

THE SEX APPEAL OF DIGITAL BODIES



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SEDUCTION, MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, INTERCOURSE, FERTILISATION, PROSTITUTION, SEXUAL ASSAULT, CANNIBALISM AND HEREDITARY GENETIC DISEASES OF OUR DIGITAL BODIES

By Luca Poma



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IL SEX APPEAL DEI CORPI DIGITALI

Seduazione, amori, tradimenti, malattie
e immortalità dei nostri digital body

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Real and digital bodies

Whether we are aware of it or not, our digital interactions produce ever increasing quantities of data. The tracks they leave behind contribute to creating and defining what I'd like to call a "Digital Body", overlapping and stretching well beyond our physical one.

As fellow Italian writer Biagio Carrano once wrote: "*digital bodies exist, they follow and precede us, and are capable of altering our everyday life.*"

Our Digital Body is not simply some cyber-version of us as we surf the internet; it's not even the trace we leave when we use social networks or digital media.

Digital Bodies are a complex, ever-changing structure, made up of all the material produced during any digital interaction, on a vast range of different platforms and database substrata, gobbling up all the information that we own: they define who we are, digitally and beyond.

The ethical aspects of this process are indeed frightening: sometimes, our physical and digital identity, coincide. The latter has the power to influence our real existence by tagging it in a way that goes beyond reputation.

Fifteen years ago, the concept of digital identity would have been limited to the realm of science fiction. Today, social studies, neuro-marketing, the law and quantum physics are all interested in the very reality of this phenomenon.

Big companies make their commercial decisions on the basis of our Digital Bodies' tracks and identity; scientific research refers to them; our online presence influences and even anticipates our choices; it may determine our success at work as it becomes easier and easier to reach out, and be known.

In this essay, I intend to show how our Digital Body has a bearing on our daily life, and – sometimes, worryingly – defines it.



The Super-Ego: Digital Bodies take over

Digital Bodies have depth and boast their own identity: they may carry information about our health, psyche, relationships, genetic history and biometric parameters. Sometimes, our digital version may survive our physical death, making us all feel, perhaps, a little redundant.

Physically, we seem to be losing socio-economic and political weight, as more and more we get hardwired to transactions and relations within society 2.0. The juxtaposition of digital over tangible makes the latter superfluous in outlining the development of our taste and commercial choices. Whether we are talking about socio-cultural inclinations or dress sizes, this is information which can be totally deduced from our Digital Bodies.

Of course, we can (and do) manipulate reality, as one can surmise from the millions of fake profiles on social networks; however, in the great majority of cases, there is direct, statistically valid correlation between our digital body and its physical counterpart. We post updates on Facebook, we blog and reply to other bloggers, we use Twitter, and we support online campaigns.

During those processes, there is always something, or someone, who – like a private investigator of a gigantic Matrix – follows our Digital Bodies' activities.

I quote from Carrano: *“our digital body can predict our physical one's future actions. Say, I am a fan of “No Tav” (a movement of protest against the Turin-Lyon high speed rail project). I happen to be in Val di Susa; it's easy to track me down as I have booked transport and accommodation online. I also have geo-tagging on my smartphone, but maybe that's for entirely unconnected reasons, like an interest in the location's gastronomy. My physical body could be stopped by the police because of the protest by No-Tav, which is to take place nearby and in the same period of time. Maybe my digital body would have liked to participate in the protest, and will follow its developments via twitter, but my physical body has decided that it would rather stop nearby and enjoy the local cuisine. Yet, it is the physical body which is being stopped and checked by the police, and such checks are caused by the behaviour shown by my digital alter-ego. This is more of a real scenario than people would like it to be,”* concludes Carrano.

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New army, new generals: the “infomediaries”. Tales of power and espionage.

The internet is an all-enveloping and all-consuming environment, where every message can be manipulated and deconstructed to please the user: however, it is not the content mash-up that should worry us; rather, it is the role undertaken by infomediaries. They act as agents who guard, segment, use and sometimes manipulate the information at their disposal.

It is true that, sometimes, tracking down one's own digital traces and sharing them with a public authority can make life easier in dealing with public administration; moreover, making public one's commercial tastes allows comparisons (and therefore better, easier choices) among various market offers.

More often than ever, even in the sensitive field of personal health, people take into account digital information platforms when making their choices.

Progressively, the physical body seems to be losing its tangible perimeter, biometric parameters become pure information bundles; each individual story becomes secondary unless it adds value, i.e. more information, to the user's profile.

The Digital Body becomes a global set of goods, which can be bought, enjoyed by third parties, valuable insofar as one has enough of it to turn it into usable currency.

Like generals in charge of imaginary digital armies (and how 'imaginary' are they really?), or – better – like pimps, professional exploiters of other people who encourage us to prostitute our digital bodies, the infomediaries grow in power, continuously analysing the relationship between digital and physical entities and searching for richer and richer sources of information or ways to 'add value' by reconfiguring what is already known.

The complex relationship between our Digital Body's actual 'life' and the power that comes from its usage has not been fully explored yet.

Centralising all available information about a relatively limited number of private individuals is the object of fierce debate in both institutional and academic circles, as efforts are made to avoid total loss of control of what constitutes one's Digital Body.

There is no mysterious plot: it is all profit-driven, showing how computer technology is part and parcel of everyday life. All that we are is stored in our genes, and our genes can be mapped and archived in a repository of our Digital Body.

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It is therefore really easy to create our own Doppelgänger: of course, in art and in theatre it is a variedly ghostly or more real double, created by fear, a never-ending presence. In modern times, it is our Digital Body, moving and living its own life every day, serving a range of commercial purposes.

Not many people, for example, know that in the USA the privacy of the Americans' Health Digital Body is not protected, and raids on patients' medical cards are more and more frequent, legally allowed, in a voyeuristic manner and by banks and other institutions like insurance companies, hungry for intimate information.

Every time we search for news (be it online dailies, press agencies, papers), information from the mobile device we are using to navigate is gathered – as shown by platforms such as "*Trackography*". Our own Digital Body becomes a messenger for Infomediaries: precious information pertaining us goes round the cyber-world, sent to organisations which package it, ready to be used to profile potential buyers.

By selecting both the country from where one operates and the sites usually visited, the information gatherers are able to obtain a very good outline of our Digital Body with our tacit consent (due to complete unawareness).

Espionage activities are carried out by our Digital Body, like a soldier unaware of working for a foreign power. We are weighed and scored for finance and credit, with an impact on our physical bodies' everyday life. That's why we are refused insurance in case of ill health, or loans and mortgages: it's all based on our Digital Body snitching about our ability to repay them.

There is a certain, apparent fragility in our Digital Bodies, because they cannot be protected; they are exposed without their knowledge.

Before internet, two people communicating with each other only had to cope with the variable of "intention", i.e. power and ways to send a message. Modern cyber-times ensure at least another variable, i.e. "visibility": we cannot hide, our messages may be seen by anybody, and anybody can contribute to the flow of communication.

The web 2.0 is responsible for a silent revolution: online (and, specifically, social) network users generate an enormous quantity of data as they increase their Digital Body Mass with new profiles, new accounts, photo and video sharing, forum and blog comments, and online interaction. Researchers can easily identify strands of information, using ever more sophisticated automated systems, to create data packets, processing them at higher and higher speed, whilst the overheads and costs for this kind of activity are constantly being reduced.

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These practices affect people without being regulated by any clear legal or ethical directives. If information is gathered from a public source (as web 2.0 pages undoubtedly are) its analysis and further distribution is not considered to be a violation of privacy: nobody can complain of the fact that I may make public an individual's sex life, if the information is already there, in public view, on their Facebook page.

Potential vulnerability of our Digital Bodies is a fact: their naivety is obvious. Nobody fully understands the consequences of thoughtless use of social media, until it's too late; the law lacks clarity because Digital Bodies are not recognised as legal entities.

As an aside, we may be unaware of being the subject of research and studies. Most of the information on the web is tagged and can be found using search engines: it can be copied, stored and used to their own advantage by the infomediaries. The data producers and owners are rarely part of the equation.

In a curious and ironic inversion of privacy, Digital Bodies may also have more sinister functions: friends and family of a child bullied by classmates may be the last to know about it, whilst the Digital Bodies of the very perpetrators amplify the matter by posting photos and/or videos online, in a completely public domain, before the police are made aware.

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Hereditary genetic diseases of our Digital Bodies: a deadly embrace stretching to the third generation at least

As expressed in one of my previous essays ("*Epigenetics and Businesses*") recent research shows that genetics, neurochemical and cerebral patterns, coupled with the environment, have closer interactions than was once thought.

Substantial studies show, for example, that happy and optimistic people have a more active left pre-frontal lobe activity, an area of our brain connected with mood patterns. These people's antibodies are also more active than those of subjects who are in low spirits or depressed. It seems that creative, upbeat people respond better to attacks from viruses or bacteria, which means that they are in better health, and therefore tend to live longer.

Psychobiology has proved that some areas of our nervous system affect the individual's mood: we assess situations, information coming from our surroundings, build expectations of our personal and professional relationships, and define reality in positive or negative terms; we react with different degrees of understanding and ability to respond to stress, depending on a multitude of factors like our personality, cognitive attitude and our own interpretation of reality.

Epigenetics (the newest branch of neuroscience) shows that all the factors above mentioned are also affected by our past experience, our own 'baggage' of feelings and emotions (whether experienced on or off-line): all these elements are used as building blocks for our perception of life.

The brain is an extremely flexible organ, continuously evolving in a process of re-defining itself from when we are born until we die. Even in a fully-developed adult, the sensorial map of our body is modified as it aligns with external stimuli. Emilia Costa, Emeritus Professor of Psychiatry (at "La Sapienza" university, Rome) and a researcher of worldwide fame, in one of her studies confirms that the Peripheral Nervous System (once considered just a passive actuator of the Central Nervous System) is in fact intimately interconnected with the brain, partially dependent on it, yet capable of a certain autonomy of action. In fact, it gathers information from the senses through which we connect with the outside world and even those stimuli which do not reach our consciousness.

The Peripheral System expresses, in physical terms, our psycho-emotive status, presiding over our reaction to stimuli, thanks to feedback given by the release and

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metabolism of hormones, neurotransmitters, endorphins and other chemical elements.

Recent studies have spotted a pattern of 'circular causality': this can only be explained if we accept that the range of main systems regulating our body's inner balance and its relationship with the outside world is completely integrated in a bi-directional stream. Continuous and total immersion in an environment full of positive stimuli, constantly projecting future scenarios, is paramount to the survival of the highest number of stakeholders, and therefore of the entire planet. This has a bearing on the individual's memory, which is an extremely effective way to assess at which stage of our aging process we are. As Costa says, in fact: *"rich, positive stimuli surrounding us help by strengthening the brain's cells, improving control of nervous impulses and, therefore, behaviour."*

The opposite, obviously, is also true: a situation laden with stress dictated by our surroundings (conflict, resentment, desire for revenge, disillusionment.... typical feelings we may encounter when interacting on social media) may affect our wellbeing both in psychological and physical ways. The relation between our physical body and our Digital one becomes more intimate, as confirmed by science itself.

It is possible that tensions experienced by our Digital Body may become part of our inherited genetic outline. As explained by science journalist Marco Pivato in one of his articles, the environment's influence over our species' development is more intensive than originally thought.

Swedish specialist Lars Olov Bygren (preventative medicine, Karolinska Institute) and his team have analysed lifestyle's influence on the brain in a large sample of 12,000 individuals. Behaviour has a bearing on genes themselves; it can even influence how said genes are passed on: *"lifestyle influences our natural behaviour as outlines by individual genes. Our destiny is not written by our genes, because it is also affected by a range of actions dictated by the same genes. We only have 25,000 genes: yet our Genome is capable of producing hundreds of thousands of different kinds of protein: each gene can, to a certain extent, "choose" which protein to synthesise, and its choice also depends on the chemical signals received from the outside and which are, in turn, dictated by the individual's lifestyle."*

Bygren's sample was made up of individuals chosen on the basis of personal interests in reading, music, cinema, theatre, and general knowledge.