

The Future-Oracular: Prediction, Divination and the Politics of Certainty

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In 2007, Google CEO Eric Schmidt stated that Google's future ambitions were "to enable Google users to be able to ask questions such as "What shall I do tomorrow?" and "What job shall I take?""

In online environments, automated prediction is remarkably personalized. In what Shoshana Zuboff has dubbed "surveillance capitalism," identifying and directly intervening in people's behavioural patterns has become a newly predominant paradigm for profit. Hosts of corporations analyse online users and attempt to predict how likely they are to pay back loans, get diabetes, or need to buy baby clothes.

Many such predictive acts are geared towards effective salesmanship. Yet Schmidt's statement speaks to an emerging cultural logic that goes well beyond mere prediction, or mere sales: a fully *oracular* mode of address, geared toward uncertain, decision-fatigued neoliberal subjects, who seek clear and singular paths to their "right" course of action. How might this emerging oracular mode of address best be theorized, and differentiated from the broad range of other predictive modalities within surveillance capitalism? What forms of fatalism arise in prediction-heavy online environments – and how do these fatalisms manage the distinctions between "private" and public life? Further, in light of such developments within surveillance capitalism, what is to be made of what I might call the "oracular impulse" in contemporary art today – in other words, the recent turn towards spells, divination rituals, and other as-yet marginalized modes of aligning meaning-making with chance?

Such questions suggest the need to understand the oracular mode of address as part of a politics of certainty. In an uncertain environment, those who can speak authoritatively – with certainty – about the future can both influence the course of that future to some extent, and increase their share of future predictions to come, regardless of how "accurate" their predictive methods might, in fact, be.