

## Googling Obesity

By Neil Seeman

[Note to readers: Registration on Gmail and Facebook is required to enable some of the links to the graphs that follow].

### Googling Our Minds

We will never know other people's private passions and interests. I here paraphrase Philip Carey, Somerset Maugham's protagonist in *Of Human Bondage*. With the launch of Google Trends™, however, we realize that young Philip was wrong about this, as naïve about the future of reading people's minds as he was about love.

Google Trends™ is a rich source of information for the curious. Released in November, 2008, Google Trends™ first captured the global media's attention by aggregating search queries on "the flu". Since data thus gathered track millions of global search queries on a daily basis and can be chopped up by geographic regions, the resulting information effectively provides an early-warning system for flu outbreaks.

<http://www.google.org/flutrends/>

As if that were not sufficiently mind-shaking, this tool can be even more informative: it promises to reveal the gap between what we think we know and what we don't know we don't know. So I sleuthed to see what Google Trends™ would say about obesity.

### The Media Care More about Obesity Than We Do

According to Google Trends™, Canadian and global news references to obesity have been edging ever upwards over the last five years. The media tell us that much of the world is now considerably overweight or obese. Reporters keep running stories about how fat we are – but this is not news. What *is* news is that public searches on "obesity" have been declining. Unexpectedly, when a big news story on obesity breaks, public interest in the topic either stays put or actually declines. Maybe we're fatigued by fat news.

<http://www.google.com/trends?q=obesity&ctab=0&geo=CA&date=all&sort=0>

### Beauty Is Really Hot News

Media attention to beauty and thinness has, relative to the universe of other possible topics, climbed dramatically around the world in the past five years. Beautiful people sell newspapers (and Web sites). So, while the media will report on obesity-related stories, journalists' true intentions may lie in piquing the public's prurient interest in hot bodies.

<http://www.google.com/trends?q=obesity%2C+overweight%2C+thin%2C+sexy%2C+beautiful&ctab=0&geo=all&date=all&sort=0>

## **The Media Have Little Interest in Healthy Weights**

While the term “healthy weights” has caught on in public health circles, it has not fared well in the media. There aren’t enough news articles referencing “healthy weights” to even register on Google Trends™. The public search interest in “healthy weights,” on the other hand, has stayed flat for years, with some fluctuation. The good news: Canadians, after Australians, show the most interest in the concept of “healthy weights”. Interestingly, people searching on information via Google from three Canadian cities – Edmonton, Ottawa, and Calgary – demonstrate relatively high interest in the concept of “healthy weights.” Clearly, Canada is doing something right.

<http://www.google.com/trends?q=%22healthy+weight%22&ctab=0&geo=all&date=all&sort=0>

## **Young People Talk a Lot about Being Fat**

My fellow follower of the zeitgeist, Dr. Carlos Rizo [<http://carlosrizo.tumblr.com/>], brought my attention to another mind search application, released by Facebook in April, 2008. Called Lexicon™, it has received far less attention than Google Trends™. Unlike Google Trends™, Lexicon™ unravels trends on Facebook’s tens of thousands of public and semi-public forums (known as “Walls”). My analysis shows that the 150 million active Facebook users talk a lot more about being fat than being thin (roughly three times as much!). I suspect this means Facebook users – with an overrepresentation of young people – are afraid they’re fat, getting fat, or maybe think their friends are fat.

<http://www.facebook.com/lexicon/index.php?q=thin%2C+fat>

## **What Might All This Mean?**

Maybe the new technology has just confirmed what we already suspected. People are not interested in searching out information on obesity because they already know they’re fat. We prefer to blab about it (on Facebook) to our friends rather than figuring out what to do about it. Reporters, on the other hand, like to run stories about thinness and beautiful bodies but they won’t discuss healthy weights. They’re out to sell news, not health.

In Somerset Maugham’s masterpiece, Philip drops his infatuation with the tormenting Mildred, marries Sally, and becomes a country doctor. He learns to see his true self and abandon his neuroses. Let’s hope tools like Google Trends™ can help us do the same.

*Neil Seeman is Director and Primary Investigator of the Health Strategy Innovation Cell, based at Massey College, University of Toronto and is an adjunct Professor of Health Services Management at Ryerson University.*