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MY BODY, MY TRAITOR

By Miriam Rasch

Who are you in the digital public sphere? Are you »a woman«, »a man« or a robot? Are you classified as »right-wing« or »left-wing«? Dutch researcher Miriam Rasch writes about how twisted alternatives for bodies and identities are created online. A translation of the essay was originally published in 10TAL #32.

We've come a long way, baby. From »On the internet nobody knows you're a dog«, to

»On the internet everybody knows I'm a top dog«, to »On the internet we're all Pavlov's dogs«. Or: from the homepage, to the social media identity, to the algorithmic profile. From the nerd, to the networked self, to the passive data goldmine (via the influencer).

This evolution can be read as a story of increasing corporality, as counterintuitive as that may seem. Usually, the story is told as if the world and its inhabitants are on their way to shedding all bodily weight, with the end-point on the horizon being a purely computerized humankind, all Mind and no Matter. But the inextricable entanglement of »online« and »offline«, »virtual« and »real«, primarily means that technology is all the time effecting the body (and thus, via the body, the soul). Like Pavlov's dog, the post-digital condition is no »cloud« in which everything evaporates (and, as we know, what is called the cloud is a very material infrastructure that is using up as much energy as a small country, relying on cables that land on contested shores, demanding ever more precious metals to be mined from unstable regions). Rather, our bodies and the data that can be mined from them, function as the pathways to understanding, predicting and thus controlling or manipulating the world, which in the same gesture means understanding, predicting and thus controlling or manipulating the body, the very body that was mined in the first place.

In a catch-22 situation, you're always made an accomplice to your own submission.

The way data is extracted from our bodies to feed the algorithmic machines has a history that seems almost quirky in hindsight, although of course it really is not. First I'm vaguely reminded of that rather old-fashioned technology of the polygraph (more popularly known as the lie detector). Even though it is still conjured up sometimes as a threat issued by the president of the United States of America, or in the movies, like recently in *BlacKkKlansman* it seems a bit of an awkward object, not to be taken too seriously in its implications. If someone lies, so claims the polygraph, this comes with certain emotions, such as the fear of being caught, and they translate into physiological activity. Heartbeat, sweat, galvanic skin responses.

Just measure these reactions on the outside and you can determine what goes on the inside. You will know the truth, even if you are not told the truth. The body is a source of data and the data don't lie.

That brings to mind the Quantified Self movement, a kind of reiteration of the polygraph and its hunger for catching out the truth. QS believes that the tracking of data that pour out of the body is a straight road to the truth as well. Sleep cycle, blood pressure, steps taken: as long as you measure all these physiological activities over an elongated period of time – just put on a smart watch, easy does it – you will eventually come close to the truth about yourself. Again: the idea that the body can and will disclose something even if you'd like to keep it a secret, whether consciously or unconsciously. »Electronic trackers have no feelings,« says Gary Wolf, one of the founders of QS. »They are emotionally neutral, but this very fact makes them powerful mirrors of our own values and judgments.«

This idea of technology that is neutral by now seems just as naive as the use of polygraphs to prove someone's innocence or guilt. But is there actually a difference when it comes to more advanced technologies that track the clicks we make, read out our facial muscles and our pupils, scan the movement of our bodies through the streets – interacting with other bodies through the presence of smartphones, coming together then parting again, with strangers on a train or with friends in a bar? Data are still perceived as neutral, the bits and pieces that are all at once mysterious and totally transparent, are seen as the infallible source of objective knowledge about our subjective selves – even though we should know from a couple of centuries of philosophizing about it that »there is no such thing as raw data«. In this view, however, *real* knowledge is not only quantifiable, but also ready-at-hand. As Gary Wolf writes: »When we quantify ourselves, there isn't the imperative to see through our daily existence into a truth buried at a deeper level. Instead, the self of our most trivial thoughts and actions, the self that, without technical help, we might barely notice or recall, is understood as the self we ought to get to know.«

Here, the truth about ourselves turns out to be rather boring. It was sitting there

waiting to be decrypted, we were just too stupid to notice. Turned inwards in old-fashioned *Innenschau*, we missed what was there all along, like Poe's purloined letter. Datamining companies have taken up this cue, leaving behind the all too neurotic and somewhat narcissistic self-help offered by QS. So inefficient! Our bodies can easily be mined *en masse* and for more commercially or politically viable goals. Where the individual can use tracking data to control and manipulate their own health and well-being, the data of a population will likewise offer opportunities to control and manipulate, but on a larger scale. Health and well-being are still being held up on a golden plate as the ultimate goals that justify it all, but as is well known, the content of such goals can vary from one to the other. It is not for nothing that measurers of Silicon Valley like Michal Kosinski, who claimed to be able to detect sexual and political preferences from the surface of your face, are accused of bringing back to life phrenologists like Lombroso, who had been buried already for a long time and rightly so.

People seem eager to forget that control over bodies does actually affect those bodies, and affecting bodies in a situation of control usually resolves in suffering (there, I said it).

The body, one could say, increasingly functions as an automaton. No use to wait for fictitious robots to take over; we'll turn into robots ourselves. Hito Steyerl mentions the example of the captcha, where the human has to confirm their humanity for the machine. »If you manage to do this, you successfully impersonate a human for a machine. But in contrast to the penetrating intelligence a thinking machine had to deploy to satisfy Turing, in a captcha, a human proves itself as human by the most mechanical and mindless activity, namely reading and copying a string of symbols.« By now the Google captcha doesn't even have to bother to ask you to confirm your humanness; it can detect it all by itself by checking your cookie history and the movements you make across the screen while operating the mouse.

This is the next step then: no need to ask any questions, because the data have already provided the answer. Answers exist without questions, like the truth starts

to exist without curiosity – which is another way to say that truth stops existing at all. In the same way our data profiles start existing without bodies – while those bodies are working their asses off. Obviously, the missing third in all these statements is power.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

I've tried to search for my data profile. I mean, if it contains the definitive portrait of who I am, if it manages to draw my innermost being from the patterns across my skin, I cannot wait to look in the mirror of this data-selfie. Digging deep into Facebook will give you a parade of categories that are linked to your account, but they are not much more than that: categories of things and names and celebrities. Google will tell you if they think you are a man or a woman and put you in an age group (better said, they tell you how they sell you), but immediately behind that insulting show of non-information you hit a wall. And what about my Cambridge Analytica or Palantir profile, did I even have it and what would it have looked like? And all these other companies I do not know by name, but that track me nonetheless?

In his book *We Are Data*, John Cheney-Lippold writes about the estrangement we can feel when searching for our data-selfie. Profiles consist of »algorithmic caricatures«, he writes, where the sole question is whether they work (or pay out), not whether they correctly reflect the world. That's why we should think of a categorization by Google such as that of woman as »woman«, that is to say in quotes, to distinguish it from the regular usage of the word (which is very complicated just by itself). Google calls me a »woman« – but what does that actually mean? Not that I have certain physical characteristics, not that I identify as a woman myself, not that I am seen as a woman in the environment where I live and work. It means that I am sold off as a woman to whoever is looking for a woman to

target.

Funnily Cheney-Lippold – who looks like a hipster professor parading a beard and chest hair – tells how Google deems him to be an older woman, no wait, »woman«. He observes: »Google's misrecognition of my gender and age isn't an error. It's a reconfiguration, a freshly minted algorithmic truth that cares little about being authentic but cares a lot about being an effective metric for classification.« What's more, such »neocategorizations« are but the communicative way stations on an always unfinished road that could lead in many different directions. Nothing's set in stone. Algorithmic profiling, he explains, is statistical in its outcome as much as in its methodology, and therefore always partial in nature. Take political affiliations. Behind the scenes, I'm not either »left« or »right«, I will be »left« for a certain percentage of probability *and* »right« for another percentage of probability. The two (three, four, five) categories are not mutually exclusive. And the numbers don't have to add up to 100%, but will likely exceed that number. For all the databrokers know, I might be both 78% »left« *and* 78% »right« (although I doubt that). In the age of truthiness, either/or thus moves from and/and to somewhat/a little.

In a way, this sounds like good news. Doesn't it remind one of the desire to be able to exist fluidly, to not get pinned down, to whirl in difference, to be always open to change? Aren't our algorithmic Doppelgängers like Donna Haraway's cyborg, »not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints«, is the unsettling question posed by Cheney-Lippold. Such floating 'persons' may be under constant surveillance, but they remain uncontrollable, never fully trackdownable, like cats that slip through an all too small opening. They might never suffer from identity crises because their self has no solid core and they know it, they won't get afraid of contradictory feelings and they will despise authenticity, that superseded thing from the romantic age.

Finally, we're absolved from all that!

Well, heck no. Again, this thought is devoid of bodies. »Someone« who looks like me

may be absolved, I am not. »She« left me sucked out, like a used up teabag, in the words of Dutch novelist Maxim Februari. Can I still step down? Am I in over my head too far? Can I cancel my subscription, de-implicate myself?

My body, my traitor. Traitor on her own account, providing all the details needed for the kill. Whether correct or not, whether true or truthy, it doesn't matter. It *is* matter.

Miriam Rasch (Rotterdam, NL) is an essayist and researcher working for the Institute of Network Cultures. She writes about literature, philosophy, media and technology. Her essay collection on living in post-digital times *Zwemmen in de oceaan: Berichten uit een postdigitale wereld* came out to high acclaim with the Dutch publishing house De Bezige Bij in 2017. In 2018 she published a collection of experimental essays in English, called *Shadowbook: Writing Through the Digital 2014-2018* which is available in open access.

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