). Looking beyond the pleasurable aspects of gamification and focusing on the productive labour it generates, Till (2014) maintains that gamification can be seen as promoting a neoliberal entrepreneurial self that is rendered eager to improve in line with market-based norms and standards.

The higher education sector is a workplace environment that has wholeheartedly embraced both the ethos of (self) quantification and the logic of gamification. Metrics of performance measurements, like journal rankings or citation numbers, have become part and parcel of academic life as they play decisive roles in hiring or promotion processes and determine the allocation of research funding. Pushed, if not compelled, by this inescapable reality, a large and increasingly growing number of academics actively engage in the self-quantification of their scholarly output. They develop academic profiles on specialised online platforms and communities where their work becomes subjected to a number of quantification and gamification processes and its "impact" is algorithmically determined. Examining popular online platforms geared towards academics, Hammarfelt et al. (2016) explicate how, through the provision of points, rankings and awards, academic work is transformed into a game through a process that adheres to dominant neoliberal ideas concerning markets and competition. It is not surprising that even scholars who criticize the gamified quantification of academic work engage themselves in such practices because, as Moore and Piwek (2015) remind us, in the employment relationship, employees usually cannot opt in or out. Thus, surveillance ends up being compulsory with limited options for opting out even if and especially when it becomes playful and participatory (Timan and Albrechtslund 2018). The present article will make the case that this is what takes place with the use of self-tracking in corporate wellness programs. While these programs are promoted as voluntary schemes, they may end up penalising those who do not participate by limiting their opportunities for employment. In that sense, self-tracking in the workplace becomes "pushed" or even "imposed" (see Lupton 2014a).

To begin, McEwen (2017) maintains that self-tracking practices involve digital reproduction processes that serve three main functions: they enable the production of content and data that can be commodified; they facilitate the production and reproduction of digital labour; and they foster the development of pertinent subjectivities that are in complete harmony with the imperatives of contemporary capitalism. For Morozov (2013), this represents a "Taylorism within": while it shapes people based on the same pre-established standards it also fosters a sense of uniqueness and exceptionalism. Thus, it is suggested that health-tracking tools produce a particular subject that is, on one end, the object of surveillance him/herself and, on the other, becomes a responsible citizen who is expected to construct a healthy self and prove so through constant and continuous measurement (Lupton 2012). In fact, self-tracking can be seen as a technology of the self that aims to promote self-responsibility, not through coercion but through encouragement and active engagement (Lupton 2014b). Like technologies of the self, self-tracking practices strive to achieve self-care, self-management and, ultimately, self-improvement (Lupton 2014b). Similarly, Ajana (2017) claims that self-tracking practices can be seen as a manifestation of the "biopolitics of the self," which makes the body

susceptible to management and monitoring interventions that follow neoliberal norms. In addition, Millington (2014) argues that activity-tracking tools not only rationalise neoliberal logics but, at the same time, the dominance of neoliberal discourses pertaining to health and fitness also rationalises the emergence and proliferation of these tools. Fotopoulou and O’Riordan (2017) caution that the “user empowerment” discourse that is associated with self-tracking is attuned to prevalent neoliberal policies that aim to reduce public spending in healthcare. Thus, self-tracking practices are aligned with neoliberal healthcare models that, on one hand, decrease the public provision of healthcare services and facilitate the development of a private health sector shaped by market forces, and, on the other hand, bestow responsibility onto individuals who are increasingly compelled to be in charge of their own health and well-being (Ajana 2017). To conclude, self-tracking is a biopolitical technology that offers the opportunity to target and extract value from many aspects of consumers’ lives while bestowing both power and responsibility to the individual user.

Datafication and Platformization of Healthcare

To achieve its purpose, digital tracking and quantification tools assert a commanding role that corresponds to the ideology of dataism. This ideology celebrates these tools as bearers of objective quantitative truths about the user (Elias and Gill 2018). Put simply, dataism professes that the more data generated, the closer to the truth we can get. It is precisely because increasing amounts of people’s data are allowed to be captured and used by corporate platforms that dataism becomes so powerful (van Dijck 2014). For En and Pöll (2016) self-tracking is an exemplary site where power is manifested as a regime of truth that constructs the self-tracking subject as a scientized self that, following the tenets of dataism, adheres to the objectivity and credibility of metrics. In fact, going beyond mere personal interest, curiosity, or even narcissism, the logic of datafication and quantification increasingly extends to almost all other aspects of our lives, like education (Williamson 2015), work (Moore and Robinson 2016), and, in particular, healthcare (French and Smith 2013). For instance, the use of self-tracking technologies in education has been linked with the emergence and growth of “surveillance schools” (Hope 2015), which pose a potential threat to children’s rights (Lupton and Williamson 2017). Focusing on the workplace, Moore and Robinson (2016) explicate that in today’s highly competitive working environment that is characterized by increased insecurity and precarious working relations, employees are increasingly required to measure their own productivity and well-being with the objective of optimizing both. In addition, new corporate wellness programs devised by insurance companies require employees to share their self-tracked data; in return, these corporations provide financial rewards (or penalties) for specific activities and goal achievements. These corporate wellness programs are becoming increasingly popular among employers. A study that examined the financial impact of wearable devices on corporate healthcare costs claimed that, after two years, employees who participated in a Fitbit corporate wellness program cost, on average, \$1,292 less than employees who did not participate (Daniels et al. 2016). It is thus claimed that the implementation of wearable-based wellness programs can lead to substantial financial gains for corporations. Accordingly, it is predicted that, by 2021, approximately 90% of wellness programs will include fitness trackers (Petty 2018).

Coupled with the ongoing attacks against public healthcare services, insurance schemes that are based on users’ health data can determine not only who will have access to affordable healthcare, but also who will be considered employable. Only the healthy or at least those who are able to lead healthy lifestyles and can prove so through concrete numbers, through data, will ultimately be eligible for healthcare and employment.

French and Smith (2013) maintain that although self-tracking may help users adopt healthier lifestyles and minimise health risks, this technology also produces detailed recorded histories of their lives and this puts them at risk of being sanctioned by insurance companies and employers that may be willing to punish and penalise unproductive behaviours. The corporate platformization of healthcare, epitomised in the Fitbit Care platform, aims precisely at capturing information that is as detailed as possible about users because platform capitalism is premised on creating environments and conditions that will allow platforms to enclose and capture the totality of life in the form of data (see also Charitsis et al. 2018). In that sense, digital platforms’ highest aspiration is to colonize life itself and these platforms achieve that through their ability to constantly

track, measure, and sort user behaviour (Couldry and Mejias 2018). For Meier and Manzerolle (2019) “platform accumulation,” which is aligned with the neoliberal logics of increased privatization, marketization, and corporate consolidation, is based precisely on the monopolization of data.

The corporate platformization of healthcare that is enabled through self-surveillance practices also serves to ensure the cost-efficiency of the human body for insurance providers (Gilmore 2016) as the measured body can effectively answer demands for increased productivity and profit (Davies 2015). Thus, corporate wellness programs that are based on the measured body can be seen as an exemplary manifestation of a “business ontology” that dominates neoliberal societies (Fisher 2009) as the imperative of health becomes intermingled with the pursuit of profit (Davies 2015). As Cederström and Spicer (2015) underline, self-tracking should not be seen as a benign attempt to locate and try to fix flaws or weaknesses; instead, it is about reconstructing oneself according to specific market requirements. As the measured body has the potential to become more productive and generate more profits, data-driven corporate wellness programs are attracting increasing interest among employers, as they can lead to significant reductions in healthcare costs because of perceived positive impacts on employees’ health and well-being (Giddens et al. 2017). However, the health benefits of using these devices are being questioned. Owens and Cribb (2017) maintain that rather than providing substantive opportunities for better health, self-tracking technologies may, in fact, contribute to increased anxiety and stigma while, at the same time, reproducing health inequalities.

It has been suggested that not being able to access and take part in the digital realm, or even refusing to engage in it, reduces people’s economic, health, entertainment, educational, and other opportunities in life (Llamas and Belk 2013). In addition, Lupton (2014a) points out that the role of social factors, like gender, place of residence, social class, race, or ethnicity, in determining people’s opportunities has been largely ignored in the self-tracking literature. On the contrary, the celebratory discourse of individual empowerment that accompanies the use of self-tracking technologies fails to acknowledge, or rather carefully hides, the socioeconomic inequalities that are perpetuated and reinforced through these practices. For instance, it has been shown that not everybody has the necessary autonomy in their workplace to actually engage in self-tracking practices; white-collar workers have a higher level of flexibility that allows them to use activity trackers effectively (Esmonde and Jette 2018). Cathy O’Neil (2016), a former Wall Street data scientist, coined the term “weapons of math destruction” to highlight the inequalities that are perpetuated by the algorithmic governance of our lives through the ubiquitous yet complex and incomprehensive mathematical models which, in the era of dataism, increasingly determine who can have access to financial and health services, who will be admitted to higher education, who will be overlooked in the job market, and even who will be targeted by police. As an exemplary manifestation of dataism, self-tracking becomes a weapon that discriminates between people who can produce good data in their everyday activities and those who cannot; these include the chronically ill, the poor, and the precarious uninsured workers who must work long hours to make ends meet.

Conclusion

Discussing wearable technologies in his New York Times column, Nobel Prize winner Paul Krugman dismisses critiques and concerns about the loss of privacy as, after all, “most people probably don’t have that much to be private about” (Krugman 2015). Instead, he focuses on another dimension of self-tracking as he sees self-surveillance as an instantiation of the Varian rule¹ that will enable people to get products and services that are now the privilege of the rich. While data and personal information will indeed increasingly become the currency with which people will get access to goods and services (see also Morozov 2015), Krugman is wrong to celebrate this development for its potential to provide better consumer experiences to more people. On the contrary, this paper underlines that the datafication of life may augment socioeconomic

¹ Attributed to Facebook’s chief economist, Hal Varian, the Varian rule purports that the future can be predicted by looking at the lives of rich people; what rich people have now, middle income people will get in ten years, and lower income people will have in another ten years.

inequalities as this will make it even more difficult for large and less privileged segments of society to access a number of vital services.

It is argued that, in capitalism, one of the greatest tragedies that individual workers may experience is the inability to sell their labour power, in other words, the inability to become exploited by capital. In the same way, while the platformization of healthcare through self-tracking and corporate wellness follows the unethical premises of appropriation and exploitation upon which digital capitalism has developed, avoiding the reach of quantification and datafication could actually be one of the misfortunes of digital capitalism, as the marginalized will be the unquantified, the digital invisibles. Instead of celebrating the trade of privacy for convenience and fantasies of superior consumption experiences, as Krugman does, the focus should be placed on the digital divide that becomes more profound by these developments. Therefore, in order to paint a more accurate picture of the effects of the self-surveilled data-driven corporate platformization of healthcare, it would be more pertinent to invert the Varian rule: the services that neoliberal policies have forcefully taken away from the underprivileged citizens, through the privatization of healthcare and cuts in social welfare programs, will become increasingly inaccessible to larger parts of the population as the logic of dataism prevails and will eventually end up being the privilege of only the data-fit citizens who can generate high quality data.

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