

Dating with Monsters: the Practices of Big Data in Healthcare

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Abstract In this paper, we explore how and when a Big Data in a hospital becomes monstrous and how people deal with this monstrosity. Our case study focuses on the Big Data initiative of a psychiatric hospital department. Inspired by the anthropological approach of Douglas [1] and Latour & Woolgar [2], we followed the data scientists of the initiative for six months. During our observations, we were surprised that – in contrast to many popular debates about ethics – the initiative was greeted with much cooperation and goodwill from the hospital staff and not experienced as a gigantic monster. At the same time, the data scientists experienced more monstrosity as they tried to capture everyday care into dichotomous categories in their models. We conclude that the rise of monsters is related to the perception, knowledge and practices of those who experience monsters. The degree of experienced monstrosity depends subsequently on the domestication process of the monsters. The domestication process in our case could be improved by bringing the monsters into the open and by dating with them as both the hospital staff and the data scientists need to evaluate their perception, knowledge and practices together. Only then can the Big Data initiative in this hospital reveal its full potential and can we live with our monsters in peace.

Keywords: Big Data, data scientists, monsters, ethnography, healthcare