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ABSTRACT

In this introduction to the special issue on digital media and body weight, the author brings together fat studies and critical social analyses of digital media to discuss the manifold ways in which body weight, size, and shape are represented and performed in and with these media. A proliferation of diverse voices and images receive expression in these media and in the use of these devices, often in direct opposition to each other. These include fat activism, body positivism, fat shaming and stigmatization, pro-anorexia, thinspiration, and fitspiration discourses and practices. The author reviews the previous literature and suggests areas for further research.

KEYWORDS

Digital media; embodiment; fat activism; fat studies; fitspiration; pro anorexia; thinspiration

Since the late 20th century, an extensive body of literature has emerged in the humanities and social sciences addressing the relationships between body weight and mass media. At first a key preoccupation among scholars, particularly feminist critics, was the emphasis placed in the popular media on slim embodiment as the ideal of femininity. Several critics contended that the types of slim bodies represented as beautiful and sexually desirable across media such as fashion magazines, advertising and mainstream television and films were portraying a limited and difficult-to-achieve body shape as the ideal to which all women should aspire. Strong links were made between this body ideal and disordered eating practices in women such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and continual dieting, and more generally with many women’s feelings of shame, anxiety, and inadequacy if they felt they did not conform to this ideal (e.g., Bordo, 1993; Hesse-Biber et al., 2006, Whitehead and Kurz, 2008). The ways in which the mass media represented the emaciated bodies of people (overwhelmingly women) who were engaging in self-starvation and other disordered eating practices as spectacles of bodily extremity were examined (Allen, 2008; Spitzack, 1993).

With the advent of the high level of media coverage of concerns about an alleged “obesity epidemic” in the 1990s, the focus of critical scholarship shifted to negative portrayals of fat embodiment. Apart from the genre of “scary skinny” celebrity reporting in popular magazines and news sites
(Lupton, 2013), the emaciated self-starving female body has largely disappeared from news reporting and women’s magazines, to be replaced by the spectacle of the fleshy fat body as a figure of extreme embodiment. A critical literature has developed that presents analyses of the ways in which the popular media represent fat bodies as grotesque, uncontained, destined for ill-health and an early death, and a burden on the public purse (Ata and Thompson, 2010; Braziel and LeBesco, 2001; Farrell, 2011; Holland et al., 2011, Lupton, 2013; Monaghan, 2005; Raisborough, 2014, 2016; Sender and Sullivan, 2008). As part of the rapidly developing interdisciplinary field of fat studies, scholars have sought to critique these fat-shaming and stigmatizing representations and identify their effects for the ways in which people think about and perform their bodies and identities.

Older mass media forms did not provide many opportunities for people to engage in resistant or activist responses to negative portrayals of their bodies. However, changes in digital technologies since the advent of the internet and the World Wide Web have created new practices of media use that provide opportunities for far greater user participation. New digital media and devices, especially those that have emerged in the past decade or so, with their emphasis on the sharing ethos and participatory democracy (Beer, 2013; Beer and Burrows, 2010; John, 2013), have allowed people of all types of body sizes not only to consume media content, but to create, comment on, share and curate it. All this is taking place in a complex cross-platform environment in which forms and practices of digital representation are constantly changing and digital media are increasingly convergent and self-referential.

Far from simply being the object of media attention or their audiences, members of the public can now create and share their own images and other modes of representation using blogs, online discussion groups and social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, and SnapChat. Contemporary digital media and devices provide many diverse spaces for people to actively represent themselves, share their body metrics and experiences and find likeminded others for support, advice, friendship, or political activism. They can use apps, platforms, wireless body weight scales, and wearable devices to monitor and measure their body weight and other body metrics, such as physical activity, diet, calories burned, blood pressure, heart rate, and body temperature. They can use gaming consoles like Wii Fit and Nintendo Xbox to engage in exergames that monitor elements of their bodies like their body mass index and fitness levels. Self-expression and portrayals of embodiment have become highly visual, enshrined in GIFs (very short animations and film clips), memes (images, videos or short pieces of text, often humorous, designed for rapid dissemination online), selfies (self-portraits taken with digital devices and often shared online), and videos that can readily be shared on social media sites. All of these media and the technologies that support and enable them—
desktop, laptop and tablet computers, smartphones, apps and other software, wearable devices such as smartwatches and fitness bands, gaming consoles, wifi, biosensors—are sociocultural artifacts that, similar to any other forms of material culture, can be examined and critically analyzed for how they configure and reproduce dominant norms, moral values, tacit assumptions and practices concerning the weight, size, and shape of human bodies.

Numerous studies, conducted particularly from the perspective of social psychology, have focused specifically on topics concerning body image and digital media. Contributors to this topic of research have tended to pathologize technologies such as social media as contributing to people’s low self-esteem and dissatisfaction about their appearance and body weight and to represent digital media users as passive consumers (see a review of this literature by Rodgers, 2016). The ways in which users employ digital media and devices to engage in practices of self-empowerment or self-transformation or challenge and resist dominant portrayals and assumptions about embodiment are rarely acknowledged in this literature.

Contributors to a growing area of critical social research take a more nuanced approach to the use and role of digital media and devices in configuring selfhood and identity, social relations and popular culture. A subset of this scholarship has analyzed the ways in which embodiment is performed and represented in digital media and with digital devices, particularly in the context of health and illness states and self-tracking technologies (Del Casino and Brooks, 2015; Fotopoulou and O’Riordan, 2016; Lupton, 2015, 2016c, 2016a; Millington 2014a; Ruckenstein, 2014; Smith and Vonthethoff, 2016). Some work has been published on the ways in which online pornography represents embodiment (Attwood, 2010; Paasonen, 2011; Scarcelli, 2015; Vannier et al., 2014) and on gay and queer embodiment in digital media (Campbell, 2014; Fraser, 2010; O’Riordan and Phillips, 2007). The use of selfies has begun to attract research attention as well (Hess, 2015; Rettberg, 2014; Tembeck, 2016; Tiidenberg and Cruz, 2015). It is becoming acknowledged that bodies become assemblages of flesh-code-devices-data as people interact with digital technologies (Lupton 2016b, 2016d, 2016c).

This special issue of Fat Studies was designed to direct attention more specifically to the ways in which digital media and devices are employed to represent, monitor, and manage aspects of body weight, size, and shape. The contributors identify and analyze diverse digital practices, including online narratives concerning contestants on The Biggest Loser reality television program (Margaret Hass), the representation and discussion of the “waist trainer” or modern-day corset in product reviews by consumers on Amazon.com (Tiffany Kinney), the ways in which “obesity” and fatness are discussed in digital news media and the comments sections of these media (Patricia Cain, Ngaire Donaghue, and Graham Ditchburn), the pro-anorexia (“pro-ana”) phenomenon in social media and other websites (Gemma Cobb), and
different forms of self-presentation of bodies culturally designated as aberrant from the norm (extremely thin and fat bodies) on social media and other online platforms (Dawn Woolley). Consonant with the multidisciplinary nature of fat studies, these contributors adopt a range of perspectives, including those drawn from rhetoric and writing studies, cultural studies, psychology, gender studies, and visual art.

As evidenced in these contributions, the participatory nature of online media allows far more people to express their opinion in public forums compared with earlier media eras. Several authors also emphasize the multi-platform and convergent nature of contemporary digital media. Cain and colleagues draw attention to the growing diversity of opinion in online news articles and commentary. As Hass shows in her contribution, news media accounts respond to television programs such as The Biggest Loser and invite commentary from audiences of these programs as well as other members of the public. GIFs and memes about such programs or celebrities generated by news, entertainment, or gossip sites are recirculated on social media. In turn, the sites may draw on commentary on social media to write their posts and news reports. Kinney’s article demonstrates that devices such as waist trainers are sold in online stores such as Amazon, generate commentary on these sites by users, and are promoted by celebrities whose fame and wealth owe much to their presence on social media, including personalized accounts on platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. Woolley’s contribution draws attention to the use of images of the self to engage in highly specific practices of embodiment online across a diverse range of sites. In her analysis, Cobb highlights the ways in which new digital media is often organized by practices of image-taking and sharing that are curated and shared with like-minded users with practices such as hashtagging.

**Fat activism and body positivism**

Termed by some “the Fatosphere” (Dickins et al., 2011, Pausé, 2016), a collection of fat activist and anti-fat-shaming digital media platforms have proliferated, particularly in response to “obesity epidemic” and related fat shaming discourses. In the early years of the Internet, these practices were conducted using blogs, listservs, and online discussion boards and then expanded into social media platforms. Many of the newer digital media have offered greater possibilities for attracting attention, readers and followers and using images and organizing discursive features such as hashtags to highlight issues of fat embodiment. For example, Facebook community pages and Twitter groups have been established for fat studies scholars and activists to communicate with each other. Some websites and social media communities are intersectoral, bringing together perspectives from queer, disability, and black activists, for example, working to challenge fat shaming
and discrimination, highlighting the multiple disadvantages from which fat people can suffer and calling attention to white privilege in other fat activist discourses. The “It Gets Fatter!” Facebook community is one such example. Its convenors describe the community as “a body positivity project started by fat queer people of colour, for fat queer people of colour” (It Gets Fatter! 2016).

The turn toward visual media in online platforms has contributed to fat acceptance initiatives. In seeking to challenge negative portrayals of fatness and the anonymous “headless fatty” mode of imagery that is dominant in mainstream media portrayals of fat people (Cooper, 2007), websites such as the Adipositivity Project (http://www.adipositivity.com) present professional-quality and highly aesthetic or artistic images of fat people displaying their bodies (mostly women, but there are some men and transgender people included). The emergence of digital devices such as smartphones that enable users to easily take and share selfies with others has afforded fat people opportunities to make their own choices about the ways in which they want to portray themselves. On image-sharing sites such as Instagram and Tumblr, they often use hashtags such as #fatpositive, #fatbabe, #bodypositive, #thickspiration, and #fatacceptance to further highlight how they wish their self-images to be received (Cooper, 2011; Dickins et al., 2011, Marcus, 2016; Pausé, 2016). The Fatshion February initiative invites people who identify as fat to upload images of themselves each February in fashionable outfits with the hashtag #fatshionFebruary, as a way of emphasizing that fat people are interested in fashion and need greater opportunities to find clothing that will fit them and designers who have their body size in mind. This approach also draws on the popular trend in image-based social media for the OOTT (outfit of the day) selfie (Pausé, 2014).

Various sites and online communities have also been established that seek to represent fat bodies (both female and male) as erotically attractive (Lavis, 2015; Monaghan, 2005). Lavis (2015) analyzed a set of videos posted to YouTube by women identifying as BBW (big beautiful women), often featuring them consuming high-calorie foods as part of their erotic appeal. Woolley’s contribution to this special issue uses the example of websites such as Fantasy Feeder to draw attention to the fat fetish community, in which extremely fat bodies and eating to achieve this body size are portrayed as sexually attractive. Here again, users of these sites do not simply consume these images but often actively post images of others or of themselves for other users to view and comment on, engage in online discussion, and arrange meetups with each other.

Social media is not only used in attempts to represent fat bodies more aesthetically and positively but also for activism that challenges the notion that fat people should seek to conform to accepted norms of attractiveness. The “not your good fatty” and “obese lifestyle” modes of discourse and
signification (often used in hashtags) employed by many activists work against ideas that fat people should be complicit with these norms (Pausé, 2015, 2016). As Pausé (2015) notes, these users are deliberately “performing fatness wrong online.” They resist the “good fatty” stereotype (referring to fat people who are making efforts to dress well and look glamorous, trying to lose weight, get physically fit, or eat a healthier diet, or positioning themselves as not at fault for their weight because of such factors as their genetic makeup). In contrast to the “good fatty” is the “rad fatty,” a fat person who performs her or his fatness unapologetically (see the humorous archetypes listed in Bias, 2014). Representations posted online by rad fatties often feature images of fat people reveling in eating foods that are coded as fattening, junk, or unhealthy substances or even smearing these foods over their bodies in an act that highlights the sensual nature of eating forbidden foods as a fat person. In these images, transgression and excess are celebrated, highlighting the pleasures of untrammeled fat embodiment. Several dimensions of carnality are incorporated (in some cases, literally): human fleshiness, sexuality, sensuality, and gluttony.

Tumblr, in particular, as a social media platform that encompasses many types of transgressive bodies, has worked as a space for representations of fat embodiment. The Tumblr developers engage in less censorship of the content uploaded to the platform compared with other popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. They are more tolerant of nudity, pornography, and bodily extremes. Selfies are often employed by Tumblr bloggers as a way of countering fat shaming discourses and representations. As a fat blogger who identifies herself only as “Sarah” put it on her Radically Visible blog:

For me, taking and sharing selfies reminds me that I can challenge the received narrative of beauty my culture has given me and either place myself in it – which I’m not supposed to be allowed to do – or discard it completely as the situation warrants. If I look at my collection of selfies I certainly don’t think I look beautiful in all of them, and that’s frequently deliberate. Being able to look in a mirror or at a photograph of myself – even an ugly or unflattering one – and like the person I see there after a lifetime of being literally afraid to see my own reflection, that feels very powerful (Sarah, 2014).

Two of the contributions to this special issue identify ways in which fat activist and body positivist discourses are becoming incorporated into mainstream digital media. As Hass contends, The Biggest Loser television program uses fat-shaming discourses and practices depicting fat people’s bodies as unacceptable, unhealthy and ugly and employs the narrative of the “journey” of extreme weight loss (deemed as the ultimate personal success) to attract audiences (see similar critiques by Lupton, 2013; Sender and Sullivan, 2008). However, in her analysis of blogs, online news stories, and comments about contestants on this program, Hass demonstrates that some online media
“talked back” to these narratives by soliciting the responses of fat activists to the program and detailing the poor treatment of contestants and their struggle to maintain their weight loss or feel successful even as winners of the series. Cain and colleagues’ study of U.S. and Australian news reports on “obesity” politics and commentaries in online forums similarly shows that public opinion has begun to include at least some awareness and acknowledgment of the political aspects of anti-“obesity” discourses that fat studies scholars and fat activists have worked to achieve. Nonetheless, as their research also demonstrates, ideas about personal responsibility for body weight and accompanying moral culpability remain dominant in mainstream digital media commentary.

**Fat shaming and stigmatization**

As I noted previously, numerous researchers have called attention to the ways in which often very negative portrayals of fat embodiment circulate in the popular media. Despite the growing presence of attempts to counter these portrayals, online representations of fat bodies that seek to challenge accepted norms and engage in fat activist politics continue to be far outnumbered by those that continue to stigmatize and shame fat people and portray thin bodies as more desirable, healthy, and attractive. A content analysis of the representation of “obesity” on YouTube (Yoo and Kim, 2012) found that highly negative representations of fat people were common, as were those that attributed personal responsibility for body weight (e.g., showing fat people eating unhealthy food) and made fun of fat people. Another study of YouTube videos using the search term fat (Hussin et al., 2011) revealed that many highly viewed videos included content that devalued fat people. Men were targeted for fat stigmatization twice as often as women, and white people were the targets far more frequently than other ethnic or racial groups. The antagonists engaging in active shaming or vilification of fat people were also overwhelmingly white men.

My own search for the term *fat people* on YouTube in September 2016 returned many top-ranked videos in which fat people are held up to ridicule and scorn. These bore such titles as “Fat People Fails,” featuring fat people falling over, breaking furniture, or otherwise publicly humiliating themselves as well as “The Top Fattest People in the World” and “Fat People Cringe,” all featuring fat bodies in the style of the freak show. These videos all have millions of views. A Google search for “fat memes” similarly found memes that not only stigmatize fat bodies but are blatantly abusive and often cruel. Just some examples I came across include unflattering images of fat people with texts such as “I’m fat because obesity runs in my family. No-one runs in your family,” “I’m lazy because I’m fat and I’m fat because I’m lazy,” and “Sometimes when I’m sad I like to cut myself … another slice of cheesecake.”
When I looked for “fat GIFs” on the GIFY platform, here again were many negative portrayals of fat people, including cartoon characters such as Homer Simpson as well as real people, again engaging in humiliating bodily performances. Many of these GIFs showed people jiggling their abdomens or dancing to demonstrate the magnitude of their flesh, belly flopping into swimming pools, eating greedily, being smeared with food, and so on. Here again, fat white men predominated as targets of ridicule.

Apps are another dominant media form that often focuses on the monitoring, representation and even gamification of human embodiment. As I have argued elsewhere, the ways in which game apps portray social groups can often reproduce and exacerbate negative or misleading stereotypes, including racism, sexism, healthism, and norms of feminine embodiment privileging highly groomed, youthful, physically fit, and slim bodies (Lupton, 2015; Lupton and Thomas, 2015). When I searched the App Annie platform using the term fat, a plethora of apps portraying fat bodies in negative ways were identified. These included several game apps that represented fat people as ugly, greedy, lazy, and gormless figures of fun who need encouragement to engage in weight-loss activities. Many other apps involve users (who are assumed not to be fat) manipulating images of themselves or others so that they look fat. These include “FatGoo”, marketed by its developers in the following terms: “Gaining weight is now fun! FatGoo is the ultimate app for creating hilarious fat photos of your friends and family.” Others of this ilk include “Fatty – Make Funny Fat Face Pictures,” “Fat You!,” “FatBooth,” and “Fatify – Get Fat.” Another fat app genre is that which uses abusive terms to shame people into controlling their diet and lose weight. One example is “CARROT Hunger – Talking Calorie Counter.” It is marketed by its developer as a “judgemental calorie counter” which will “punish you for over-indulging.” The app can be used to scan foods for their calorie content. If it judges food as too high in calories, users are abused with insulting epithets such as “flabby meatbags” and even tweets shaming messages about them to their Twitter followers. While such apps may be considered by some as harmless fun, they play a serious ideological role in stigmatizing and rendering abject fatness and fat people.

**Thinspiration, fitspiration, and pro-ana**

Similar to fat and body positivist activists, people seeking to promote physical fitness, bodybuilding, extreme thinness, and disordered eating have also been able to use social media as part of seeking greater visibility for their bodily performances. Several studies have identified the proliferation of pro-ana and thinspiration representations in online discussion forums and blogs (Ferreday, 2003; Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006; Norris et al., 2006) and social media sites such as YouTube (Syed-Abdul et al.,
2013), Facebook (Boero and Pascoe, 2012; Juarascio et al., 2010), Tumblr (De Choudhury, 2015), Instagram (Marcus, 2016), Pinterest, and Twitter (Ghaznavi and Taylor, 2015). While many social media sites have sought to contain these discussions by banning certain images and hashtags, pro-ana advocates have been resourceful in finding new ways of promoting their cause to evade such censorship. As Cobb outlines in her contribution to this special issue, instead of directly referring to pro-ana, for example, or even to thinspiration/thinspo, they employ such misspellings as “thynspiration” or “pro anna,” terms like #thyghapp (a deliberate misspelling of thigh gap, referring to the thin legs that are often idealized in pro-ana discourses), #ed (short for eating disorder), #promia, or #bonespo to organize their discussions and share their messages with other pro-ana advocates (see also Lavis, 2014; Marcus, 2016).

Twitter appears to be one social media platform where little or no censorship of pro-ana advocacy takes place. When I searched for #proana, #thinspo, #bonespo, and #thinspiration when researching this article, I found many Twitter users employing these hashtags for pro-ana purposes, often accompanied with the archetypal images of emaciated seminaked female bodies, often clad in lingerie or tight gym shorts and cropped tops, all the better to display their protruding ribcages, collarbones and spines, flat stomachs, and thin legs. The eroticism of pro-ana and thinspiration body imagery posted to social media sites is emphasized in Cobb’s and Woolley’s articles. Both Cobb and Woolley identify the sexualized nature of thinspo and related images that celebrate extreme thinness in female bodies and associate this with beauty and sexual allure. An analysis of Twitter and Pinterest similarly found many such eroticized representations of very thin bodies used by supporters and followers of pro-ana and thinspiration (Ghaznavi and Taylor, 2015).

In her analysis of pro-ana online, Cobb draws attention to the significant overlaps between pro-ana and thinspiration discourses and practices. As Lavis (2014) has pointed out, how pro-ana is defined is an element of the context of user engagement. Hashtags such as #thinspiration or #thinspo can be used by advocates of pro-ana but also by people simply wanting to lose weight. It is only when the broader context of the hashtag is examined, such as its use with other hashtags and certain types of images, that its status as pro-ana or otherwise can be discerned. In her article, Cobb makes clear that images of bodies have become central to online pro-ana forums and social media discussions, partly as another way of escaping censorship from platform developers. This represents a significant shift in discursive portrayals of self-starvation practices and anorexic bodies, from the previous modes of chatting in forums with other pro-ana advocates to using images in conjunction with hashtags to convey meaning and generate community.

Thinspiration is a profoundly gendered discourse. Far more female than male bodies feature in digital images tagged with #thinspiration or #thinspo.
I noted earlier that white men tend to be targeted for ridicule in memes and GIFs. Interestingly, my search for “skinny” or “thin” memes and GIFs also found that they hold up white male bodies to derision, this time drawing attention to thin men as lacking appropriate muscular strength. Many memes show half-naked thin men in bodybuilding poses, seeking to highlight their lack of size. When skinny women are featured in memes and GIFs, it is usually in relation to women who falsely claim or complain about being fat or else are sexualized images of young women in swimwear displaying their lean bodies (often tagged in GIFs with #hot #beauty, #perfect, and #sexy as well as #thin, #thinspo, or #skinny). Thin women, these memes suggest, are to be envied because they conform to conventions of female attractiveness. In contrast, thin men are deficient because they fail to achieve ideals of masculine strength and size. The fitspiration or fitspo terms are more recent, but they also take up and reproduce many of the ideals of thinspiration, and similarly have a strong focus on physical appearance and conventional sexual attractiveness. The bodies that are championed in fitspiration are physically toned, active, strong, and fit as well as slim (but not emaciated), and are similarly eroticized, with both female and male bodies featuring (Boepple et al., 2016; Boepple and Thompson, 2016; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2016).

Many apps to support weight loss efforts can be found in the health and fitness category of the major app stores, and they are among the most popular in this category. The App Annie platform, which analyzes app industry trends, showed in late September that such apps dominated the top ten free list in the Apple App Store in the United States, with the “Fitbit,” “Calorie Counter & Diet Tracker by MyFitnessPal” and “Running for Weight Loss” apps the top three most downloaded. These are all self-tracking apps that are advertised to users as contributing to weight loss efforts. Another type of app claims to calculate the fat percentage in users’ bodies: examples are “Body Fat %,” “Fat Checker” and “Kids Fat”, while apps such as “Fat Meter” suggest that they can calculate users’ body weight based on facial recognition software as “entertainment.”

These apps, and other digital software such as online weight loss software and devices such as smartwatches, wireless body weight scales and wearable self-tracking devices, all contribute to concepts of embodiment that encourage close monitoring and observation of personal biometric data. They suggest that good health, high levels of physical fitness, and body weight levels that conform to specific norms (usually the body weight index measurement) can be achieved by engaging in these forms of self-knowledge and bodily discipline. Critical analyses have drawn attention to the technologies of selfhood enshrined in these software and devices that support ideals of self-management and self-responsibilization for body weight and size (Clarke, 2015; Fotopoulou and O’Riordan, 2016; Lupton, 2014, 2016c; Millington 2014a, 2014b; Niva, 2015). Similarly, in pro-ana, thinspiration,
and fitspiration discourses, thinness is equated with attractiveness and good health, as well as linked morally to the ability to exert control over self-indulgence and laziness (Boepple and Thompson, 2016).

The authors published in this special issue also identify the association made in digital and other media connecting tight, controlled, thin bodies that display little excessive flesh with pain and self-denial. Where once mortification of the flesh may have involved practices of religious spirituality such as self-flagellation and starving in the effort to work toward a higher level of purity and demonstrate control over beastly appetites (Gerber et al., 2015), these days high levels of exercise, a tight control over and restrictions in one’s diet, the kind of extreme weight loss achieved by The Biggest Loser contestants, the aspiration toward eating “clean,” low-calorie food and the donning of garments such as waist trainers that painfully squeeze and reign in bodily bulges seek to achieve similar ends. Fatness and thinness, excessive and contained flesh, are the outward signs of how well people can exercise control over their bodies (Lupton, 2013). As Cobb points out, there is a very fine line between the type of self-disciplined fit and thin body that thinspiration and other fitness, dieting, clean eating, and weight-loss sites promote and the very thin bodies that receive positive attention in pro-ana sites.

**Conclusion**

The research here reviewed, including the contributions of authors in this special issue, provide important insights into how new digital technologies document and respond to different types of bodies and how people can communicate with each other and find communities built on a range of body sizes, shapes, and weights and engaging in many modes of bodily practices. In an article published in this journal, Jayne Raisborough (2014) identified what she perceived to be a recent trend toward the increasing invisibility of fat people in “serious media,” such as news reports. As I have demonstrated, this is far from the case if the full range of popular media, including new digital media forms such as social media, apps, GIFs, memes, and other software are included for consideration. Fat bodies are more visible than ever before in such cultural artifacts, as are thin, fit, and emaciated bodies.

I have identified many elements of the ways in which contemporary digital media and devices configure body weight, size, and shape, including representations, practices, and performances related to these diverse bodies. Users of these media and devices engage in acts of consuming, creating, commenting, and sharing of photographs, videos, hashtags, status updates, and personal biometric data about their bodies and those of others. Digital bodily assemblages are generated and circulated in the digital data economy of the online world; in the process, they are often reassembled, reconfigured, and
shared with a potentially vast number of unknown other users. Any analysis of the ways in which digital media and devices operate and the meanings and practices they reproduce or create must incorporate awareness of the interconnected nature of these media, as well as the constant circulation, reconfiguration and repurposing of their content.

Future researchers need to attend to these complexities and take stock of the rapidly changing nature of digital technologies and their use. The intersections between digital food cultures (Lupton, in press) and digital body cultures also provide topics for further studies: investigating, for example, how the trend toward promoting “clean” eating is interconnected with pro-ana, thinspiration and fitspiration discourses online, or the intersections between “food porn” and fat activism and body positivism. How people use such digital media artifacts as apps, gaming software, hashtags, GIFs, memes and selfies as part of body cultures is a neglected area of research that could provide some fascinating insights.

Finally, the ways in which people’s personal information is purposed and repurposed, often by actors of whom they may have little knowledge, requires sustained research. Data about people’s bodies and states of health are highly valuable to a range of actors in the digital data economy, including not only the digital developers of the technologies that generate these data but also the third parties to whom they on-sell the data, researchers, government agencies, health insurance companies, data mining and profiling companies and illegal use by hackers and cybercriminals. The data profiles and inferences that are made about people based on this information can have significant implications for their life chances and opportunities, including the denial of rights and services (Libert, 2014; Rosenblat et al., 2014). It is important, therefore, that researchers interested in the digitizing of body weight, shape, and size direct critical attention to issues concerning data privacy and security.

Notes on contributor

Deborah Lupton is Centenary Research Professor in the News & Media Research Centre, Faculty of Arts & Design, University of Canberra, Australia. Her latest books are Medicine as Culture, 3rd edition (Sage, 2012); Fat (Routledge, 2013); Risk, 2nd edition (Routledge, 2013); The Social Worlds of the Unborn (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Digital Sociology (Routledge, 2015); and The Quantified Self: A Sociology of Self-Tracking (Polity, 2016). Her current research interests all involve aspects of digital sociology: big data cultures, self-tracking practices, digital food cultures, the digital surveillance of children, digitized academia, and digital health technologies.

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