Let’s Get Personal: Embracing Complexity and Big Data

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\), has been a dream for me since I conceived CreateTech with my agency colleagues in 2010. And I’m sure anyone interested in computer science, technology and the future of advertising would want to be with me in that room.

This year I was struck by how our vision for this conference—to be at the cutting edge of tech and advertising—has succeededand even surprised me, given that the entire population is tech obsessed. The thread that wove through many of the presentations and talks was this: Even with the growing complexity of our digital world; the fascination, even the dread, of all the data; everything is 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, instead, will allow enhanced interpersonal and human-computer interaction.

To communicate effectively in this new world, we will need to embrace the complexity of life’s contexts, as well as 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 to autonomous robots that will become part of the family. We are on the brink of a revolution where computers will be even more part of our daily lives, and in a deeper fashion. With home robots, for instance, we’re forecasting pretty far into the future in an almost science-fiction way, but the technology is here today, as Dr. Breazeal and her Jibo robot remind us. Dr. Breazeal predicts that our relationship to computers will change dramatically once we move away from interacting with them primarily via screens and begin to live in a world where computers take their place as part of the family; in other words, when they become part of human groups. And as that happens, we’ll find it ever more important to understand when it is appropriate to speak to, interact with or communicate with a member of the group: in other words, robot etiquette.

In terms of our businesses and the way we design things, we are just learning what it means to be able to respond appropriately in a context-rich environment where we know 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 data that’s fast becoming available to us. Learning to read the context from all that data will allow marketers, advertisers and anyone else to know *when it is appropriate* to communicate. And getting that close to people will require our learning to live with them—not just talk to them on our terms.

Although 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 in 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 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 empathetic 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 shallow to apply in today’s technology-enabled world. And as [Sheldon Monteiro](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-08-20/news/53029106_1_amazon-fire-walmart-labs-sapientnitro) pointed out, it is only one part of what businesses are looking for when designing systems of 360-degree, always-on customer engagement.

[Fernanda Viégas](http://hint.fm/about/) said we need to appreciate the opportunities that Big Data and all its complexity is giving us, in order to go even deeper in our understanding of people living in the world now. We’ll derive not just *more* information but a *higher-resolution* picture of the world in which brands live with people.

This new world of connected people, places and things, and the 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’s time to embrace the complexity and learn to live in the new real worlds that digital systems have made visible.

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