

WHAT DO YOU GET WHEN YOU MIX METRICOPHILIA, SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICS?

In 2015, in a post called '[Against 'scale''](#), I quoted W. Brian Arthur ([2009](#), p. 22, in [David Harvey, 2014](#), p. 96) on the 'combinatorial evolution' of technologies:

slowly over time, many technologies form from an initial few, and more complex ones form using simpler ones as components. The overall collection of technologies bootstraps itself upward from the few to the many and the simple to the complex.

A staggering and chilling case of this is the UK data science company Cambridge Analytica (CA) which combines "25 years' experience in behavioral change, pioneering data science, and cutting-edge technology to offer unparalleled audience insight and engagement services and products."

One of their products is called 'Validity':



Greater scale, better decisions.

Political certainties have never been more uncertain. Small sample sizes routinely underrepresent significant segments of the electorate and conventional polls often fail to deliver insights.

Certainty requires scale. With a top-level view we forecast shifts early and accurately.

Greater scale, more certainty, better predictions, better decisions:
to paraphrase Primal Scream, what a beautiful future!

CA's marketing copy might seem blandly scientific or perhaps '[metricophilic](#)' but it masks actual practices which are truly shocking and are about to start biting very very hard in the everyday lives of millions of people. If that sounds like hyperbole (and it wouldn't be the first time I've been guilty of that!), please let me know in a comment but first watch this video below of CA's CEO Alexander Nix speaking about "the power of big data in global elections" and his company's "revolutionary approach to

audience targeting, data modeling, and psychographic profiling”:
<https://youtu.be/n8Dd5aVXLcC> Then, for a recap and some additional background, read this translation of an article by Hannes Grassegger and Mikael Krogerus: [‘Trump knows you better than you know yourself’](#).

This is the metricophilic, sociopathic and cold cutting edge of technology and politics today. Grassegger and Krogerus write that it is

not at all the case, as is so often claimed, that statisticians lost this election because their polls were so faulty. The opposite is true: statisticians won this election. It was just certain statisticians, the ones using the new method. It is a cruel irony of history that Trump, such a detractor of science, won the election thanks to science.

Some more of my thoughts on Nix’s talk and Grassegger & Krogerus:

1. I don’t know whose idea it was to play [CCR](#)’s ‘Bad Moon Rising’ over the intro but that’s a pretty sick joke.
2. It’s good that Grassegger and Krogerus (in translation at least) say that ‘Trump won the election thanks to science’ rather than using a determinist phrasing like ‘science/statistics won the election for Trump’.
3. Notice data broking firm Acxiom’s logo at the 5:37 mark and the mention of CA’s ability to “match offline data [purchased from Acxiom and others] to cookies to drive digital advertising.” I wrote in September 2015 about cookies and Acxiom in a post about the [‘student data blueprint’](#) and urged educators to consider the risks of this ‘data blueprint’ to their students, especially ‘refugees or those who come from countries with authoritarian governments who might be very interested to know what their citizen is up to, e.g. China, Saudi, Venezuela, Thailand, or Russia.’ At the time, I wondered whether I was drawing too long a bow. Now, with Trump in power, I feel like the worst case scenario is materialising; what new uses could he make of CA’s “revolutionary approach to audience targeting, data modeling, and psychographic profiling”? Are we going to see what happens when ‘scientism’ is taken to its logical conclusions in every aspect of our lives, including in Australia? In the meantime, are we in education just going to continue [‘sleepwalking through our mediations with technology’](#) ([Selwyn, 2014](#), paraphrasing Winner, 2004) while paying lip service to ‘digital literacy’?
4. Notice the references to ‘psychometrics’ in the Grassegger and Krogerus article: “Psychometrics, sometimes also known as psychography, is a scientific attempt to “measure” the personality of a person” or, as [Denny Borsboom](#) puts it, ‘measure the mind’. It’s had a massive influence on education, assessment, language assessment and debates around reliability and validity. That’s where I’m planning to head in my next post.