
Metadating: Exploring the Romance of Personal Data

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Abstract

We introduce 'Metadating' - a speed dating event where single participants dated with their own personal informatics data. Participants engaged in reflection and self-tracking prior to the workshop, and created 'data profiles' to be judged and discussed before and during dates. We use this provocative context to investigate the potential social role of personal informatics. We highlight the value of ambiguity, how data might look more 'human', and the opportunities for curating personal informatics.

Author Keywords

Personal Informatics, Quantified Self, Online dating

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction/What is Metadating?

In this paper we describe 'Metadating' - a speed-dating event that aimed to explore and speculate about the opportunity to meet, date, judge and love other people, based on the vast amounts of quantitative data they can increasingly collect about their lives. Sensor-based technologies - wearable activity monitors, home monitoring systems and smartphone apps - promise to generate data and insights to help us live happier,

easier and healthier lives. Rather than a 'big data' approach, favoured by dating sites such as OKCupid¹, we sought to understand how people interact with their own and each other's data on a small, personal scale.

Data can increasingly be collected beyond an individual; within families; between friends; with an employer or health professional. Therefore we suggest that the potential social roles of these self-tracking technologies, and their role in the presentation of self has been greatly under-explored.

With this work we argue that dating is a concentrated activity where people work very carefully on their self-presentation and being social. This is especially the case for creating online dating profiles - be it choosing a Tinder profile photo; answering a questionnaire on OK Cupid, or penning a lonely hearts ad. Through this speculation of 'dating with data', we set out to create a rich and provocative context to study the social life of data, and an example of 'lived informatics' [4].

How to do Metadating

Metadating was advertised as a singles dating and research event to "explore the romance of personal data". Up to a week prior to the event, participants were given an invitation that included a 'data profile' for them to complete. Shown below, this profile was both akin to a cultural probe [2] and the key artifact at the event. The profiles helped participants familiarise themselves with the notion of self-tracking, collect some personal data and reflect on what data to share.

At the event, there were two key interactions with the data profiles. Participants were first split into two halves (of mixed gender) and invited to inspect and jointly discuss the profiles of the other half of the room. This loosely simulated the experience of online dating – judging someone without meeting them based on a profile. After this, participants took part in 4-5 minute speed dates with their data profiles at the table. Due to the gender balance on the night, the women had 7 dates each, while each man had 4 dates. 28 dates were performed in total.

In this short paper we present some interesting excerpts of the data, followed by some brief reflections and design considerations, which we hope will provoke discussion about both the social roles of personal informatics, and methods to do speculative research about these tools as they gain mainstream appeal.

Data Profiles

Consisting of three pages, the profiles had one page of structured biographical but quantitative questions (e.g. walking pace, heart rate, furthest distance travelled from home) and two pages of empty graphs, tables and visualisations and left significant blank space to avoiding constraining the data that could be represented. We included information about some free tracking tools people could use as well as examples of how different visualisations could be used. As with an online dating profile, it was up to participants how much they recorded, and how accurate or honest they were with what they shared.

¹ www.okcupid.com

my self

Use this space to give as much or as little info about yourself:

What is your...
 ... walking pace (mph) 2.68
 ... shoe size (UK) 12
 ... hair length (cm) 0.25
 ... ring size (UK)
 ... or

What are your 3 favourite...
 ... places visited?
Berlin
Minneapolis
Manchester
 ... foods or drinks?
Cocktails (vino)
Earl Grey Tea
Coffee
 ... books read?
Strange Attractor
Rebecca's Wish
The tipping point
 ... films watched?
Cloud Atlas
Inception
Trance
 ... music listened to?
Brush Strokes
Oblivion (Hilary Duff)
Piano - Edie Deno
 What's the farthest distance you've travelled from home? 5.478 miles
 What's the earliest and latest you sent an email this month? 7am / 5pm
 What's your heart rate right now? 82

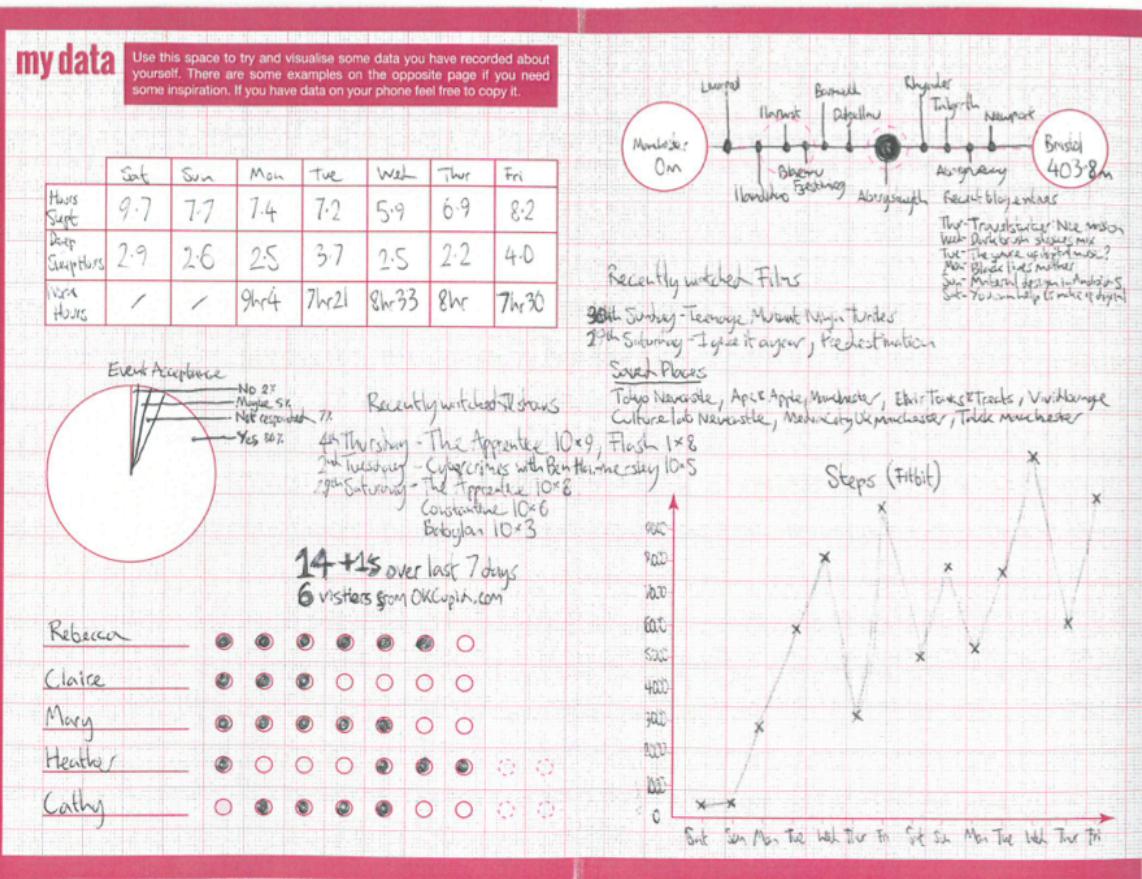


Figure 1: Example of a completed data profile.

This profile also shows the mix of numbers, drawings, and diagrams used. To read the whole profile would take some time, others could be scanned more quickly. During dates, participants tended to latch onto the data that was most apparent or a source of comparison.

Data Excerpts

Here we show excerpts of different profiles and the range of data they chose to represent.

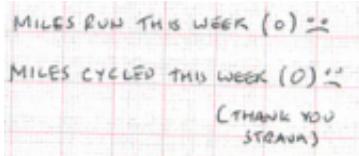


Figure 2: An amusing example of someone displaying the exercise they hadn't achieved that week. And yet even displaying this data signifies an interest in fitness or intention to exercise.

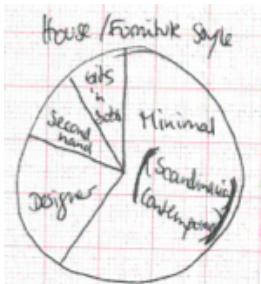


Figure 3: A pie chart of furniture taste. Another example where although this would be challenging to track, the pie chart as a form has been appropriated to present part of one's taste and identity.

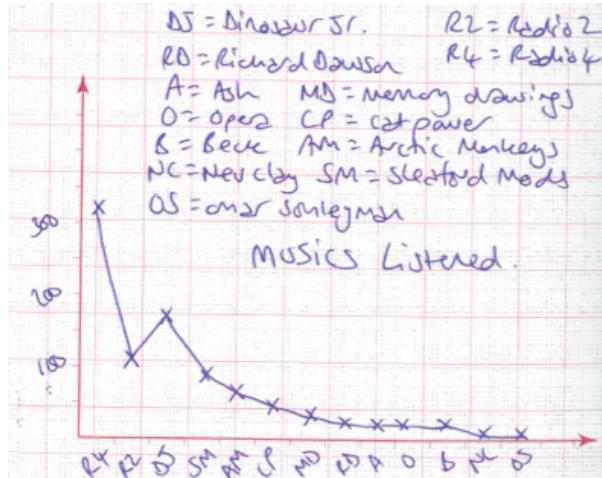


Figure 4: Graph of music listened throughout one week. Curiously much of this was as part of a car-share to work.

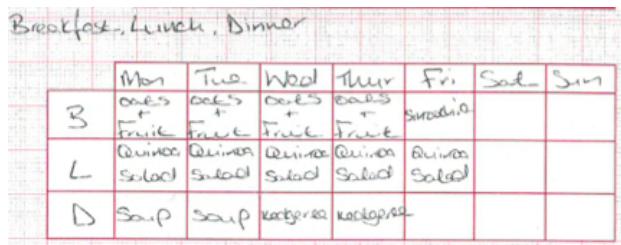


Figure 5: Weekday food intake. During the event, they lamented that they had been '*too honest*' and their data looked rather boring.

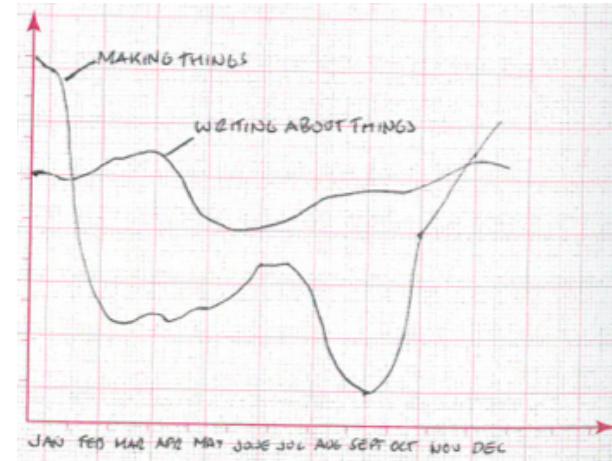


Figure 6: A graph of the correlation between making things and writing things over the course of a year. An example of a powerful graph, that would be hard to track with current self-tracking tools.

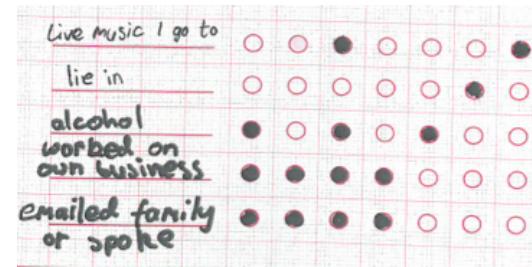


Figure 7: Recorded activities throughout the week. Immediately communicates a number of interests e.g. live music, family ties, entrepreneurship.

Observations and Reflections on Metadating

From what we observed, dating with data was undoubtedly a compelling activity, which our participants enjoyed. Many felt the dates were over too quickly, and remarked that having something like the data profile to share made dating easier - "*because usually you just go in cold, and there's nothing*".

People rapidly sought outstanding details on each other's profiles, as a means to start or move a conversation on. They frequently engaged in comparative talk, establishing similarities and differences in their data and daily lives. This was the case even for measurements such as one's heart rate. These numbers rarely form part of everyday discourse, but when present to hand, became a resource for conversation – jokes, comparison and even suspicion.

Often, more ambiguous data attracted conversation. Numerous dates discussed their '*furthest distance from home*', remarking: "*5000 miles is quite interesting as a lead in... you want to know where that person's been*". It proved more engaging to ambiguously say 'I've travelled 11,372 miles from home' rather than simply, 'I've been to Dunedin, NZ'. There was also a strong sense that the data shouldn't tell everything. As one person said – "*You don't want someone's complete autobiography before you meet them*".

Similarly, the accuracy of people's data was not a significant concern. Many people faked or made up data that was '*representative*' and were very frank about doing this. For others, the motivation for tracking something and sharing it, was as telling to them as the data itself. This data was more symbolic, acting as more of a signal, than a source of specific information.

Much conversation revolved around putting data in context - describing where they had been; explaining why they had walked so far or not; justifying one thing or another with anecdotes in between. The data excerpts above require captions and talk before they can be interpreted. By contextualizing their data, people told personal stories, constantly working to relate abstract numbers and graphs to lived experience.

The freedom of a hand-written profile undoubtedly made for a far more personal and imaginative exercise. There's something ludic about much of the data people represented. It's also telling that much of the data would be challenging to produce with an app or device (e.g Figs. 3, 6). This also indicates that the current suite of tools do not or cannot record a lot of the things that people feel really represents or defines them.

Taken together – the ambiguity, the inaccuracy and the construction of context – reminds us of both Frederic Bartlett and Harvey Sacks. Bartlett argued for a highly reconstructive human memory, and thus suggests that '*literal recall is extraordinarily unimportant*' [1] in everyday life and conversation. Here, the story and conversations that could be reconstructed around data proved more important to the act of dating, than the data itself. We can also see personal informatics data becoming what Harvey Sacks might have called 'tickets to talk' [5]. An excuse - a means - to engage in conversation, in this case focused on different aspects of one's life and the practice self-tracking itself. While the context for this talk was arbitrarily constructed as speed dating, we can see how simply being visible and present-to-hand, data can insert itself within conversation and take-on meaning.

Some Design Considerations

We now seek to move from these reflections towards design considerations that we hope will provoke discussion. To reiterate, we organised Metadating as a playful and provocative environment to consider the potential design space for more social roles of personal informatics tools, moving beyond individual concerns.

Ambiguous informatics

Made visible, data undoubtedly becomes a ‘ticket-for-talk’ – a social object. Gaver [3] describes ambiguity as ‘encouraging close personal engagement with systems’ and it can evidently be so with data. However, ambiguous informatics, to coin a term, is in many ways at odds with tools that promise self-knowledge, ‘insight’ and personal efficiency. We were also struck by how unconcerned our participants were about the accuracy of each other’s data, usually a key issue in designing any self-tracking tool. Design should consider scenarios where data might be represented more ambiguously – to foster conversation or reflection and support the personal telling and sharing of aspects of one’s life.

Data to make friends with

It seems the sort of rational looking data that apps typically generate to improve people’s lives, and support a match-making algorithm is not the data people want to talk about on a date or make friends with. Perhaps it’s just that data that depicts people as rational, predictable and robotic is not all that romantic or sexy? The detailing of vices, the inaccuracy, and the hand-drawn nature all contributed to making the profiles feel much more human than is traditionally represented digitally. In designing data as a technology for telling and sharing, we should consider carefully how data depicts us as more or less human.

Curating personal informatics

The flexibility of drawing data by hand, creating what one participant called ‘*analogue data*’ presents an opportunity. There are few tools that support such a level of curatorial control over the presentation of one’s data. Beyond automatic ‘big data-like’ approaches – which seek to mash as much data as possible to deliver insight (e.g. <https://exist.io/>) – what opportunities can we design for people to pick out, edit, highlight and curate their data? Consider the multiple possible representations of photographs, on display, in private albums, online, surrounded by comments, behind filters, on Tinder, as memes etc. and etc. How can data be easily rendered in different forms for different occasions, just one of which might be dating?

Acknowledgments

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