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Curating the 'Care-Full' Home: An Experiment in Satirical Interdisciplinarity in Social Research

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Abstract

The short film – *The Care-Full Home* – explores the datafication of everyday later lives vis-à-vis emerging technologies. The film was created over 48 hours during a hackathon focussing on digital ageing. It uses satire as an overarching methodology to engage with the ambiguities of datafication and the uncertain boundaries between data and undata. In this accompanying piece, we outline the creation of *The Care-Full Home* and discuss the methodological potentials and pitfalls of satire as a means of critical engagement with questions of datafication and ambiguous social phenomena more broadly.

Introduction

Digitalisation is integral to our contemporary collective imagination of societal transformation. Digitisation and population ageing are among the most profound contemporary social forces shaping human life worldwide (WHO 2022). Opportunities and challenges at the intersections of these two forces of demographic aging and digitalization demand **new forms of knowledge creation** extending far beyond the traditional intellectual terrains of any single field (Peine et al 2021). Such efforts are now emerging through initiatives such as the Socio-Gerontechnology Network, an online research consortium that brings together scholars specialising in STS (<https://www.socio-gerontechnology.net/>). However, such work is rarely easy. Its pursuit can generate innumerable opportunities for different ethical, methodological, epistemological and ontological commitments to collide (Klein 2021).

In this piece, we focus on a short film – “The Care-Full Home” – that was collaboratively developed to push the boundaries of **digital ageing research** and offer an epistemological rupture in how scientific knowledge gets produced in academic circles. “The Care-Full Home” is the culmination of an innovative and playful experiment with the potential uses of creative satire as a methodological approach to cultivating rich engagements with ageing and technology (Appendix A). The project was developed over two days during a 2023 hackathon hosted at Goethe University (https://www.uni-frankfurt.de/127933695/RIL_23). **Hackathons bring diverse experts together to rapidly engineer creative responses to contemporary challenges.** Our group was made up of five scholars at different career levels from five

countries and five disciplines (anthropology, demography, gerontology, philosophy, sociology), with a shared specialism in digital ageing.

Unknowing Thyself: The co-creation process

Unknowing Thyself was formed by asking all attendees to write their personal research interests on pieces of card that were then handed over to hackathon organisers who grouped the cards thematically. Our group was formed around interests in questions of “home”, “ambivalences of care”, “new materialism”, “self-care” and “data assemblages” (Appendix B). The group was given 48 hours to deliver a project of our choosing, facilitated through the availability of a collection of expert consultants and the university’s various physical and digital resources. The first task was narrowing down a project. Some group members had experience in creative methods and multimedia (JRF), and we alighted on the idea of making a film to best use our collective expertise. Through consultation with faculty experts affiliated with the Lab, we decided to make a film about a futuristic smart-home, optimised to ‘care’ for its older resident. **We set about storyboarding our film (all authors), specifying four scenes of routine and domesticity in the Care-Full Home, each containing quirky forms of datafication (Appendix C). We then created a script (SH, TS), gathered multimedia via free-to-use content platforms (EC, JRF), roughly collated the content (EC), recorded narration (SH), and edited the final film (all authors).**

Some group members specialised in the critiques of ‘datafication’ (TS), a practice embodying the disciplinary logic of capitalism, wherein cultural processes and lived experiences are classified, coded and filed into taxonomies and ontologies (Edmond et al 2022) of transforming culture into data. Therefore, we decided to focus on exploring the boundaries of (un)data **(datafied everyday phenomena, the meaning of which can be compromised when abstracted from context)**, questioning what we might and might not intuit as collectable and usable data as a medium, and even means, of care. Recognising the characteristic ambiguities of care datafication, particularly at the frontiers of (un)data, we alighted on satire as a productive medium of critical engagement. **We did so because one member (JRF) had experience of using satire sociologically in the style of Young’s (1958) famous satirisation of meritocracy.**

Amidst a wider interest in humour across the social sciences, satire is increasingly recognised as a valuable methodological tool (Lockyer & Weaver 2022), **challenging old consensuses around the rightfulness of seriousness (and humourlessness) as characteristics of “good” scholarship (Watson 2015).** It sits within a wider turn to creative methods across the social sciences as offering more critically praxis-conscious strategies for pursuing and doing transformative social change (Barron et al 2021), **particularly using multimedia experimentally, beyond dominant logics of authentic representation as a necessary commitment in scholarly projects (Grossman 2014). One of satire’s methodological uses is hence as a catalyst of reflexivity, encouraging us to reflect on taken-for-granted moral appraisals of the value of our own work and that of our disciplines more generally (Watson 2015).**

Critically, for our purposes, satire blurs the normative boundaries between the good and the bad (or irrelevant), and between fact and fiction. It opens up a fertile space for audience participation in social science by leaving certain things productively under-evaluated and under-explicated. For instance, if we propose a smart-mirror that can record and assess appearance, and translate that assessment into recommendations, different audiences may interpret this as more or less desirable. This interpretability can be useful vis-à-vis datafication as a response to moral panics regarding digital technologies and their consequences for the self, particularly in relation to ageing and care. Here, satire can offer a salve to social scientific finger-wagging, without contrarily cheerleading those same research phenomena or fashioning an intellectually underwhelming aesthetic of impartiality.

The capacity of satire to engage with and itself manifest the ambiguities of care digitalisation were poignantly exemplified when something of particular interest occurred toward the end of our first day. We discovered that almost all our suggestions for features of the 'Care-Full' Home were already available in the real world. For instance, we were surprised to find that our imagined smart-vibrator could be purchased for \$229, replete with a mobile app, AI capabilities, biofeedback, and a plush imitation of the vibrator for your pet. That which we had devised as representing the more farcical end of prospective digitalisation, had in fact been genuinely developed by others who presumably considered such an entity worthwhile. In this instance, satire had enabled us to inadvertently further our own capturing of the ambiguities of datafication. The subversive potential of humour as a 'method' in sociological research is increasingly acknowledged. Echoing other writers (Watson 2015; Hylton 2017) who have used satire, humour and irony in their joint articulation of sense and nonsense, we designed our film to capture the ambiguities of a datafied reality, or as Zupancic (2008: 58) notes, the spaces 'between a reality and its other side.'

Beyond its operation as a means for critically reflecting on the nature of self-care datafication in later life, satire also functioned as an important foundation of methodological enjoyability. We had a good time, which is critical to the success of something as intense as a hackathon. Following an evening of discussion with various scholars from other hackathon groups, it became apparent that the format was challenging some groups. However, we were genuinely enjoying the process and finding the work worthwhile. At a basic level, humour can evidently be an effective social and political lubricant, but we would argue that satire can do more than this. While its potential for facilitating multiplicity has been documented in relation to research dissemination (Batty & Taylor 2019), what we did here went further methodologically. By centring satire, we conjured a space wherein different perspectives could co-exist relatively smoothly, even enjoyably, and thence be brought into fruitful relations of coproduction.

Concluding Reflections

Despite its growing importance, satire is still typically featured as something of an aside in most methodological discussions, briefly mentioned in concluding paragraphs, even where it has seemingly played an important role (Lockyer & Weaver 2022). By being more explicit, we hope that this project will exemplify some of the possibilities that playful satirical approaches offer as routes into complex contemporary social issues. **Principally, we found that satire 1) resonated with the ambiguities of datafication and hence opened some of its frailties up to scrutiny, 2) pushed us to reflect on the conventional commitments of our own heavily disciplined praxis, and 3) made a demanding process genuinely enjoyable and, by extension, fruitful.**

While potentially easing explorations of complex topics by purposefully leaving much open to interpretation, these interpretive spaces that are opened up through satire can present opportunities for new divergences that can themselves turn sour. For instance, creators have a distinct lack of control over how ambiguous depictions of research problems will be perceived and used in the wider world, particularly when compared with the exactitudes of traditional academic publishing. Satirical engagements that purposefully channel ambiguity potentially intensify the risks of work being misused by bad actors or interpreted in harmful ways by other audiences. **Moreover, we acknowledge the potentially contentious ethics of satirically attending to older women's appearance, health and sexuality, which can be highly sensitive issues and hence not something to necessarily make-light-of. We recognise that some audiences might interpret the work as satirising these issues, but our explicit intention is solely to satirise related datafication. We purposefully focussed on a woman to allow us to engage with these issues and touch on some more fraught forms of datafication, simultaneously underscoring the point that satire is far from an unproblematic strategy.**

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