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Citation

Rosamond, Emily. 2021. 'Portfolio of Personalities: Social Media, Micro-Celebrity and Self-Assetization'. In: People Like You: A New Political Arithmetic. United Kingdom 11 June 2021. [Conference or Workshop Item]

Persistent URL

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Programme

People Like You: A new political arithmetic

10th -11th June 2021

part of the project, [*People Like You': Contemporary Figures of Personalisation*](#)

Thursday 10 June

BST times

2.00-3.00

Welcome

Sophie Day (Goldsmiths), Celia Lury (Warwick University), Helen Ward (Imperial College London)

People Like You: A new political arithmetic

Chair, Martin Tironi

(Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile)

Scholarship on the history of 'political arithmetic' highlights its significance for classical liberalism, a political philosophy in which subjects perceive themselves as autonomous individuals with separate interests in an abstract system called society. This society and its component individuals became intelligible and governable in a deluge of printed numbers, assisted by the development of statistics, the emergence of a common space of measurement, and the calculation of probabilities. Our proposal is that the categories, numbers and norms of this political arithmetic have changed in a ubiquitous culture of personalisation. Today's political arithmetic, we suggest, produces a different kind of society, what Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg calls the 'default social'. We address this new social as a 'vague whole' and propose that it is characterised by a continuous present, the contemporary form of simultaneity or way of being together that Benedict Anderson argued is fundamental to any kind of imagined community.

3.00-3.15

Response, Martin Tironi

3.15-3.45

Break

3.45-4.15

Responses, Michelle Murphy (University of Toronto), Dominique Cardon (Sciences Po) and Louise Amoore (Durham University)

4.15-4.45

General Discussion

4.45-5.45

Cori Hayden (UC Berkeley)
The Spectacular Generic

Chair, Celia Lury

For what, exactly, are generic medicines *substitutes*? When generic drugs were introduced as a novel commercial option in Mexico in the late 1990s and early 2000s, one notable private sector protagonist – the famous “Dr. Simi” – promoted generics as a tool for fighting the economic inaccessibility and the ideological power of foreign, brand-name drugs. Enjoining potential consumers to “Defend your domestic economy!” the Simi enterprise — a massive force in the commercial and political sphere — invoked a national(ist) politics and defence of pharmaceutical sovereignty, built around the figure of the domestic substitute or the domestic copy. But Simi’s endeavours, and the configuration of Mexico’s generics market more broadly, quickly raised the possibility of another locus, form, and politics of generic substitution. The commercial-circulatory apparatus emerging around generics now sits in direct contrast to what many constituents/consumers experience as the “failures” or lacks in Mexico’s venerable public health insurance programs. The commerce in generics has, in many respects and particularly in Simi’s aesthetics, claims, and political incursions, come to substitute for “the state.” Yet, far from delivering us to a generic critique of neoliberalism, I want to use the contours of this “Simipolitics” to explore how state and market are themselves being recomposed.

Discussion

Friday 11 June

11.30-12.30

Emily Rosamond (Goldsmiths)
Portfolio of Personalities: Social Media, Micro-Celebrity and Self-Assetization

Chair, Sophie Day

Opening YouTube’s homepage unleashes endless personalized recommendations – choice lures from a rapidly expanding content pool. Myriad ad-hoc services, debates, and styles of self-presentation vie for attention in this oversaturated field. Among these, the “burnout talk” video – YouTubers explaining why they need to step away from content creation – symptomatizes the platform’ oversaturation. Algorithms favouring constant content creation strain aspiring micro-celebrities – a condition exacerbated by continually expanding content pools that offer ever-diminishing hopes of attaining high enough subscriber counts and watch time hours to

monetize channels. What forms of critique best highlight these conditions? This paper argues that social media platforms like YouTube offer profoundly unequal terms for assetizing personality. In a winner-take-all status-scape, very few YouTubers successfully self-assetize, generating significant rent from their personalities and personalized audience exchanges. Meanwhile, platforms assetize a different object: a hedged *portfolio of personalities*, comprised of all content providers. This effectively outsources all risks of content development to users, while platforms reap rewards from their hedged portfolio's ability to induce engagement. YouTube has shifted as it has expanded: away from any tacit claim to democratize access to reputation and status, by providing meritorious content providers access to wider audiences; and toward a randomized-aristocratic distribution of status, whereby ever more content creators fall below the monetization threshold – and yet, precisely *who* will improbably succeed remains indeterminate. Algorithmically-concentrated attention assetizes few, exemplary personalities on an epic scale, while most remain unenriched – in spite of the privatized public sphere's tacit claim to democratize access to self-publication. Effective critiques of social media platforms, thus, should contest specific apparatuses that entrench inequalities within self-assetization practices: the algorithmic concentration of attention, the selection of ratios of personality rents to platform rents, and the production of thresholds between 'amateur' and 'professional' self-assetization at specific points along a spectrum from low to high status.

Discussion

12.30-1.30

Fabian Muniesa (Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation, Ecole des Mines de Paris)
A Science of Stereotypes

Chair, Helen Ward

Two questions are hastened by a critical incursion into a number of cultural works that interrogate the propagation of stereotypes today (posts, memes, tweets, pics, gifs, tokens). The first question is about the particular genre of the industry that propels such propagation. What is the form that value – and its subversion – tends to adopt within this medium? The second question is about the obsessional content – and the phantasmal constraint – which characterizes such culture. Can a paranoid-critical method be of any help?

Discussion

1.30-2.15

Break

2.15-3.15

Dominique Cardon (Sciences Po) & Jean-Marie John Matthews (Paris-Saclay/IMTBS)

Chair, Celia Lury

The displacement of reality tests: The selection of individuals in the age of machine learning.

This reflection aims at interpreting the transformation of selection tests in our societies, such as competitive examinations, recruitment or competitive access to goods or services, based on the opposition between *reality* and *world* proposed by Luc Boltanski in *De la critique (On Critique)*. The hypothesis we want to explore is that we are witnessing a shift in the format of competitive tests, which is made possible by a spectacular enlargement of the space for comparisons between candidates and by the implementation of so-called machine learning techniques. But this shift is not the only and simple consequence of the introduction of the technological innovation brought by massive data and artificial intelligence. It finds justification in the institutions and organizations that order selection tests because this new test format claims to absorb the multiple criticisms that our societies constantly raise against the previous generations of tests. This is why we propose to interpret the attention and the development of these automated procedures as a technocratic response to the development of a critique of the categorical representation of society.

Discussion

3.15-3.30

Break

3.30-4.30

Louise Amoore (Durham University)

Chair, Sophie Day

Machine Learning Politics: Of Attributes, Functions, and Features

The transformation from rules-based algorithms to deep learning models has also been a condition of possibility for the undoing of rules based social and political orders, from the Brexit challenges to EU integration to the austerity politics and digitalization of welfare states and the pandemic NHS. Where rules-based computation and decision was critical to the formation of post-war politics, and to the formation of welfare states in 20th century, what happens when the machine learning function displaces it? The processes of machine learning extract features from data, clustering attributes, and mapping optimal functions. Computer science has become a political force because of its claim that any exiting function can be approximated by a deep neural network, so that the algorithmic political arrangement becomes one in which all political problems can be figured as machine learning problems. Consider how a political question becomes refigured in and through the propositions of machine learning: “what is the optimal representation of all the input immigration data to achieve this target of limited immigration?”; “what is the best representation of all human mobility data to achieve the target of limiting

Covid-19 transmission?"; "what is the representation of crime data that optimizes the output of urban policing in this district of London?". It is for this reason that it is insufficient to merely say that automated technologies or machine learning systems disrupt our social order or undercut our existing bodies of rights. It is more significant, even, than this disruptive force. For it is itself a mode of politics that arranges the orderings of public space, adjudicates what a claimable right could be, discriminates the bodies of those on whom it is enacted. What we are witnessing with machine learning politics may be a transformation from algorithmic rules conceived to tame a turbulent, divided, and capricious world, to the productive generation of turbulence and division from which algorithmic functions are derived.

Discussion

4.30-5.00

General discussion

Chair, Penny Harvey
(University of Manchester)