

The Traditional Link Between Authenticity and Freedom Will be Broken by Big Data

Three Big Data Questions

Prudential's AI Director Michael Natusch shows how data gleaned from a selfie reveals more about risk for life insurers than pages of underwriting forms querying smoking histories, parents' maladies and similar. More, instant analysis of client data will soon trigger constant insurance recalibration, with premiums rising when, for example, you purchase mountaineering equipment, and falling if it is returned unused. The efficiency is appreciable and the goal of client safety laudable, but there is also a paradox. Originally, insurance *facilitated* vibrant experiences: we could risk potentially bone-breaking activities because we knew we'd be admitted to the ER. Now, the same companies aim to incentivize staid, riskless existence. This conversion from vivification to enervation near the heart of the insurance mission is enabled, ultimately, by access to policy holders' personal information, and the question about privacy – who gets access to what, when, why – presses not just harder, but with increasing intimacy as data technology advances.

Mark Zuckerberg summarizes a central Facebook ethical mission as the integration of divergent personal identities: the person you are at work is exposed to your social circle, and that melded identity is exposed to your family, and so on. The goal is to create a single image of the self, transparent and applicable in all contexts. Zuckerberg promotes the ethical aspect of this integrity, while also profiting from an economic effect: users known thoroughly can be predicted completely. Marketplace conveniences follow, along with a churning industry dedicated to what Acxiom calls identity resolution. Still, the premise – that the integrated self is intrinsically desirable on the ethical level – remains uncertain.

Data enterprises geared to predict human behavior frequently don't know *how* they know. My paper responds to the blackbox problem by arguing that nonlinear artificial intelligence models (neural networks) are not explainable as a condition of the possibility of their operation. Stronger, the fact of inexplicability is precisely the source of the power of this area of AI. Hashing this stance involves a discussion of the interpretability/explainability distinction, a non-technical delineation of the limits of Shapely values, and the Kant/Hume intersection at causality. This discussion (which will be much shorter than it sounds!) ends by joining with the privacy and integrity questions to conclude: Big data applications auger a reality where we are known – especially by marketplace forces – better than we know

ourselves. More, the inexplicability of this knowledge renders conventional defensive reactions (privacy-by-design engineering, legal regulation by GDPR) vulnerable to failure.

The failure leaves two divergent ways forward, and following them is my essay's aim. On the way, heated and contemporary technological debates about privacy and personal identity will bend into congruity with traditional humanistic discussions about authenticity and freedom.

Nozick: Big Data Experience Machine

One way forward is to embrace the privacy/integrity/inexplicability requirements of optimized AI. The route can be explored by updating Nozick's Experience Machine thought experiment, with elements of the original machine redesigned as a predictive analytics experiment where life experiences are constantly optimized: surveilled users always already have what they want because it can be predicted and delivered, even before they personally sense any urge. In other words, it's not just that Netflix picks and begins the perfect next movie just as the last one ends, it's that *everything* is delivered not on demand, but before. Whether it's a meal from Seamless or a romance from Tinder, embracing big data reality promises a euphoria, one where wanting itself is annihilated by constantly perfect satisfaction. It will be asked, within this thought experiment, how the satisfaction feels, and whether it could be pleasurable as it is no longer preceded by lack. There is also an authenticity dimension here. Inside the experiment, authenticity must flourish because the big data experience machine works by fully resolving who we are, and then by conforming to that identity: we are known fully, and then true to ourselves in the sense that we are satisfied completely. Finally, there is also a skepticism underneath the experience: How can freedom exist if we never want anything, if we always already have anything that could trigger desire?

Deleuze: Divergent Identity

There is another option, instead of embracing data-predicted selfhood, it can be escaped. The same platforms that gather our personal information and then return directives fitted to cohere with our established profiles can be corrupted from within. The idea here is to turn the elements and tools of predictive analytics against the larger project of containing users within their established profile, and the strategy begins with a reconceptualization of identity formation. The Zuckerberg/integrity model starts from nouns (who I am) and proceeds to verbs (what I do). The contrary model suggested by Deleuze in *Logic of Sense* reverses the order. There is a particular value to this approach in the area of data ethics because it postulates not just that behaviors create identity, but that divergent behaviors create divergent

identities, ones escaping the predictive analytics of the data algorithms. The consequent work to be done proceeds from this question: how can recommendation engines – the suggestions of Netflix, the careers of LinkedIn, the romances of Tinder – be twisted to generate unpredicted identities, that is, ways for users to become people even they themselves never expected? There is, finally, a personal freedom here, but one requiring a careful analysis due to its idiosyncratic nature, including that it depends on users refusing authenticity by denying who they are.

Conclusion: Authenticity, Freedom

This will be an essay in big data humanism, and within the humanistic tradition there are few tighter bonds than that established between freedom and authenticity: Freedom is the way our authenticity expresses itself, and authenticity provides the rules we need to give ourselves in order to act freely. Entwined, these two values have represented an ethical ideal for individual existence from Kierkegaard through Nietzsche, Heidegger and forward. My conclusion will be that the unity is splitting under the pressure of coming big data reality.

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