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Life & style The G2 2013 review

Series: The G2 2013 review

# Beyond selfies and twerking ... the words that really mattered in 2013

Forget twerking, selfies and taking selfies when you're twerking. Not everything we said this year was completely trivial. Steven Poole explains the words that actually meant something in 2013 – while Anna Hart reminds us of the ones that were annoying nonsense

Steven Poole and Anna Hart  
The Guardian, Sunday 29 December 2013 17.00 GMT  
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President Barack Obama, talking about his healthcare policy, dubbed Obamacare. Photograph: Charles Dharapak/AP

### Big data

This was a year in which sheer hugeness was exciting, as vividly demonstrated by Pacific Rim, Guillermo del Toro's excellent film about giant robots punching giant monsters in what passed for their giant faces. Similar thrills attended the mainstreaming of the phrase "big data", which made everyone wonder in embarrassment how they had got along with their pathetic wad of tiny data for so long.

### Metadata

Edward Snowden's revelations about government spying revealed nothing if not a triumph of big data for the organisation once jokingly referred to as the No Such Agency. They also introduced the wider world to the sneakily deployed term "metadata". As the word suggests ("It's all gone a bit meta"), metadata is data about data: not the actual content of telephone calls, for example, but information about their length, the identities of the people involved, smartphone geolocation, and so forth. That's quite a lot to know already, much more than the kind of ghostly, low-fat info that defenders of state policies pretended "metadata" meant. Now that we know this, sadly, officials require a new word to describe data they Hoover up while pretending it isn't all that important. Paradata? Pseudodata? I Can't Believe It's Not Data?

### Surveillance

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### Live Better

Naturally, the term "**surveillance**" cropped up a lot post-Snowden. (So did the term "Orwellian", which ought to be henceforth abandoned in such contexts. It's a terrible insult to poor old George Orwell, who did not actually recommend that governments spy on everyone.) "Surveillance" was first brought into English in the early 1800s from the French surveiller, meaning to watch over. It seems odd now, but early uses of "surveillance" often implied a benign, caring observation rather than totalitarian intrusion. Conducting surveillance of your children in the past would have meant, say, employing a reliable governess, rather than hacking into their smartphones.

### Sousveillance

Opposed to "surveillance" is the term "**sousveillance**", which was first coined by wearable computing pioneer Steve Mann a decade ago. As "*sous*" is French for "under", sousveillance is defined as either the recording of activity by the person doing it (via tiny cameras or other devices), or – more politically – surveillance of the powerful conducted by ordinary people: watching the watchers. Nonveillance, apparently, is not an option.

### Bitcoin

The point of **bitcoin** is to conduct one's economic affairs away from prying eyes. The electronic currency with no central bank was invented in 2009 by a mysterious individual who goes by the Japanese pseudonym "Satoshi Nakamoto", and who at current market prices for the virtual wonga is thought to be a dollar billionaire. The word "bitcoin" (it's coin made of bits, geddit?) spiked in media reporting this spring when its value crashed, and then again more recently when IT worker James Howells confessed that he had thrown away a hard drive containing £4m worth of bitcoins, which now languishes somewhere in a Newport landfill, guarded by a satisfied virtual Smaug.

### Precariat

This nicely clever term for a newly insecure socioeconomic class was coined a few years ago by the sociologist Guy Standing, and came to prominence this April when everyone was taking the BBC's online class survey instead of actually working, thus making them more likely to join the **precariat** if they weren't already in it. The lexicographers of Oxford Dictionaries note that the word subsequently fell to its usual "low level" usage, but if the zany political economy of modern times is anything to go by, it will be coming in handy for a good while yet.

### Hard-working

Salvation from a plunge into the precariat, as well as all the other thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, will allegedly come, according to all politicians in 2013, from being "**hard-working**". In a short radio interview this year, Theresa May used the magical phrase "hard-working families" an impressive six times. No one, it seems, gives two hoots for only somewhat industrious clans, or workaholic singletons.

### Obamacare

In the US, "hard-working families" were going to benefit this year from "**Obamacare**", a shorthand term for the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, which one Republican senator recently called an "Orwellian" title for the legislation. (Poor George Orwell: still can't get a break.) The snappier name "Obamacare" was originally coined by a health industry lobbyist, and then first applied derisively by Mitt Romney in 2007. (In an elegant piece of rhetorical jiu-jitsu, the president later said he accepted the label, "because I do care".) Sadly, "Obamacare" was everywhere this autumn for the embarrassing reason that its website launch was an almighty technical ballsup. Not all Big Data is too big to fail.

### Binge-watching

Temporary escape from hard-working precarity could be sought this year by "**binge-watching**" all episodes of, for example, a TV series about people having sex with dragons. The term "binge-watching" had been around for years, but took off when Netflix released the first season of House of Cards simultaneously, thus depriving competitive TV critics of a weekend's sleep.



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## And the words that still, really, really didn't



Nicole Scherzinger: maddening catchphrase. Photograph: Serge Thomann/WireImage

### Belfie

2012 unleashed the selfie upon us; in 2013 we met her mutant evil twin, the butt-selfie. Now that Rihanna and Kim Kardashian's Instagram streams are literally a load of arse, we can but mourn the lost innocence of last year's face-oriented attention-seeking.

### Schmazing

There was a lot to hate about this year's X Factor, so we didn't really need judge Nicole Scherzinger bringing her maddening catchphrase to the party. Total schit.

### Artisanal

Peddlers of overpriced tat love this word, which is why every sane person should hate it. Scribble it on a blackboard menu or slip it into the name of your Etsy store, and you could charge 30% more for some goat's cheese, a scotch egg, or a wooden beehive. Artisanal has been so brutishly overworked this year that it now means either 'handmade' or just 'made'. Like every single product in the world, then.

### Twerk-out

Humans have been shaking their bums to music for centuries, but thanks to Miley Cyrus's Robin Thicke-frotting routine at the MTV VMAs, twerking is now a fitness craze that's dancing Zumba into the corner. Tedious.

### Glocal

Yes, it's the barbaric marriage of global and local. No, we have no idea what it's supposed to mean. Nebulous tech-speak only fit for use by the most uninspired and desperate of keynote speakers.

### Phubbing

Snubbing a companion by gluing your eyes to your phone. Probably the least convincing portmanteau of 2013. People have always been rude; smartphones are simply a new conduit for self-absorption.

### Sparrowface

Not all pouts are created equal. 2012's puckering protocol was "ducklips", a fractionally more pursed pose than its trendy usurper. Sparrowface requires preening narcissists to form an O-shape with puckered lips, while flinging their eyelids apart with reckless abandon. 2013 will go down in history as the year humans finally lost the respect of the sparrows.

### Meggings

Leggings, but for men. You know what? We womenfolk are big-hearted sorts. Forget about those centuries of patriarchal rule. You're welcome to share our word for leggings with us, chaps. It's leggings.

• This article was amended on 29 December 2013. The original version stated that Benicio del Toro directed Pacific Rim. This has been

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1

Of course it is. Thanks for pointing the error out – we've corrected it now.

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