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Feminism in the era of the Quantified Self: agency, labour and future markets

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How can “self-knowledge through numbers” open up new spaces for feminist politics and interventions in health policy, personal data, reproductive rights and technologies? This paper analyses how discourses of women’s empowerment and reproductive choice are articulated in relation to data collection today, by drawing from three areas of empirical research. The empirical work that I draw from in this paper includes interviews with the organizers of QSXX in San Francisco, Boston and New York, and media analysis of tech reviews and promotional material of various apps, as well as close reading of the interface of one such app, Kindara. I analyze the key discourses of the ideal gendered, self-regulating neoliberal subject, and how this subjectivity entails both a knowledge subjectivity and a data subjectivity. I then consider the counter-discourses articulated by feminists and, from this, I embark on a discussion about how the data gathered link to how we imagine possible futures and shape our everyday materialities. Through theoretical frameworks of biopolitics and reproductive labour (Dickenson, 2007; Thompson, 2005), I discuss how feminist and data futures are imagined, and how far data collection has the potential to make the voices of women heard, beyond the articulation of consumer demands about digital health.

Reproductive control has been a key issue for feminism, and women have always logged their data in some way. However, it is with online and mobile technologies such as smart phone apps and social media platforms that data collection carries a promise of significant life changes. There is currently an explosion of self-tracking apps (Fotopoulou and O’Riordan, 2016; Neff and Nafus, 2016), and apps used specifically to monitor fertility and reproductive hormones (Lupton, 2015). This use raises some critical questions around data ownership and power, labour and exploitation, at the intersections of the digital with the biological, which are of interest from a feminist perspective. What form might feminist politics around reproductive rights take with these new practices, and more generally, what might a feminist critique of data collection look like?

Policies concerning reproductive rights and promotional material of self-tracking devices, address women as both responsible, rational citizens and as engaged consumers. But self-tracking women embody multiple identities, for example ‘geek’, patient or potential donor (of genetic material or data for research, or both). New practices and technologies around hormonal self-tracking (such as fertility, menstruation

and reproduction) seem to reformulate rather than transgress gender roles, especially those associated to caring and being a mother (Fotopoulou, 2017). For example, many tracking tools for menstruation, fertility and pregnancy focus on moods or other information that reflects men's (and not women's) interests. Male designers encode gender stereotypes in the tracking categories of products (see Apple's Health for example), and – when they do not exclude women - reproduce power relations (Eveleth, 2014). At the same time, self-tracking women often have to negotiate their role as 'geeky feminist' – especially those who participate in meet-ups of the Quantified Self and identify as 'smart, geeky, talented' women involved in sensor hacking.

The Quantified Self, with capital QS, is a spreading community of “lifelogging”: a community of people who incorporate technology such as wearable sensors to log data on various aspects of their everyday lives (Lupton, 2016). Women are, however, still a minority in the groups, and their issues appear to be marginalized. Women-only groups started appearing in the US in 2013, and have been spreading, with a scope to exchange skills and tools that are specific to women's health and wellbeing. The QS is not a political organization, but talking about monitoring hormones potentially enables political debate around important issues of personal data and health.

Neoliberal governance is increasingly articulated through discourses of risks (see Sunder-Rajan, 2006) and the mobilization of fear (Dean, 2009) – especially in relation to the welfare state and the healthcare. The discourses of empowerment and choice that are reproduced in the design of various apps and in websites of personalized health and tracking may be thought to respond precisely to this context of fear about access to healthcare. Empowerment in this context is linked to expertise about and control of one's body, and an imaginary that the body will function properly if its functions are tracked. 'Information is power', states in its online mission statement the *Hormone Project*, a network for experts and researchers that aims to connect sources of hormonal knowledge and drive innovation in biotech and personalized health.

This paper proposes what a feminist approach to hormonal self-tracking technologies and practices can be, by first considering the context in which such practices emerge. Even before the advent of the internet, Donna Haraway (1988) suggested that feminist politics need to be reframed in post-industrial technoscientific capitalist societies. Later, in Braidotti's (1994) exploration of embodiment and biotechnologies, it is precisely the aspect of the body as part of a capitalist production machine, and particularly women's bodies as biopower (in the form of genetic material, eggs, organs, fetuses) that is seen to produce new kinds of global inequalities. Today, as digital and biological technologies seem to merge and overlap, revisiting feminist Marxist scholarly traditions - whereby women's bodies are understood as generators of biovalue, property rights and as sites of exploitation – seems not only relevant, but also necessary (Fotopoulou, 2017). In the case of women's self-tracking, labour both in relation to tracking technologies (wearable sensors, smart phones, interfaces) as digital technologies, and in relation to gender need to be considered. We may think then about how women as a particular social group produce surplus through their labour in the processes data collection, and how that labour relates to other forms of embodied reproductive labour.

Through this exploration, the paper suggests that discourses of control and expertise of self-tracking apps, tools and communities render the gendered labour invisible, whilst enabling new, future markets to capitalize on women's bodies. This is a historical struggle for feminism and reproductive rights, which scholars and activists have framed within the conceptualization of biovalue and reproductive value. As women are increasingly seen as bodies of data and their material futures are affected by the predictive algorithms that inform their data logging, this critique is now as relevant as ever.

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