

The Computable Self and the Politics of Data

Friday March 10 2017

This one-day regional workshop, hosted at McMaster University's Sherman Centre for the Digital Humanities, will explore political, scholarly and creative interventions into personal data, practices of quantifying self, and our virtual and networked lives. Invited academic, artistic and research creation presentations will address creative and political intersections that link data, self, and social formations. How does data work to create, mandate or complicate normative formations of self and idealized socials? How do our emergent practices and critiques of data illuminate neoliberal or machinic valorization; shed light to the acts of power and self-governance or surveillance; imagine resistive ways in which we can exploit or retain agency with our data? How do we realize data's productivity through our varied critical and creative practices?

Keynote speaker Nora Young, host of CBC Radio program Spark, will give a talk titled **Data Bodies, Digital Citizens: Power and Politics in the Age of the Data Boom:**

We're in a new era, where the physical and the digital are braided together as never before. Simply going through daily life, enormous amounts of data are produced about us, and by us. As individuals, that data can help us learn about ourselves. Collectively, it can lead to smarter, more sustainable cities, improve health care and respond to crises.

But that Data Boom comes with serious risks: loss of privacy, unacknowledged bias, or the targeting of vulnerable populations. The Data Boom is affecting the credit rating you get, the jobs you will be considered for and more. To build the data future we want we need to be active digital citizens, and rethink our relationship to our data.



The workshop aims to consider popular outreach, such as Nora's, that seek to engage a broad public in crucial conversations around the present and future work of data.

Sponsored by:

McMaster University's Faculty of Humanities

McMaster University's Department of Communication Studies and Multimedia

Sara Bannerman, Canada Research Chair in Communication Policy and Governance

Paula Gardner, Asper Chair in Communications

Location

The Sherman Centre, where the workshop will take place, is located in the main Mills Library (Building 10 on the campus map). If you enter through the main doors, proceed straight ahead to the back of the main floor, where it is located through the double doors right beside the wall with televisions installed in it. A campus map is available here: <http://www.mcmaster.ca/welcome/campusmap.cfm>

Parking

Parking information can be found at <http://parking.mcmaster.ca/>

Visitor rates for most parking lots on the main campus are \$5/hour to a \$20 daily maximum. Lots A, B, and C are the closest to the Sherman Centre in the Mills Library (Building 10 on the campus map).

Workshop speakers

Andrea Zeffiro, Academic Director, Sherman Centre for Digital Scholarship, Assistant Professor, Communication Studies and Multimedia, McMaster University

Christina Baade, University Scholar, Associate Professor, Communication Studies and Multimedia, McMaster University

Christine Quail, Associate Professor, Communication Studies and Multimedia, McMaster University

Danielle Wong, PhD Candidate, English and Cultural Studies, McMaster University

David Ogborn, Associate Professor, Communication Studies and Multimedia, McMaster University

David Phillips, Associate Professor, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto

Gabby Resch, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto

Isabel Pedersen, Canada Research Chair in Digital Life, Media and Culture, University Of Ontario Institute Of Technology

Matt Ratto, Associate Professor, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto

Natasha Tusikov, Assistant Professor, Criminology Program, York University

Paula Gardner, Asper Chair in Communications, McMaster University

Sara Bannerman, Canada Research Chair in Communication Policy and Governance, McMaster University

Sarah Brophy, Professor, English and Cultural Studies, McMaster University

Tony Porter, Professor, Political Science, McMaster University

Schedule

	Breakfast / Coffee	8:15
	Welcome	8:40
	<p>Morning Sessions' Thematic Questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What kinds of practical or creative practice methods help to unlock data's productive power and the potentially disruptive potentials of data, machines that capture data, and algorithms that process data? • What aesthetic affordances of the digital pose particular constraints or possibilities for expanding our understandings of and uses of data, especially everyday day and everyday devices? • Do we experience or sense new types of self, or self-governance, through new data practices? How are these aligned with politics and political movements or practices? 	
Paula Gardner	<p>Performing Data: Movement, Biosensors, Emergence</p> <p>My ongoing research with dance and movement seeks to understand, through embodied practice, how we might comprehend and dance with our data in apperceptive manners. This project challenges projects such as Quantified Self and theories claiming that the self is computable, leaning instead toward a critical HCI (Human Computer Interaction) approach, which suggests that selves and computer interfaces are better understood as inter-informing. In fact, this project flips the quantifiable self premise, to suggest that humans can obtain a greater sense of embodiment via critical engagements with the digital interface. The project employs an emergent (or genomic) algorithm that grows with dancers' play in the space, providing varying sound and visual feedback in response to the dancer's movement and biodata (brain waves, heart rate, etc.). This algorithm was written in response to our discovery that in order to be in the "zone" or "flow", dancers needed to dance the interface, rather than master it via study of algorithms programming it. The emergent algorithm and the feedback platform, together, are imagined as vehicles allowing the dancer to be in the "flow" where unthought movement (or apperception) occurs.</p> <p>The emergent algorithm is smart, responsive and produces messages or feedback via its choice of sound aesthetics that vary in tone, texture and structure. As such, the research pushes the exploration of digital aesthetics and embodiment, seeking to understand emergence as an affordance enabling embodied practice in digital spaces. We seek to employ these learnings in the creation of a visual data performance for audiences of these movement shows, enabling them to access and perhaps feel the dancer's embodied experience of this biofeedback dance—through that visual data performance produced by the dance.</p> <p>The paper reflects on how applied practice with embodiment can lend deeper understanding to theories of embodiment that ironically are often developed outside of practice. It challenges somaesthetic theory that focuses on visualisations (e.g. of biodata display) as a key process to achieve sensory experience and thus interactivity; in contrast this project seeks embodied sensory experience, via dancer and audience performances with data itself. The paper engages in dialogue with Ana Munster's argument that "baroque" exaggerations afforded by the digital allow embodied digital experience, pushing this exaggeration to the level of embodied performance. Altogether, we seek to create a space where dancers, data and audiences together engage in embodied, dialogic performance.</p>	8:50-9:10

<p>Gabby Resch & Matt Ratto</p>	<p>Captured in the Data Sublime</p> <p>In a 2002 paper, Lev Manovich talked about what was, at the time, the emerging field of artistic data visualization - what we now see marketed in books and on countless blogs as beautiful data. Manovich acknowledged how taken he was by such work because it carries "the promise of rendering the phenomena that are beyond the scale of human senses into something that is within our reach, something visible and tangible."</p> <p>This promise makes data mapping into the exact opposite of the Romantic art concerned with the sublime, Manovich claimed, recognizing that data visualization (and its progenitor, the field of statistical graphics) is primarily concerned with the anti-sublime. If Romantic artists thought of certain phenomena and effects as un-representable, as beyond the limits of human senses and reason, data visualization artists aim at precisely the opposite: to map such phenomena into representations whose scale is comparable to the scales of human perception and cognition. But Manovich ends his paper with a caution: rather than trying hard to pursue the anti-sublime ideal, data visualization artists should also not forget that art has the unique license to portray human subjectivity - including the fundamental new dimension of being immersed in data.</p> <p>This stands counter to the fact that most contemporary visualization platforms privilege (and, in effect, normativize), scale relations that can only be fractured by embodied modes of interaction. By highlighting some recent work I've done creating immersive data landscapes in virtual reality, using gestural and biometric data, I will make an argument for recovering the sublime and disrupting conventional notions of scale in data visualization practice.</p>	<p>9:10-9:30</p>
<p>David Phillips</p>	<p>Embodied Selves Interrogate Computed Selves</p> <p>The processes of surveillance coerce us to act such that our actions can be translated to data. That data is then circulated, collated, and analyzed. That analysis is then used to organize our lives and our actions. Thus we are made legible to surveillant organizations, and we become accessible to their interventions. My work explores this recursive interplay of subjectivities, bodies, actions, data, and organizations. I keep asking: "What is it to live our lives mediated by infrastructures and practices of surveillance?"</p> <p>Lately I've been using theatrical methods to explore that question. My co-researchers and I have used surveillance theory to inform the construction of theatrical games and improvisations, allowing those embodied activities to inform, illuminate, or question the theory. This iterative transgression between theory and embodiment somehow mirrors the surveillance process itself. I will be presenting and discussing this process as a methodological resource.</p>	<p>9:30-9:50</p>
	<p>Discussion</p>	<p>9:50-10:15</p>
	<p>Coffee Break</p>	<p>10:15-10:30</p>

Isabel Pedersen	<p>Emotions, embodied tech, and computable selves</p> <p>The work of data increasingly infiltrates our lives, and data processes are opaque to us. Like a one-way mirror, information exchange about us goes on without our ability to fully grasp it, follow it, or, really understand it, much less determine it. As algorithms make decisions about us, computers filter what we read, map our whereabouts, remember faces of the people we know, and predict our next move.</p> <p>More and more, our personal devices will intrude onto and under the skin to read feelings, reactions, anxieties, delights, and fears. Our digital selves will accrue emotional profiles through the emotional or affective stimuli we produce. Ethical questions arise from the opacity of storing emotion and how it will be used through data assemblages.</p> <p>For this workshop, my ideas will be channeled through a description of several research creation projects I am working on with collaborators. One of them, Fearmonger, is a critical arts project that explores the juncture between human emotion, affective technological mediation, and embodied tech. It uses an aesthetic instigator, uncanny fear, to engender an experience that is creatively jarring and thought-provoking. As an arts experience, it discloses convergences between film, affective response, biofeedback data, participants, spectatorship and the notion of computable selves.</p>	10:30-10:50
David Ogborn	<p>Live coding and the unmaking of software</p> <p>Live coding artists treat computer programming as a performance act, often but not always to produce expressive sonic and visual results for a live audience. Live coding has been interpreted through a diverse set of lenses: as a form of public reasoning, as an improvisational traversal of a search space, as a pedagogical weapon in the struggle for media and computational literacy, and as a more or less inevitable acceleration of iterative, industrial practices of software development.</p> <p>Alongside such lenses I would like to develop another: live coding as an unmaking of software, with the latter understood as a historically contingent category binding computational activity to commoditization, control, and surveillance. Live coding artists foreground computational effects that are iterable yet ephemeral. They produce code artifacts whose place in hierarchies of abstraction remains ambivalent and open, and may even make a theatrical spectacle out of the forgetful destruction of algorithms. In resisting the routine production and consumption of software, live coding creates a space in which alternate futures for our collective computational self may be imagined.</p> <p>This lecture-demonstration will examine each of the above lenses both theoretically, through the identification of some theoretical lines of flight, and empirically, through the performance of a series of short live coding acts inspired by each lens.</p>	10:50-11:10
Andrea Zeffiro	<p>Whose Operating <this> System? Towards a Queer Data Ontogeny</p> <p>What is 'big data'? For some, it is merely a marketing term adopted by industry to describe the growth in the volume, velocity and variety of data production, sharing, and management. For others, 'big data' remains opaque and contrived. Its elusiveness in many ways gives it power. In my teaching and research, I've come to work through the evasiveness of the buzzword by framing big data co-productively: as a technical assemblage, and an ideological apparatus. Big data in the first instance is understood as a nexus of computational tools, techniques and protocols, and infrastructures and institutions. A big data paradigm persists precisely because it is underpinned by technocultural politics and practices. In the second instance, big data is framed as an ideological apparatus: a system of relations that govern the exercise of power within the social body. We see the apparatus at work through the naturalization and normalization of specific behaviours, attitudes, and values that uphold and reinforce a big data paradigm. But what is big data? My talk is an occasion to engage in a 'return to theory'; a</p>	11:10-11:30

	deliberate statement at odds with Chris Anderson’s ‘End of Theory’ thesis. However, this is by no means an occasion to retreat into theoretical discourse and make ‘big data’ intelligible, rather, I turn to queer perspectives to draw out the limits, failures, inadequacies, and dissonances of ‘big data’, and to demonstrate that indeed, there has always been something queer about the prevailing big data paradigm.	
	Discussion	11:30-11:55
	Lunch	11:55-12:35
Early Afternoon Session Thematic Questions:		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do we experience or sense new types of self, or self-governance, through new data practices? How are these aligned with politics and political movements or practices? • What policies do we need for the governance of data? 	
Sara Bannerman	<p>Relationality, Privacy, and the Networked Governance of the Self</p> <p>Today, mass government surveillance, big data and data mining, pervasive social media and wearable devices, and self-promotionalism all challenge many now-dominant mores of privacy. Technologies and practices challenge the current norms of privacy governance in democratic societies and the foundations of privacy as set out by Westin in 1967, and hold implications for the development of “the self” in postmodernity. The time has come to rethink the roles of privacy regulation in a world of networked governance of the self—at a time when (like all other times) our collective understandings of “the self” is being reshaped. Relationality offers one way to do this that is helpful in the context of the rise of networks. In section one, this paper introduces the “networked governance of the self” and defines this phenomenon. In section two, the paper discusses the functions of privacy in democratic society, emphasizing the continuing importance of privacy to the networked governance of the self, but also the need to re-examine the roles that privacy plays, not only in democratic society, but in the networked governance of the self and others.</p>	12:35-12:50
Tony Porter	<p>Global governance and the computable self</p> <p>Traditionally global governance has seemed very distant from the daily lives of most individuals. This paper argues that the linkages between global governance and the most personal and private aspects of individual lives are being dramatically strengthened, and that material properties of the smallest and most local elements of these linkages and the role of numbers and measurement in them are crucial to understanding their significance, capacities, and limitations. This is contrary to the tendency in much analysis of global governance to trace impacts to the material power of the largest states, corporations, international organizations, or social structures, or to the more pervasive but immaterial influence of ideas or cultures. This paper also argues that awareness and analysis of these linkages and material properties of the networks they involve is crucial for analyzing their political and ethical effects. I develop this argument by bringing together three themes. The first theme is the role in global governance of numerical measurement and numbers more generally, as with rankings, benchmarking, risk models, big data, algorithms, and digitized media. The second theme is the role of technologies and material objects as analyzed by actor-network and media theories. A third theme is the role of human bodies in global governance and international relations as analyzed by feminist theory. The increasingly intense interactions of numbers and the materiality of machine systems and human bodies make possible, but also limit, the small-scale material linkages between global governance and the daily lives of individuals.</p> <p>The paper then turns to two cases of the links between the computable self and global governance. The first is the World Bank’s 2015 <i>World Development Report</i> (WDR), entitled <i>Mind, Society and Behavior</i>. This WDR argues for the value of</p>	12:50-1:05

	<p>drawing on behavioural economics to understand better individual choices. The second case is the use of data gathered directly from bodies by sensors in devices such as Apple Watch. Insurance often functions as a form of governance, since it rewards and punishes various individual behaviors by altering the costs and benefits of an insurance policy. The assemblage of transnational insurance firms and of the firms involved in measuring bodies makes it a form of global governance. We shall see in both cases that these linkages are indeed being strengthened, but their capacities and limitations, and their political and ethical effects, are shaped by the material properties of their smallest and most local elements.</p>	
Natasha Tusikov	<p>Pacemakers, iTunes and Kindles: How the Shift Toward Licensing is Changing How We Own and Use Knowledge</p> <p>Information that we used to own outright in the form of books or the CDs/DVDs that comprised our music and movie collections is now increasingly leased to us through complex software licenses. Apple and Amazon, for example, establish agreements with publishers of books and music, and then set contracts that govern how iTunes and Kindle users can access those works. Consequently, we no longer 'own' those files, which can disappear from personal libraries if users violate licensing agreements, but instead purchase access to content. What's more, enforcing this new ownership model relies upon companies' constant surveillance of their users and the use of digital locks to deter unwanted behaviour. Similarly, important shifts are also occurring in the medical realm as implanted medical devices (pacemakers) and wearable technologies (Fitbit) raise questions about who owns bodily data, how bodily data should be governed, and in whose interests. This presentation examines the ways in which the shift toward software licenses are changing how people can access, use, and control information, and the possible consequences of this shift in terms of how we think about ownership, privacy, and, ultimately, knowledge governance.</p>	1:05-1:20
	<p>Discussion Chair: Christine Quail</p>	1:20-1:40PM
	<p>PROCEED TO CIBC HALL, 3RD FLOOR UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR KEYNOTE TALK</p>	1:40-2PM

Nora Young	<p>Keynote talk: Data Bodies, Digital Citizens: Power and Politics in the Age of the Data Boom</p> <p>We're in a new era, where the physical and the digital are braided together as never before. Simply going through daily life, enormous amounts of data are produced about us, and by us. As individuals, that data can help us learn about ourselves. Collectively, it can lead to smarter, more sustainable cities, improve health care and respond to crises.</p> <p>But that Data Boom comes with serious risks: loss of privacy, unacknowledged bias, or the targeting of vulnerable populations. The Data Boom is affecting the credit rating you get, the jobs you will be considered for and more. To build the data future we want we need to be active digital citizens, and rethink our relationship to our data.</p>	2-3:15
Coffee break (Sherman Centre)		3:15-3:30
<p>Thematic Questions for Late Afternoon Session:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does data transform the labour of producing the self? • What kinds of practical or creative practice methods help to unlock data's productive power and the potentially disruptive potentials of data, machines that capture data, and algorithms that process data? • What aesthetic affordances of the digital pose particular constraints or possibilities for expanding our understandings of and uses of data, especially everyday day and everyday devices? • Do we experience or sense new types of self, or self-governance, through new data practices? How are these aligned with politics and political movements or practices? 		
Sarah Brophy	<p>The Stickiness of Instagram: Kara Walker's "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby"</p> <p>This talk explores the pivotal roles of self-inscription, mediation, and audience participation in African American artist Kara Walker's summer 2014 maximalist installation at the Domino Sugar Factory, with a particular focus on the Instagram hashtag #KaraWalkerDomino. What surfaced on Instagram, and what now constitutes a considerable portion of the post-exhibition online archive of "A Subtlety," are numerous self-portraits that show museum visitors posing in highly sexualized ways against the backdrop of parts of Walker's sugar-coated polystyrene sphinx figure. But many critical, creative, and contestatory images and interventions were generated as well over the course of—and after—the exhibition. How best to conceptualize a project that deliberately elicited disturbing and conflicting forms of autobiographical, participatory labour? What are the affordances (technical, affective, pedagogical, and political) of social media, especially Instagram, in counter-historical art practice today? Arguing that the digital mediation of Walker's installation was premised on dynamics of ruination, disgust, and, above all, stickiness, this analysis traces the critical-creative processes of spectator implication and potential unsettlement (what Stephano Harney and Fred Moten theorize as a mode of "tearing down" the edifices of racial capital from within) that were mobilized in and around "A Subtlety." In turn, the paper reflects on the limits and complications of digital participation, especially vernacular photography, for art projects that endeavour to remember slavery and post-slavery history critically.</p>	3:30-3:50
Danielle Wong	<p>Sikh Selfie-Love: Intimate Surveillance and the Pleasures of Staring Back</p> <p>In February 2016, Canadian social media producer Jasmeet Singh was stopped in a San Francisco airport on his way to Toronto and ordered to remove his turban. In a Snapchat story filmed in the airport, Singh says that after he removed his turban and had his hair "played" with by TSA officers, he was refused a mirror to use for re-tying his turban, and forced to walk in public with an uncovered head to the nearest bathroom. Filmed in the selfie-format of his popular Snapchat and Vine videos, the series of clips was eerily familiar, for Singh had predicted and</p>	3:50-4:20

	<p>performed his detainment at the American border several times before on social media in “fictional” comedic videos.</p> <p>For this workshop, I consider how the “data double,” a term that Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson use to describe the ways in which the individual subject is broken down and abstracted into a series of data, articulates racialized interchangeability—a trope that, for South/Asians is particularly entrenched in Yellow Peril notions of Asian inscrutability and duplicity. Btihaj Ajana argues that one’s data double travels “in advance” to the border and is matched with the material body once it arrives and used to determine whether that body can cross. Following Ajana, I consider South/Asian Canadian performances of informational doubling and online versions, including Singh’s selfie performances on Snapchat and Vine, and Peter Chao’s online persona “Chinese Guy,” in order to ask: what are the limits and possibilities of performing or performative data? What is the relationship between Big Data abstraction, self-abstraction and the historical relationship between abstract labour and Asian North Americans? Can one “out-pose” not only the poses of stereotype (Tina Chen) but the poses and positions into which we are disciplined by surveillance in order to rupture or “stare back” at such institutional gazes?</p>	
Christine Quail	<p>Title: “The Politics of Networked Domesticity”</p> <p>This presentation will propose the concept of “networked domesticity” as a theoretical tool to begin to understand the proliferation of online DIY platforms. This presentation will focus on Craftsy, an online platform that sells courses, materials, and social networking spaces for cooking, baking, sewing, knitting, quilting, and other domestic practices. I will examine how Craftsy leverages popular and familiar spaces, such as Pinterest, flickr, and Instagram, and familiar interactive and sharing strategies. Further, I will engage with Emily Matchar’s (2013) concept of the new domesticity, and suggest a more nuanced approach to understanding networked domestic practices today. This approach includes a critical political economic analysis of sponsored content, industry cross-promotional practices, and data mining; it also articulates a feminist critique of domestic labour and professional gender inequity. It will work through nuanced political implications of networked domesticity, from, for example, the slow movement and a critique of capital and consumerism on one hand, versus a more conservative politics of return to conservative gendered identities, on the other.</p>	4:20-4:40
Christina Baade	<p>“Lean Back: Songza, Ubiquitous Listening, and Internet Music Radio for the Masses”</p> <p>Launched in late 2010, Songza was a relatively small player in the internet radio universe, available only in the United States and Canada, with 5.5 million active users in the U.S. in late 2013, compared to Pandora’s 75 million. Songza was regularly celebrated in the trade press, however: from 2011, when Billboard named it a top music startup, industry observers credited Songza for having arrived at a novel solution to the problem of how to bring internet streaming music services to audiences beyond early adopters and music geeks. Combined with its clean, easy-to-use interface, Songza’s curated “playlists for everything” seemed an ideal formula for broad-based appeal, offering a path to a mass audience for internet radio. The potential of Songza’s approach was confirmed when Google acquired the company for over \$39 million U.S. in June 2014 and incorporated its context-sensitive Concierge functionality into Google Play Music in October of that year. Songza’s life as a standalone app ended in January 2016, but its staff and ethos of expert curation, context sensitive playlists, and staunch “anti-snobbery” now shape Google Play Music, which is available in sixty-two countries and is becoming a major competitor in online music and entertainment.</p> <p>In this presentation, I will discuss how Songza’s embrace of “lean back” listening helped it court a wider audience for internet radio during the early 2010s, giving particular attention to how these efforts were framed in the trade press. My aim is to intervene in the growing body of research on internet music services in three key ways: by attending closely to the importance that industry attributed to “lean back” listening in expanding the audience for internet radio; by bringing ideologies of</p>	4:40-5PM

domesticity, ubiquitous listening, and gender to the fore (particularly in relation to the rich literature on gender and labor, including emotional labor); and by considering the Canadian context and the ways in which it amplified the impact of Songza, countering the ways in which the U.S. context has been generalized in the far from borderless world of streaming music. Ultimately, I will argue, Songza's "solutions" to the needs of everyday users and to the problem of finding a mass audience for internet radio—which its acquisition by Google Play seemed to ratify—obscured another series of problems having to do with what happens when music becomes a "service"; the relation between domesticity, "the public," and the media; and the place of gender, labor, pleasure, and democratic practices in the discussion.

Discussion and Closing

5PM-5:30