Let’s Get Personal: Embracing Complexity and Big Data

I was able to sit in a room with some of the smartest geeks in the world—folks like Dr. Cynthia Breazeal, inventor of [the JIBO robot](http://mashable.com/2014/07/16/jibo-worlds-first-family-robot/); [Sheldon Monteiro from SapientNitro](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-08-20/news/53029106_1_amazon-fire-walmart-labs-sapientnitro); David Schwarz of [Hush](http://heyhush.com/); and [Fernanda Viégas](http://hint.fm/about/), co-leader of Google’s “Big Picture” visualization group; to name just a few—for two days at our recent [CreateTech conference](file:///C:\Users\Angie%20Argabrite\AppData\Local\Temp\notes617F4E\createtech.aaaa.org\). Obviously, this was a dream for anyone with any interest in computer science, technology and the future of advertising. And so it was for me.

The thing that really struck me through this conference, the thread that wove its way through many of the presentations and talks, was that even with the growing complexity of our digital world, it’s all driving toward a more [personal experience](http://www.wired.com/2014/11/the-internet-of-me/). Even the [much-buzzed-about Internet of Things](http://www.wired.com/2014/11/the-internet-of-things-bigger/?mbid=synd_slate) won’t, ultimately, remove computing and technology further from the personal sphere. Communicating effectively in this new world will require embracing the complexity of life’s contexts, from the intimacy of wearable tech to robots that will become part of the family. [Related to the Internet of Things](http://www.forbes.com/sites/howardbaldwin/2014/11/24/a-match-made-somewhere-big-data-and-the-internet-of-things/), and on the same track, Big Data will take us in directions we may not have considered.

What Big Data is going to be able to provide is the context that will allow marketers, advertisers and anyone else to know **when it is appropriate** to communicate. In terms of our businesses and the way we design things, we are just beginning to scratch the surface of what it might mean to be able to respond appropriately in a context-rich environment where we have data about not only *who* you are but *where* you are, how you’re feeling, whether it’s cold or hot, whether your team just won … in other words, all the sorts of things that are becoming available to us.

Though our relationship with Big Data is in its early stages, it is already leading us to remarkable insights and even emotional experiences. Digital technologies are ever more embedded in our lives—in the things we use and the places we live, work and shop. And these technologies communicate with us and each other continually through networks growing like a living root system of the digital forest.

We are on the brink of a revolution where computers will be much more a part of our daily lives in a deeper fashion. With robots, for instance, we’re seeing pretty far into the future in an almost science fiction sort of way—but the technology is here today, as Dr. Breazeal reminds us.

Dr. Breazeal forecast that our relationship to computers will change dramatically once we move away from interacting with them primarily via screens into a world where computers will take their place as part of the family; in other words, when they become part of human groups. And as that happens, understanding when it is appropriate to speak to, interact with or communicate with a member of the group is going to be increasingly ever more important.

This conclusion was reached through 15 to 20 years of research and not based merely on the fact that certain products were successful in the marketplace recently—like, let’s say, the iPhone. Facebook and iPhones become popular, and media coverage points to it as an example of how behavior has changed. But that coverage is often anecdotal and not based on actual research. So later, when the data is in and we’re able to analyze it, we learn that, ah, well, maybe our [connections on Facebook aren’t all that good](http://www.businessinsider.com/forrester-facebook-social-relationship-strategies-that-work-report-2014-11).

Analytics are getting good, but right now we don’t have the communication chops to be able to respond appropriately to the data that we have. David Schwarz of [Hush](http://heyhush.com/) talked about how we’re still at a utilitarian stage of design for the connected world. We need to learn to become more expressive and more empathic in the connected age.

Unfortunately, the inclination of many in advertising is to simplify what’s happening in technology, reverting to an older model. Witness the continued emphasis on [“storytelling”](http://launchingcreative.com/storytelling-is-dead/)—a buzzword for decades, it’s too broad and simplistic to apply in today’s technology-enabled world. And as [Sheldon Monteiro from SapientNitro](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-08-20/news/53029106_1_amazon-fire-walmart-labs-sapientnitro) pointed out, it is only a part of what businesses are looking for in designing systems of engagement.

[Fernanda Viégas](http://hint.fm/about/), co-leader of Google’s “Big Picture” visualization group, said we need to embrace the complexity of Big Data and not just wish it away by oversimplifying it. Embracing it provides us with not just *more* information but with a *higher-resolution* picture of what we have. It’s crucial not to oversimplify but to strive to understand and embrace that complexity and then to learn to interpret those higher-resolution pictures that big data can give us. Understanding how the context of a richer, higher-resolution picture of who people are in a particular moment can help teach us how to communicate appropriately and meaningfully and effectively in the world to come.

Big data—and what it represents—is as real as the weather. And the effects are as difficult to predict. But it will allow us to design products, services and communications that get closer to people and to become even more a part of peoples’ lives. It’s time to embrace the complexity and learn to live in the new real worlds digital systems have made visible.

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