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, the fascination, even dread of all the data it’s all driving toward more [personal experience](http://www.wired.com/2014/11/the-internet-of-me/). Even the  [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 but allow enhanced interperson human computer interaction.

Communicating effectively in this new world will require embracing the complexity of life’s contexts and all the data that makes those contexts available, from the intimacy of wearable tech, through our behaviors on the web, from connected appliances and spaces , in the future, autonomous robots that will become part of the family. 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 and her Jibo robot 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.

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. Learning to read the context from all the new data available will allow marketers, advertisers and anyone else to know **when it is appropriate** to communicate. And getting that close will require our learning to live with people not just talk to them on our terms.

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.

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 the opportunities it is giving us to go even deeper in our understanding of people living in the world now, not just as defined by census categories and purchase history. Embracing it provides us with not just *more* information but with a *higher-resolution* picture of the world where brands live with people.

This new world of connected people, places and things and the Big data that flows between them—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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