The Metric Selfie: hypothesising a holistic view on the algorithmic individual

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Abstract

This essay addresses a growing phenomenon whereby various aspects of our lives, from the professional to the personal, are being continuously scrutinised and rated though sets of metric parameters. We substantiate this claim with empirical evidence, and argue that these rating exercises may ultimately provide an illusion of rigour while in fact being dominated by subjective undercurrents and modes of impact.

Keywords: *Self-perception, analytics, evaluation, perverse media*

A defining phenomenon of contemporaneity is a constant state of self-consciousness: both literal, as a heightened awareness of our own selves, and as a preventative expectation of self-restraint in face of the other. This is compulsive and pervasive, permeating the various dimensions of the individual, from the professional to the intimate. Granted, no good would likely stem from a permanent exercise in collective abandonment (we've learned that much from certain post-WW2 subcultures), yet calculated mutual reassurance hasn't exactly turned out to be a particularly fertile option when pursued continuously and reciprocally.

This *breed* of self-consciousness can be partly traced to the exponential ubiquity of evaluation exercises. Largely fuelled by the plain fact that automation makes them *possible* ("because we can"), these exercises are therefore embraced as an assumedly desired reassurance of reliability and order in a World narrative projecting multiple signs and instances of volatility. How else would we be able to read *meaning* in the angst-inducing zeitgeist, right?
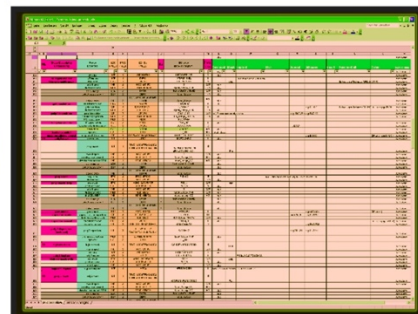
A further path of enquiry and speculation would be the largely unregulated and imperative dynamics between evaluation, surveillance and data mining/analytics: we have largely entered a habit of logging every administrative procedure and interaction in some writing form or another, in a felt, pre-emptive expectation of potential conflict, even litigation - just as job offers may depend on a measure of detective work on our social media history, including the potential unearthing of AV documentation of past lapses of judgment provided with overblown resonance and longevity. Self-consciousness has thus become the micro-management of one's own presence and associated actions under the ghost of potential perpetual resonance. The conundrum of big data versus who would exactly take an interest in the trivial individual is unlocked as a haunting intuition that one day, context, legislation and complex analytics will converge in unforeseen consequences. Just as the mobile phone counts our steps in an endearing coercion to "stay healthy", so its silent, associated geo-tracking renders detective work redundant. Better stay out of the shady alleys, just in case the current syndrome of automated hermeticism takes a dislike on us at some point.

Job evaluation itself is now often performed via algorithm-regulated self-insertion of activity indicators. In growing instances, the calculation of one's professional worth is obtained in the shape of an absolute number, further subjected to productivity and rating indexes verified according to the evaluator's overview, with quotas subsequently attributed in order to meta-regulate the regulatory system itself. The algorithm is, in this way, ultimately surpassed by the subjective, yet the illusion of rigour remains: hermetic, self-evident, decanted into the percentage we become. Of relevance is also the fact that focusing one's performance on a narrower range of typologies of activity will ultimately become detrimental: apparently averse to specialisation, the algorithm tends to reward a continuous flow of multi-tasking, a perverse *phobia* of dedication and depth.

The evaluation exercise contains an intrinsic measure of antagonism; it looks and feels as if it is meant to be unpleasant throughout if we choose to *attempt* to be in charge of it. The interface mirrors the severity of the exercise, in itself a challenge. The way to render the experience bearable is ultimately the focus on the competitive element: to regard professional self-evaluation as a video-game, to self-automate the insertion of data while watching a live re-calculation. The alternative is the sheer acceptance of full automation: the "system" will gather whichever data it finds and process-(construct)-calculate its measure on the spot, providing a transcendent measure of one's worth. Overall, this clearly parallels the gradual emergence of "citizen rating" programs as abundantly reported, the ultimate psychic impact being that work mode becomes one's default *modus vivendi*.

This ready availability of computation has therefore created the ubiquity of the measurable experience: not only are we meant to reciprocally and continuously rate the quality of our multiple daily instances, we are invited to consider this to be self-evidently necessary; if not necessary, then an escape valve for the various micro-narratives that inevitably offer a semblance of struggle, no matter how residual. Recent personal observations include the invitation to rate a passport control agent performance while inspecting one's documents, an airport baggage collection, and various hotel stays. All three of these have taken place at sites of displacement, where our territorial identity is checked, our belongings hopefully reunited, our comfort restored while in transit; further rating sightings include shop purchases, public toilet visits, online chats with a bot regarding a parcel delivery, a car oil change procedure, and long-distance flights.
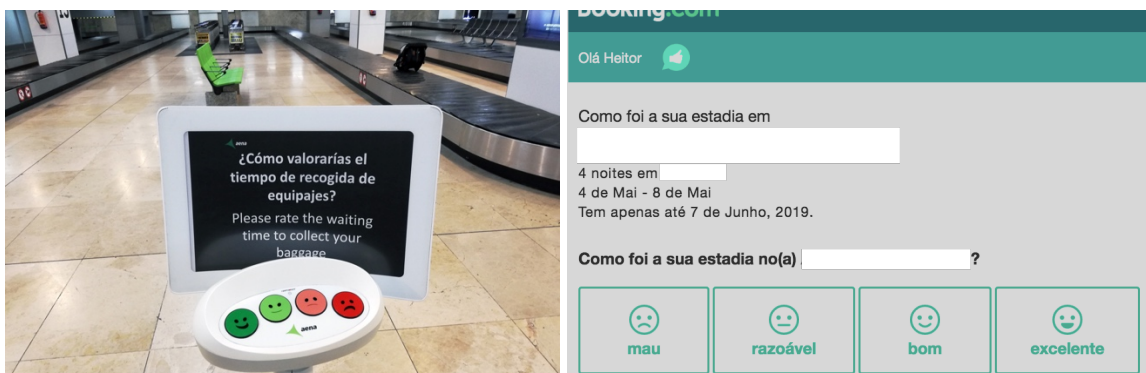

Four pieces of evidence emerge from this "rating" fixation. The first is a corroboration of the above job-evaluation syndrome: a statistical magic trick is performed, devoid of substantiation and density, projecting analytical rigour where in truth a simple void lurks: we are left in the dark as to the *nature* of the experience we are invited to rate. Does my rating of the toilet experience pertain to the level of cleanliness, a personal distaste of the omnipresent background music, or the sheer physiological relief? On a more charged protocol, what would constitute grounds for a negative rating of the passport control experience? Did the agent smile? Did any of his/her questions make me feel uncomfortable? Certainly being denied entry would merit a negative rating; but in such instance, would I still be allowed to rate? The speculative possibilities stemming from all observed instances provide exponential anecdotes for intellectual delight.

The second piece of evidence is actually tacit, and it is an intuition: we somehow *know* the attribution of any option other than the maximum score will be regarded as a failure of some kind.

The provision of the experience is meant to be immaculate. What lingers spectrally is the possibility that a rating below "exceptional" will have consequences: an internal enquiry, perhaps? Someone's job at stake? Who knows: often all we have is a set of buttons to push, and no further details are welcome or even possible within the interface. We therefore play safe, out of a vague hunch that we have been coerced to state the extraordinary in face of the ordinary, invited to comply with the perpetuation of the measurable where only the subjective or the *irrelevant* would be rigorous. Micro-scrutiny gives way to

a kind of neurosis, whereby our brains are invited to comply with the processing power of "smart data" that surrounds us.
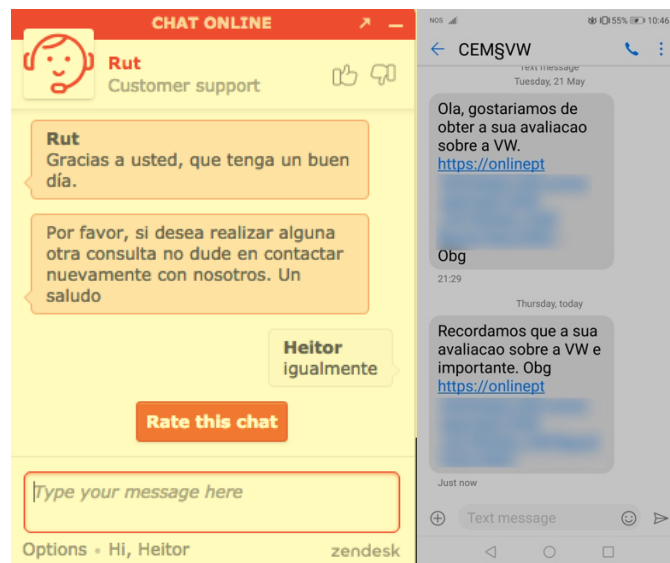
The third piece of evidence is a boomerang effect. By attributing a rating to the experience of the subjective, we *subject* ourselves; we enter the hall of mirrors where the effective, underlying rating is the rating experience itself. The magic trick is completed by the vanishing of the option *not* to rate: still there in plain sight, yet effaced either by force of courtesy or the playful aesthetics of the interface. Yet the day will come when rating will be mandatory: it's all a matter of turning it slowly and gradually into an acquired taste.

The fourth piece of evidence is a dissonance, a rupture between the intrinsic violence of unfounded, unnecessary judgement and these aesthetics of playfulness: in daily routines, whenever not tangibly impactful on ourselves, rating is often presented in the shape of a lexicon of emoticons and primary colours, soft aesthetics at the very least, a chasm between the imperative of judgment with ambivalent consequences and its contradictory, purposefully designed surface of innocuous, childish play. Spectral presences roam the mind here, imprints of yet another state of flux: the x-ray ritual as we enter the airport boarding gate area, somehow the ultimate metaphor for the transparency that is now the underlying ideology, transparent to the point of invisibility. And yet, besides the unquestionable and honourable need for safety screening, various airports now include their own colourful, playful children's x-ray queue. Once traversed the ultimate exercise in transparency and dispossession, in a matter of seconds we are ejected into the glossy, neon-fuelled delirium of duty-free shopping as a currently mandatory pathway to the boarding gate. The "duties of freedom", the spectral violence of terror giving way to the sensory violence of over-consumption; the x-ray screens that read our nude bodies for weapons give way to the HD-screens offering to rebuild us with cosmetics, as if announcing the body as an agent of violence by default, only redeemable through a post-anatomical reinvention via digital self-actualisation.

The trauma of dutiful dispossession is instantly compensated by the soothing experience of consumerism.


We digress for a good reason.

All of the above converge in a conviction: that the line that separates the trivial from the transcendent is now blurred and ultimately extinguished by the presence of *paradox*. The relentless rating of plain transactions and interactions, of plain states of being and evolving, roots itself in a fundamentally radical shift in perception, that of reality as devoid of ambivalence. That ambivalence is actually amplified by the self-proclaimed exactitude of the metric exercise, its acknowledgement hostile: *being alive* is meant to translate at any point as continuous euphoria, an individual externalisation, a theatrics of the superlative.
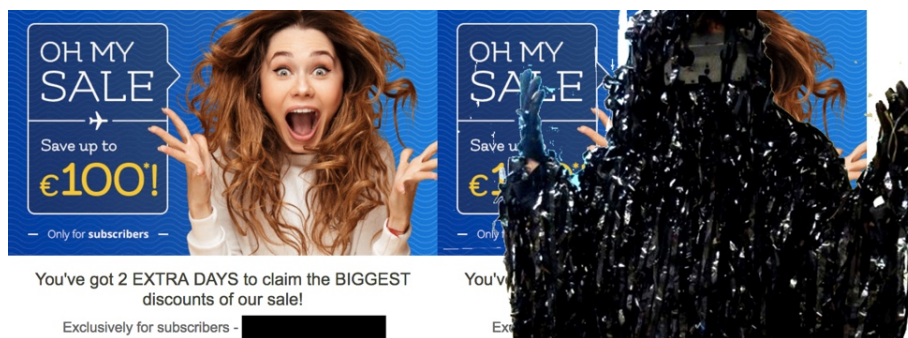
The endpoint of this perversion, including its self-infliction, may be observed most acutely in online social media. Firstly in the tightrope walked by "influencers", to whom only a colossal number of followers will suffice in a construction of positivity ultimately regulated by a calculating neurosis under the permanent spectre of semantic catastrophe: one small error of judgement and your character is slaughtered. And yet this exercise is rooted upon the catastrophic, as the stratospheric figures it pursues can only be based on a relinquishing of personal sovereignty, a loss of control.

Secondly, the endpoint may ultimately be observed in each single selfie posted by the millions, where the individual constantly rehearses his/her persona and monitors its transient viability, translated in the

impoverished lexicon of appreciation: Like-Love-Haha-Angry-Crying-Wow. The self rendered a personal statistic through the cosmetic abdication of texture, be it physical, narrative, relational. The body no longer viable as a space of fertile abandonment, no longer a territory of discovery, no longer a witness of its own history or a bearer of the marks of History — but rather a compliant, self-competitive construction of atemporal exhaustion.
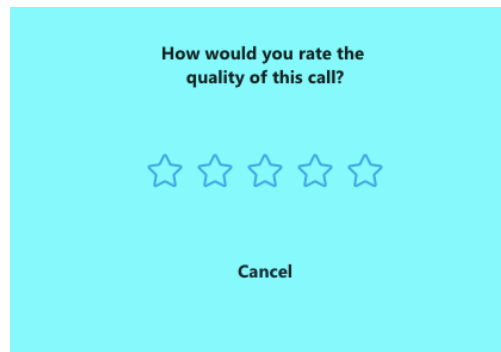
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Images sent to the author via email / SMS by various promotional entities, and gathered at various online and offline environments inhabited by the author; images have been occasionally edited in order to emphasise the metaphorical elements or protect sensitive information.
Figure 1 (left) by David Trullo, 2016; used by permission of the artist.