Antiseptic Machine Life

Sun-ha Hong

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The Detox Paradox

December, 2018. Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter, tweets to the world announcing his withdrawal from the world.[1] He has journeyed to Pyin Oo Lwin, Burma/Myanmar, in a classic Silicon Valley pilgrimage to the exotic heart of new age spirituality. Dorsey has long positioned himself as a spiritual influencer for contemporary technoculture, proselytizing on the need for humanism, intimacy, and nature, to balance the networks of outrage that he himself has helped create.

And so, Jack Dorsey drinks salt juice each morning. He fasts. He takes ice baths. While in Burma, he undergoes a week of silent meditation, detoxing himself from the excesses of technology. But the detox itself is rationalised in terms of technological optimisation. Dorsey cites the vipassanā, an ancient Buddhist practice that was itself rearticulated as a popular modern movement partly through American practitioners. For Dorsey, vipassanā is about "hack[ing] the deepest layer of the mind and reprogram[ming] it." He sees Buddha as a proto-biohacker, characterized by his "rigorous scientific self-experimentation." Dorsey positions himself as an extension of Buddha's noble science, enabled by the latest smart machines. Seated in a Mandalay cave (but one laid out with a tiled floor), he tracks himself with wearable devices, monitoring his heart rate, his calories, his REM sleep.

Outside the cave, Burma remains less than tranquil. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims had fled the country in recent months, seeking relief from systematic persecution by the military regime. But should Dorsey have been more mindful of the wider ethical context? One commenter thought not: "[Dorsey] came here just to do something during his birthday." He was just trying to cleanse himself from the swamp of data. Allegations of ethnic cleansing was a problem for someone else, for some other day.

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The detox is now an established stage in the ouroboros of technology consumption. First, we subsume ourselves in a data surround, in which the sheer overproduction of data becomes normalized as the rhythmic backdrop to everyday life. Technoculture then offers a new range of data analytics that we might further

[1] Dorsey, "Twitter Post."

consume to make our (always temporary) escape. Some tools merely visualise and collate the extent of our technological malaise; others turn to techniques like Pavlovian conditioning to literally shock us out of it. Two MIT students describe the almost nonconscious habit through which they end up wasting time on Facebook—as if, they say, "dragged there by some mysterious Ouija-esque compulsion."[2] Their solution is the Pavlov Poke: a browser activity monitoring system tied to a circuit board, sending electric shocks to the user upon detecting nonproductive activity. Detoxing restores control—but only if you agree to suspend your ordinary boundaries, and accept heretofore exceptional forms of technological intervention.

But what are we trying to fix about ourselves when we detox? The fast-growing detox business deftly leverages the language of self-help and wellness industries, commodifying authenticity as an object of performative nostalgia. Popular detox manuals describe smart machines as a 'force field' separating humans from each other and from themselves;[3] the detox, in turn, will reconnect us with our bodies, as well as nature and all its 'healing power.'[4] Detox apps also draw freely from the iconography of addiction and mental health; one popular app invites users to "Get your dose of AppDetox now", complete with a surgical needle for the app icon.[5]

All this, of course, means more labor and responsibility for the hyperactive subject, parallel to the ways in which productivity technologies in the workplace create new demands on the worker to manage themselves.[6] Detox apps like "Moment" typically provide dashboards for smartphone use data, such as screen time versus 'quality offline time'. As such data become integrated into the base operating system (such as Android's Digital Wellbeing, or iOS' Screen Time), they ironically feed into more notifications and alerts *about* the detox as an object of quantified optimization. Meanwhile, social media executives, nestled in their boundless riches, confess they try to stay off social media and limit their own children's screen time. The reader is thus asked to reflect on their own moral failure to individually resist an industrialized compulsion. Like the physical detox in the realms of food and health, in which I *owe it to myself* to regularly cleanse my body of harmful substances, the digital detox makes a moral responsibility of the need to purify, sanitise, empty out, our bodies and minds.[7] Here we might also think of enduring ideas around digital hygiene[8]: the growing work of daily maintenance the user must perform to stay clean, stay safe online, whether from viral infections or anti-vaxxer disinformation.[9]

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[2] Robertson, "An Electroshock Facebook Deterrent Converts Mindless Browsing into Pain."
[3] Maushart, *The Winter of Our Disconnect: How Three Totally Wired Teenagers (and a Mother Who Slept with Her IPhone) Pulled the Plug on Their Technology and Lived to Tell the Tale*, in Syvertsen and Enli, "Digital Detox: Media Resistance and the Promise of Authenticity", 8.
[4] Formica, *Digital Detox: 7 Steps to find Your Inner Balance*, in Syvertsen and Enli, "Digital Detox: Media Resistance and the Promise of Authenticity."
[5] Keshavarzian, "Digital Detox Hegemony: The Misconception of Offloading Technology Fatigue."
[6] Gregg, *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*.
[7] For the connection between food metaphors and digital detoxes, see Sutton, "Disconnect to Reconnect: The Food/Technology Metaphor in Digital Detoxing."
[8] Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud*, 57.
[9] For one such analysis, see McKinney and Mulvin, "Bugs: Rethinking the History of Computing."

As with Dorsey's meditations, the digital detox industry's gestures towards the holistic and the intangible are articulated through a highly calculative, optimising mode of seeing. Detox characterizes its enemy as time wasted, life frittered away on the screen, which can and must be corrected through an almost surgical separation of data's harms from its benefits. We hope to "reconnect"' with ourselves, and build a happy life out of objective calculations, without the consequences of side effects like distraction, addiction— which are construed as not so much failure on the part of the technology, but "diseases of the will."[10] Yet the process of managing the growing array of smart machines and the data they track entails returning to the treadmill of data-driven optimization. Philosopher Han Byung-Chul calls this condition *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft*, or fatigue society: that stagnating malaise in which the to-do list is always growing, the inbox is ever dinging, the Twitter feed endlessly repopulating, all in ostensible aid of a subject for whom the overabundance of activity is valorised as essential virtues.[11] Dorsey's meticulously planned detox, gilded with a touch of disaster tourism, seeks a reset button on the human machine. The detox purges the toxic build-up of the excess information and stimulation that characterizes the smart society—such that Dorsey may return to the fray, all the more energized, for business as usual.

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We detox from our machines only in order to return to them as more efficient and productive subjects. We detox according to the very logic of what we detox from: that of optimization. These contradictions reflect a broader tension in what I have called elsewhere "data's intimacy", or, the promise that emerging "smart" machines will help you know yourself better than ever, that autonomous surveillance and predictive analytics will provide objective knowledge of ourselves.[12] Across wearable devices, smart home assistants, and other fixtures of the Internet of Things, we find a new ecosystem of machines that cling to your body, listen in from inside the home, and are sometimes literally under your skin. They observe, record, and in doing so, articulate your existence in terms of calculable proxies.

But intimacy is never a one-way street. The word often evokes a sense of human togetherness and transmission. Yet its roots in *intimus,* meaning the inmost parts of the self, tells us that this proximity can apply elsewhere and in different ways. Our understanding of intimacy as love, friendship, hanging out, liking, following, laughing, remind us that even as we hope intimacy makes us whole, it can also be a disruptive and fraught process that opens us to vulnerability. Intimacy is not just about getting "in touch" with our inner selves; it also turns us inside out, exposes us, leaves us vulnerable. Forging new connections often entails creating new boundaries as well, demarcating good kinds of proximity and contagion from bad ones. How 'close' should we keep our smart machine that wants to live in our beds and extract data

[10] See Valverde, *Diseases of the Will: Alcohol and the Dilemmas of Freedom*.
[11] Han, *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft*; also see Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*.
[12] Hong, *Technologies of Speculation: The Limits of Knowledge in a Data-Driven Society*.

from our skin? What other kinds of connectivity, exposure, visibility, come hand in hand with the kind of intimacy proposed by the smart machine?

Involuntary Vulnerabilities

In the early days of the popular web, many wondered if the reduction of certain sensory channels—from real faces to emoticons, real-time to asynchronous conversation—would impoverish human intimacy. Just as consequential, it turns out, are the ways in which algorithmic systems regulate the kinds of people, databases, opportunities, communities, with which we gain meaningful contact. In *Purity and Danger,* the anthropologist Mary Douglas shows us how cultural conceptions of cleanliness and (im)purity regulate acceptable forms of proximity.[13] One striking aspect of the so-called "smart" society is the degree to which those demarcations are enacted, black-boxed, and concealed through technologies of intimacy. Here, the human proximity and connection afforded through the smart device or the social media platform is the *side effect;* what is primary is the industry's ability to collect user data from bedrooms, bathrooms, and every crevice of what was once considered 'private' or 'domestic'. It is a question how our moods or sleep patterns, exercise routines or sex lives, can be made most compatible to the array of available sensors and analytical processes such that they can be rationalised into "insights" and predictions. It is intimacy defined not by a robust theory of the personal, private or human, but the degree to which scalable and automated systems of quantified prediction can *get close to* the most personal and mundane aspects of individual subjects.[14]

In short, the advent of smart technologies—made in the name of human intimacy, a means to connect with "our true selves" —is also a project for our involuntary vulnerability to machinic measurement, and to the quantifiable standards of health and wellness, productivity and efficiency that they entail. Katherine Hayles calls this "somatic surveillance," or the exteriorisation of what previously remained relatively nonrational and nonconscious, in order to avail it for calculative rationalisation.[15] Here, the kind of proximity that matters for profit and predictivity pays little heed to the kind of intimacy appreciable by human sensory experience. Behavioural data is collected from schoolchildren first in the name of community safety, but then quickly passed on to, in one case, betting firms, who can use the data to identify potential customers.[16] Our faces, that long privileged point of human intimacy, are first voluntarily uploaded for social connections and subsequently recombined to train facial recognition datasets. Eventually, your images become more promiscuous than you could ever be, becoming caught up in more datasets and institutions well beyond any practical ability to give meaningful consent. Yahoo's YFCC100M

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[13] Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*.
[14] For more on this subject, see, for example, Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data - Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves*; Stark, "Algorithmic Psychometrics and the Scalable Subject."
[15] Hayles, "Cognitive Assemblages: Technical Agency and Human Interactions."
[16] Bryan, Griffiths, and Ungoed-Thomas, "Revealed: Betting Firms Use Schools Data on 28m Children."

dataset, released in 2014, included faces scraped en masse from Flickr archives as old as 2004.[17] Faces taken and shared in one's adolescence might still circulate a decade on—totally unbeknownst to their owners. None of us know now where we will next encounter own faces, or where our faces are being read and measured. All over the world, faces of ordinary individuals are already being used to bill customers, as in India's Chaayos coffee chain; to admit (and bar) visitors, as in China's Hanzghou Safari Park; to scan passengers on airplanes, as with America's Delta Airlines. Trevor Paglen notes that the vast majority of images today are produced by and for machine communication.[18] The same is true for personal data. What we actively communicate to a platform like Facebook through our words and Likes is dwarfed by, more passive, invisible forms of communication, such as the company's ability to invisibly track online activity outside the platform through pixel tracking. Such data is pumped and circulated to fatten datasets that are often black-boxed out of human scrutiny and understanding.

Technologies of datafication are designed to share and leak data; such promiscuity[19] is crucial to the economic interests of the tech industry as we know it. For it is precisely in the promise of collecting data for one reason and using it for another, in recombining data for unexpected new purposes, that the technology is argued to provide extra value.[20] Consider Clearview AI, the now notorious surveillance service that seeks to provide the largest possible database of faces scraped from the internet. Promotional emails from Clearview encouraged its clients to be as voracious as possible, never mind the privacy risks: "Have you tried taking a selfie with Clearview yet? See what comes up! … Try your friends or family. Or a celebrity like Joe Montana or George Clooney… Your Clearview account has unlimited searches. So feel free to run wild with your searches."[21] The list of Clearview clients is confidential, though leaks indicate that the product, publicly described as strictly for law enforcement purposes, is also being used by the likes of Walmart and a Massachusetts high school.[22] The human intimacy promised by technologies of datafication, tinged with romantic promises of individual agency and spiritual harmony, functions as a foil for an altogether different logic of proximity between corporations and my data, law enforcement and my body.

Speaking of social media platforms, José van Dijck noted that the promise of human connectedness is used to advance greater connectivity at the level of data-driven surveillance.[23] It is not merely that machinic proximity sneaks in, like a thief in the night, under cover of human intimacy. Rather, the very terms by which we seek human intimacy is increasingly *rationalised* in terms of predictive surveillance. Smart

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[17] Thomee et al., "YFCC100M: The New Data in Multimedia Research."
[18] Paglen, "Invisible Images (Your Pictures Are Looking at You)."
[19] For more on this subject, see Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*.
[20] Betancourt, "Immaterial Value and Scarcity in Digital Capitalism."
[21] Mac, Haskins, and McDonald, "Clearview AI Once Told Cops To 'Run Wild' With Its Facial Recognition Tool. It's Now Facing Legal Challenges."
[22] Mac, Haskins, and McDonald, "Clearview's Facial Recognition App Has Been Used By The Justice Department, ICE, Macy's, Walmart, And The NBA."
[23] van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*.

technologies achieved widespread buy-in through deeply discounted offers of wonderfully novel connectivity: ride my car, sleep in my home, make friends along the way, escape the soullessness of the mass produced travel experience. Once we're strapped in for the ride, though, there is a gradual creep in terms of admission. It's not just that Uber rides grow more expensive, shedding the billions of investor funding that had artificially depressed prices in its early years; it is also the new forms of screening and judgment required to play this new game of proximity. AirBnB is now exploring algorithmic screening systems for tenants, where data on individuals might be scraped and correlated in an attempt to derive predictions of their "trustworthiness."[24] When machines crawl the web for data like "swear words or phrases that express negative emotion" to derive personality traits like "neuroticism, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy" —and in turn, use that data to provide or withhold accommodation services—we start to see a new set of gatekeeping functions, new rules of proximity and separation, derived from what was allegedly a technology of intimacy. Giggle, a new girls-only social network, wants to offer the safety of curated intimacy—as long as you undergo scanning through a "bio-metric gender verification software" to show you are really a woman. "Unfortunately, it doesn't verify trans-girls," we are told.

These emerging forms of technological governance extend out of the screen and onto the material conditions of those technologies as well. Smartphone users download PooKeeper to track their own shit, mindful of the rising responsibility to measure and optimise every facet of their personal lives. Meanwhile, Facebook's overworked moderators—tasked with the unenviable work of cleaning metaphorical shit off the platform at high speed—are instructed to log their own toilet breaks, creating ever more fine-grained measures of workplace "productivity."[25] Amazon has long been accused of doing the same with its warehouse workers. Meanwhile, at least one Uber office has been seen segregating its drivers and full employees into separate bathrooms.[26] Who gets to come in contact with whom? Who gets to measure themselves—and who cannot afford to avoid being measured by others? As one early pioneer of self-tracking technologies would later muse: "It costs a lot not to have internet access. I wonder in the future whether people will be able to afford not living with the internet … Not being connected will constitute a new disability."[27] Initially, the question is simple: do you want a smart assistant that listens in on you? Over time, the equation shifts: can you afford to refuse the smart assistant if your job, your insurance, your social network, effectively requires it?

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The expansion of involuntary vulnerabilities continue at rapid pace. Google is actively pursuing partnerships with hospitals and health data companies in order to gather more comprehensive data about your health, your medication, your

[24] Singh, Nilesh, and Das, Determining trustworthiness and compatibility of a person.
[25] Gilbert, "Facebook Is Forcing Its Moderators to Log Every Second of Their Days — Even in the Bathroom."
[26] Horton, "An Uber Office Segregated Bathrooms for Drivers and 'Employees.'"
[27] Chris Dancy, in Moore, *The Quantified Self in Precarity - Work, Technology and What Counts*.

symptoms—and so is Facebook.[28] Amazon is steadily building its ecosystem of smart home devices for data collection. Its Alexa smart assistant can now ask questions and initiate conversation, and has passed HIPAA certification to handle patient data. Meanwhile, Amazon's Halo fitness band seeks to "create 3D scans for body fat and [listen] for the emotion in your voice".[29] Each possible site of data's intimacy becomes a space for strategies of "accumulation by dispossession,"[30] in which something about us is systematically devalued *such that* it provides surplus value for its canny extractors. Smart technology, as one Valley marketing director confides, is "all push not pull … the Valley has decided that this has to be the next big thing so that firms here can grow."[31]

But the push for profit and growth also pushes along—and pushes away—many other kinds of social change in its uncaring stride. The pursuit of intimacy with myself, with others, with the world, is conducted through the belief in technology as a shortcut, information as a neutral equaliser, data as purifying element for the messiness of intimacy. At the same time, such intimacy is opening up new paths for the extraction and exploitation of the personal, the private, the domestic, creating new and involuntary points of vulnerability. And whenever you need a break from all that? The detox is here for you, too—if you can afford it.

[28] Copeland, Mattioli, and Evans, "Inside Google's Quest for Millions of Medical Records"; Fussell, "The Sneaky Genius of Facebook's New Preventive Health Tool."
[29] Bohn, "Amazon Announces Halo, a Fitness Band and App That Scans Your Body and Voice."
[30] Thatcher, O'Sullivan, and Mahmoudi, "Data Colonialism through Accumulation by Dispossession: New Metaphors for Daily Data."
[31] In Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, 224.

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