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Interview with Delfina Fantini

Can you describe your notion of "a better place"?

Everybody is declaring "better". Restaurants propose better food, politicians better systems, digital companies better services … nowadays better is a very popular word. But there is no defined meaning of it. If you look up in the dictionary, "better" is something "more desirable". Desirability embeds values and ways of seeing the world. "Technology is not really about hardware and software any more," said Google CEO Eric Schmidt in 2011, "It's really about the mining and use of this enormous volume of data" in order to "make the world a better place." What is Google offering? It profiles consumers, it stores their behavioural data. Their "better" is related to control and consumerism. Similarly, Chinese politicians argue that their social credit system is creating a better social system.

I believe a more desirable scenario for us has two pillars: Avoid technolosolutions and the algorithmisation of

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life. The first one refers to the idea of creating technological solutions for problems that don't really exist (Morozov, 2013). The second touches on the idea of the impossibility of translating human characteristics into an algorithmic logic. When we look at complex systems (e.g., the environment, cities, the society and our bodies), it becomes even more evident: Numbers are not enough to tackle all the challenges they pose, they don't have the qualitative capacity of human expertise and negotiation between disciplines. To preserve the planet, we should learn to use more effectively what we have already (maybe technology has a role here, but not always) and reduce consumerism (invented needs). It's easy to say "let's go digital and make the world better", but the elephant in the room is the materiality of digital objects and services: They need power, devices, servers, cables under the sea, all of which come with a very material footprint. With this comes human reductionism; an integral part of the belief in digital 'smartness' is that we are being evaluated and controlled by algorithms: Agency and reflection are being taken from us. Critical examination of relevant complex matters still needs human analysis; some subjects should not be automated or dictated by algorithms.

Can you illustrate a concept/approach/solution you think is crucial in order to get there?

Overall, we need to reinforce research showing the limitations of 'smart' technology, while also indicating the potential socio-political implications of algorithms when they come into play in complex systems like bodies and cities. Here, it is important to bring attention to accountability and privacy. Design research is a very good tool for generating new knowledge and bringing new questions into the world. A classic conception of 'smart' objects is that they will do things for you, such as perform tasks and make choices. However, their 'smartness' is extremely consumeristic (most of them guide you to buy things) and based on a deterministic approach to the problems you may have. I did the experiment myself in

the project "Becoming Your Smart Fridge", playing the role of a fridge algorithm, trying to understand what is needed to perform its supposedly "neutral/'smart' decision-making". It was an important step towards raising research questions about what is smartness beyond the American innovation rhetoric that sees it so bundled with Moore's Law. Once you pick up the relevant questions, you can make up your mind about the future, which for me was redefining what 'smartness' is. For instance, use everything we have at our disposal in the community instead of impulsively consuming and requiring endless amounts of new digital devices.

What is a small actionable change in this direction that we could start doing from tomorrow?

The internet is not neutral. The Internet of Things' first application was an industrial one, and this has had enormous bad repercussions now that it got out of the factory and into our everyday lives. The values it embeds, optimisation, efficiency, quantification of success, cannot be patched into daily objects and our lives. That's why we need to implement and discuss ethics and values along which algorithms are operated. Algorithms must manifest and assume their impossibility to incorporate human complexity. Hence, 'smart' systems shouldn't be deterministic; instead of serving just one solution, we could start designing them to increase the choices. Today's wearables utilised for self-quantification (devices tracking sleep, heart rate, etc.) give us as feedback standardised decontextualised metrics and a lot of pseudoscience. They assume behaviours and articulate standard recommendations that are not helpful, because they do not take into account the context where and why the behaviour took place. We need to design systems that are transparent in their functioning, that enable multiple choices and that make us reflect on rather than dictate what we should do.What role do you think people like you (your profession) can play?
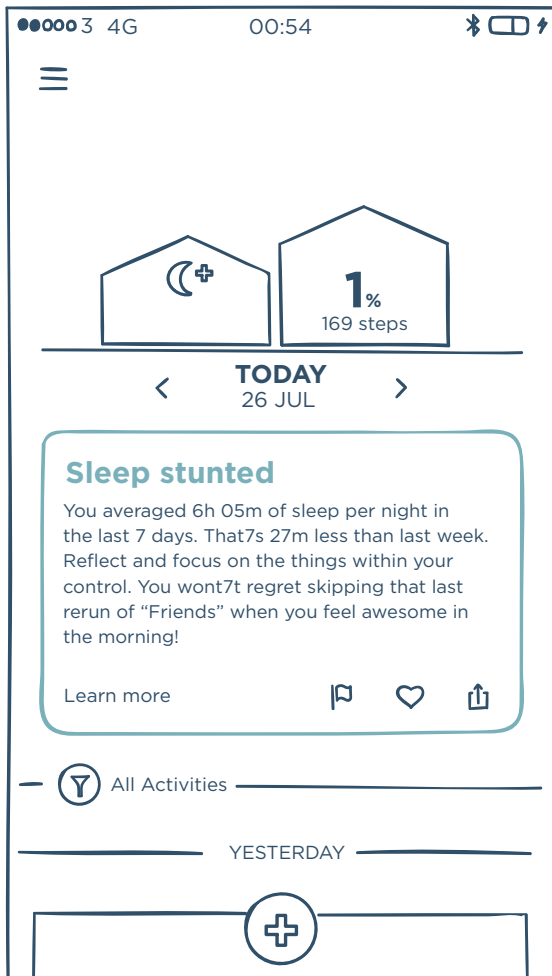
The content of the messaging itself included in the accompanying app is laced with pseudoscience and research soundbites taken out of context (I was not sleeping because I was delivering my PhD thesis). Also I realised the internationalisation of shared experiences (Silicon Valley) – why, for example, does it assume I watch Friends?

What role do you think people like you (your profession) can play?

Definitely, public engagement (in my case from a design perspective): Creating design interventions, raising problems and

awareness. In the project "What Your Kitchen Thinks It Knows about You?" displayed in 2014 at the London Natural History Museum, visitors were asked to prepare a cup of coffee (they had plenty of ingredients to choose from), receiving in return a receipt of their behaviour in real time (choices and a description of what they were doing) associated with Amazon's outcomes (if you like this then …). People may haven't heard of IoT, but interactive installations like this can make many processes otherwise opaque tangible and understandable. In this way, the public can become aware of and reflect on the technology.

It is also very important that we carry around seeds from one discipline to another: I was trained as a biologist, specialising in neuroscience, and then I moved to design. My background makes it natural for me to see diversity and interrelation all around us (with this comes the limits of understanding); for instance, a large part of the brain it is related to an irrational, unconscious and emotional sphere (rationalising human behaviour and attempting to predict it is very problematic).

And European citizens at large?

We should make them an active part of the discussion by making accessible knowledge about the black boxes of their digital life. Once you create debate and awareness, once things are transparent, discussions can escalate and large-scale change can happen. Citizens can engage.