Bad Bodies: Comparing Surveillance of Border Crossing and Weight Loss

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Abstract

Biopower is the idea that control at the population level can be effectuated by surveillance and discipline at the individual level. It offers a valuable theoretical framework in which to examine both border control and weight loss monitoring. Specifically, this paper conducts a comparative literature review of research in both fields. It focuses especially on US VISIT, the project to restructure all ports of entry to the United States, and FitnessGram, a software system that tracks American elementary and high school students’ activity, nutrition, and weight. This comparison illustrates how biometric and algorithmic technologies are positioned as natural solutions to the social risks of terrorism and obesity. This naturalization of technology creates a porous divide between public policy and private industry, and reinforces existing prejudices through algorithmic bias.

Keywords: US VISIT, FitnessGram, Border Crossing, Border Control, Border Security, Fitness Apps, biopower, dataveillance, biometrics, algorithmic discrimination

The US VISIT is an ambitious $10 billion project to restructure all points of entry to the United States (Amoore, 2006, p. 337). FitnessGram is an assessment tool, first developed in 1982, that measures and tracks students’ fitness levels (The Cooper Institute, 2014). With these two programs in mind, this paper will strive to unpack a complex question: how do both US VISIT and FitnessGram embody comparable values and objectives? By reviewing select case studies within the United States and beyond, this paper will argue that both border control and weight monitoring are grounded in similar mythologies of risk and responsibility. Michel Foucault’s theory of biopower will be applied to support this argument. The idea of biopower is an elaboration on Foucault’s theory of societies of discipline. It refers to the multiplicity of techniques governments use to surveil and control bodies, in order to maintain the desired order at the population level. This can include vilifying and excluding groups based on biological differences as well as attempts to shape biological facets of life such as sexuality and reproduction (Foucault, 1978). The biometric solutions to these mythologies pose problems of
separation between industry and state; they reinforce prejudice through supposedly neutral algorithmic categorization of good (non-risky, healthy) and bad (risky, overweight) bodies.

US VISIT and FitnessGram are based on similar narratives of risk and security in the United States. They leverage biometrics to represent human bodies in digital systems. In so doing, both programs individualize risk, placing responsibility for correct behaviour on the shoulders of the citizen. US VISIT and FitnessGram, therefore, legitimize the state’s monitoring of behaviour through constant surveillance. They use data gathered about bodies to try to change the state of these bodies. In both cases, the results are troubling. A porous divide between public and private spheres of surveillance is created, allowing private industry to become the guardian of citizen data. Additionally, the algorithmic systems embedded in both programs legitimize entrenched prejudices by reflecting them in supposedly neutral data.

The neoliberal mythology around border security in the United States, as Louise Amoore (2006) observes, is that the perceived collective goods of globalization—unrestricted global travel and commerce—can be preserved, while the risk—terrorism, illegal immigration—can be excised and preempted (p. 338-339). In reference to the American attitude toward the risk of terrorism, Rachel Hall (2015) paraphrases Brian Massumi as saying, “a mind set on avoiding an accident that has already taken place inhabits neither the future nor the past but the empty present in which the accident is about to have happened (again)” (p. 5). This speaks not only to the communal trauma at the root of an American national fear of terrorism, but to the fallacious belief that the risk of future accidents can be eliminated via past experiences.

Current technology, especially data science (which makes predictions about the future, based on information of the past) seems, on its surface, to provide a perfect remedy for this fear. Amoore (2006) speaks of this attitude in her discussion of the US VISIT program, which she describes as “a $US10 billion project to restructure and manage all aspects of US air, land and sea port of entry security” (p. 337). She addresses the belief that the risk inherent in globalization can be mitigated through proper applications of technology. By identifying certain people as “risky traveler[s]” based on their past data patterns and targeting them for ongoing surveillance, terrorism can be predicted (Amoore, 2006, p. 343). Thus, technology is positioned as a means to eliminate the risk of terrorism, while also preserving the boons of globalization.

The moral panic around obesity in the United States is rooted in a similar narrative of risk and preemption. The problem of obesity has been framed as an epidemic, a kind of communal disease that threatens the body of the American population both physically and economically (Wright, 2009, p. 2). The centralization of children in this narrative epitomizes the understanding of risk: overweight children present a risk to the continued health and success of the American people. Conversely, children represent an opportunity for preemption. If, in the present, children can be trained in proper nutrition and exercise practices, the future will be secure (Butler-Wall, 2015, p. 230).

Technology is seen as a tool (or solution) in this process of preemption. Both border and obesity
risk narratives imply that an identification of risk can be encoded into bodies. The idea that obesity risk can be eliminated protects a mythology of collective good, parallel to the myth of purely beneficial globalization: wealth and consumption can continue with minimal limitation, and without harmful inherent consequences. The shadow of this myth can be seen in Deborah Lupton’s assertion that overweight bodies have become “scapegoats for larger social anxieties over...changing patterns of production and consumption” (as cited in Butler-Wall, 2015, p. 229). Both narratives of risk and technologically-enabled preemption (and security) then offer a kind of utopian ideal of biopower. If bodies can be perfectly governed through advanced and accessible tools, we can continue to reap the supposed benefits of our entrenched systems, while also eliminating the risks they present.

Algorithms offer a tantalizing antidote to the narrative of risk, promising that with enough data, the future can be predicted and prevented. With border control, this takes the shape of individualized data-gathering, to predict the riskiness or safety of allowing a particular individual into the United States. Amoore (2006) notes the impressive array of sources that are applied to create risk profiles of travelers: “Accenture’s ‘smart border solution’... interface[s] and integrate[s], at the time of writing, over 20 existing databases, from police authorities, to health, financial and travel records” (p. 339). These programs categorize bodies as safe/unsafe before they even reach the border physically. Amoore (2006) concludes that “the guiding assumption...is that encoded risk profiles can be used as a basis to predict and prevent future acts” (p. 340).

In the case of weight monitoring, data has been collected in American elementary and high schools, relating obesity to socio-economic factors, as well as patterns of exercise and diet (Butler-Wall, 2015, p. 230). This is executed through the implementation of FitnessGram, a database and software program that will be present in 90% of U.S. schools by 2018 (Butler-Wall, 2015, p. 228). The underlying logic is that if demographic, dietary, and activity data can be cross-referenced with fitness levels, children from particular backgrounds—with certain patterns of behavior—can be targeted for intervention. The risk of obesity can therefore be attacked and eliminated.

Once data has been extracted, and algorithmically assessed and categorized, physical bodies must be identified with the digital categories they belong to. As algorithms are perceived as the solution to risk prediction, so too are biometrics seen as the natural method of identification. In the case of border security, biometrics serve as both a “neutral” and an “infallible” way to guarantee identity (Amoore, 2006, p. 343). If someone’s data profile can be digitally linked to their physical body, they can be marked with an algorithmic category—in this case, risky or not risky for entry into the United States. Kruger, Magnet, and Van Loon (2008) point out that this has separated the unidentifiable (and therefore unsafe) from the mass of identified subjects (p. 104). To this end, the US VISIT initiative includes the fingerprinting of all foreign entrants into the United States (Amoore, 2006, p. 339). A biometric identifier is not an actual replica of a physical feature, but a data pattern, which allows “simulated, mathematically abstracted, computerized simulations of these body parts” (Kruger et al., 2008, p. 310) to be rapidly disseminated throughout databases located in what Kruger et al. (2008) call ‘spaces of
School weight monitoring introduces a subtler form of biometrics, linked to closely surveilled measurements of physical bodies. FitnessGram “tracks body composition, aerobic capacity, and ‘health-related fitness levels’” (Butler-Wall, 2015, p. 229). The program even received negative attention for sending home BMI report cards to students’ parents (Butler-Wall, 2015, p. 228-9). Thus, a biometric portrait of students’ bodies is constructed by a software program; it ties in data patterns of class, race, ethnicity, and behaviours with categorizations of healthy/unhealthy and safety/risk for obesity. Similar to the dissemination of biometric profiles of suspected terrorists, these profiles of healthy/unhealthy bodies can travel through different American agencies and institutions that have an interest in surveilling public health.

As Butler-Wall points out, however, “we must not understand this shift to topology as a move toward disembodiment” (2015, p. 235). As biometrics anchor data patterns and categorizations to the body, this data acts on the body, forcing it to adhere to the behaviour set out by its categorization. At the border, bodies are arrested, detained, and immobilized or permitted access, based on their identifications and labels (Amoore, 2006, p. 340). Users of FitnessGram are expected to set goals and follow activity and nutritional steps—as recorded in subsidiary programs ActivityGram and NutriGram (Butler-Wall, 2015, p. 236). The program’s central purpose is to change the body, or more importantly, change the metrics of the body, as recorded in FitnessGram. Data is anchored to the body through biometrics; data acts upon the body, and thus, new data is created.

Privileging of, and faith in, the perceived neutrality of technology creates a porous divide between the public and private sectors in the implementation of biometric dataveillance. The narratives of terror and obesity in the United States frame algorithmic prediction and biometric identification as the solution to these societal risks; they are therefore centralized as necessary in the maintenance of globalization and free market consumption, respectively. This necessitates the involvement of those with technical expertise, privileging their role above that of policy-makers or state actors. Amoore (2006) offers an example of the privileging of expertise and the way in which it allows for avoidance of political matters. In building the US VISIT program, the Titan Corporation acted as a sub-contractor to the United States government. Its so-called expertise was gained by supplying interrogators and translators to the Abu Ghraib prison. Amoore points out that this has barely registered in public debate about the program (2006, p. 345). As this example shows, even critics of these developments in surveillance and security might overlook serious ethical questions when certain parties are deemed to be necessary experts.

US VISIT and FitnessGram are both partnerships between the United States government and private corporations. In the case of US VISIT, the Department of Homeland Security enlisted the company Accenture as the primary contractor, to design and implement the program; this collaboration was named the Smart Border Alliance (Amoore, 2006, p. 337). FitnessGram was implemented as part of Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move! program, with ten million dollars in private funding from General
Mills and designed by The Cooper Institute, a nonprofit organization (Butler-Wall, 2015, p. 228). In the case of weight monitoring, though, there are subtler ways in which the public and private sectors interact. For example, the discontinued American software, Foodflex, offered nutritional suggestions to consumers by tracking purchases through their grocery store loyalty cards. Although the program was created by a corporation and was intended to be sold to (and used by) other corporations, its advice was based on the framework of the USDA nutritional guidelines (Coll, 2013, p. 212). In this way, a public agenda was indirectly enforced by a private program, which had its own goals of increasing consumption of particular products. Similarly, FitnessGram makes its data available to researchers (Butler-Wall, 2015, p. 234). Although this is a less direct public/private partnership, it is another example of information and goals exchanging and intermingling across this porous divide.

In addition to the blurred lines of private and public action, privileging technology serves to naturalize prejudices by encoding them into data collection and algorithms. As is the case in many algorithmic processes, categorizations fall along the fault lines of existing prejudices and socioeconomic boundaries. In the case of border control, the non-risky body (and therefore mobile body) is that of a citizen or safe traveler. On the other hand, the risky body—that of the non-citizen or unsafe traveler—is immobilized. These categories of risk are familiar because of the existing social narratives that surround them. The risky traveler is “[an] alien, immigrant, or illegal” (Amoore, 2006, p. 339). With reference to the US VISIT program, an Accenture consultant stated that “[the system] will ask if you have made international phone calls to Afghanistan… or purchased 1000 pounds of fertilizer” (as cited in Amoore, 2006, p. 340)—as if these activities were comparable as suspicious behaviours. Because the algorithms are designed to identify behaviour that is regarded as suspicious by their human designers, technical expertise naturalizes and reinforces social prejudices.

The naturalization of prejudice enacted by weight monitoring programs is perhaps more insidious. Many socioeconomic factors impact the ability to lead a healthy lifestyle: access to healthy food, opportunities for enjoyable exercise, limited time and resources, and low paying jobs. These factors, however, are suppressed in the categorization of biometric data. The FitnessGram program’s “interactive platform works topologically to recode race and other demographic variables as metrics of risk” (Butler-Wall, 2015, p. 230). The demarcation of good and bad bodies, without the consideration of deeper systemic issues, reinforces racial prejudices against minorities. Wright (2009), for example, provides an overview of Lisette Burrows’ work on cultural attitudes toward the Maori and Pacifika peoples in New Zealand; these groups are seen to be unhealthy because of “what are described as their ‘inappropriate’ cultural practices and values around eating and exercise” (as cited in Wright, 2009, p. 18). Moreover, Coll (2013) points out that the perception of certain types of food and activity as inherently healthy are also an imposition of bourgeois values on lower classes (p. 214).

As per Foucault’s theory of biopower, the individuals inhabiting these systems are encouraged to self-monitor and regulate. Those whose bodies are perceived as good are offered benefits for consenting to surveillance and therefore normalize surveillance for all. This then leaves those with ‘bad’ bodies
vulnerable to targeting in the accepted culture of surveillance. In the case of border control, self-monitoring divides consumers of travel and beneficiaries of globalization from those who are ‘potential risks’ in the fabric of globalization.

Hall (2015) presents a convincing conceptual framework for this process in her analysis of the performance of transparency. All who enter an airport are presumed to be guilty. Those deemed good then undergo the ritual of proven innocence, whereas those deemed bad are excluded from the possibility of such a performance (Hall, 2015, p. 9). The implications of this framework can be seen not only in customs and security practices, but also in programs beyond the airport. On the one hand, travelers who have ‘good’ (mobile, non-terrorist) bodies are encouraged to leave fingerprints (upon exit from the airport); they are then offered loyalty points, such as Air Miles, to link their travel/consumption profiles with biometric data (Amoore, 2006, p. 342). On the other hand, a frequent US-Mexico or US-Canada traveler (behaviour identified as risky) can be fast-tracked for entry into the United States; however, this is only if they agree to be fingerprinted and tracked by RFID for the duration of their stay (Amoore, 2006, p. 343). The same biometric tools are used on both sides of this divide, but the applications and consequences of fingerprinting are very different. Since one group submits voluntarily to fingerprinting in exchange for economic rewards, it becomes acceptable to expect the same of the other—even though the corollary is not an economic perk, but submission to continuous surveillance.

A similar logic applies to the case of weight monitoring. Coll’s (2013) study of the use of grocery store loyalty cards to surveil consumption patterns includes an extremely illuminating interview. A young woman was asked if she would willingly submit to varied insurance rates, based on loyalty card-measured consumption patterns (Coll, 2013, p. 210). She replied as follows: “Personally, I have nothing to blame myself for. Perhaps the obese would have something to be blamed for, but not me” (Coll, 2013, p. 211). In the case of obesity, the impetus to self-monitor is quite strong. It is incentivized not only by rewards for correct consumption, but also by the fear of falling into the bad body category.

Hall’s (2015) model of transparency posits that all travelers are terrorists until they prove themselves otherwise. Similarly, in the current narrative of obesity risk, there are no thin bodies, only not-yet-overweight bodies. Software programs like FitnessGram are therefore presented as tools for self-monitoring, to ward off this perceived risk. Michelle Obama, who championed the program, is often held up in popular media as a subject of bodily admiration. She is, therefore, the perfect figurehead for a fitness and health campaign. Rather than tackling the systemic roots of obesity, she chose to endorse a program that positions ill-health as a failure of personal education and initiative (and aims for correction) (Butler-Wall, 2015, p. 231). Moreover, the program encourages practices of self-monitoring, analysis, and behaviour adjustment in children that it aims to sustain into adulthood (Butler-Wall, 2015, p. 239). This closely resembles the model of biopower elucidated by Foucault, though adapted (from sexuality) to the topic of physical activity and fitness.

Biopower isn’t necessarily coercive. Often, it works through subtle processes of surveillance—
including self-monitoring, and exhortations and encouragements—to adjust behaviour. The narrative and incentive that exists in the United States encourages people (who believe themselves to possess ‘good bodies’ and behaviours) to submit to surveillance; they will then maintain their status, receive economic benefits, and contribute to a risk-free society. However, fellow citizens who are categorized as ‘bad bodies’ are then expected to comply to similar technologies and processes of surveillance. Advanced technology is positioned as the solution to risk, and experts are privileged as political/governing actors. Algorithmic predictions entrench existing prejudices by naturalizing human-created categories of behaviour and demographics. While it is often difficult to see these processes at play, this paper exposed and examined the applications of biometric technology; this was executed through a theoretical (biopower) lens, as well as through contemporary examples. With further examination and critique, we can work towards rendering visible the oversimplified categorization of bad and good bodies that divide society.

References