Precious people

How digital alchemy transforms us into vulnerable consumers

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1 The expansion of the self-measurement zone

This article primarily focuses on digital self-measurement technologies that have become popular in recent years. The zones of possible self-measurement are undoubtedly expanding (Selke 2016). Most of the propagated prognoses are based on unquestioned promises of salvation: great potential and opportunities accompany digital self-measurement technologies. When *Deutsche Telekom* CEO Timotheus Höttges literally warned us about a 'fundamental intellectual and cultural pessimism' at a conference, he was, in principle, right. However, as a sociologist, I am most interested in shifting baselines, meaning slow changes to our common frame of reference (Rost 2014). The baseline that is currently changing is the manner in which we, as 'quantifiable consumers', regard something as normal. My sociology, therefore, is first and foremost non-affirmative and critical. Second, my approach is informed by a position of scepticism. It is based on the assumption that nothing comes for free in this world and that there cannot only be winners in a game. In other words: I am interested in the hidden costs and losers of the game.

2 The return to the alchemistic principle and the discovery of the human as an over-efficient subject

Digital self-measurement is nothing more than a modern-day return to the alchemistic principle. This is a supposition that will require some clarification. I will go back in time a little in order to illustrate the fundamental principle: Johannes Amos Comenius is considered to be the founder of modern-day schools. In his book *Didactica Magna* he explains the advantages of compulso-

ry education in order to make educational achievements both measurable and comparable. Comenius was an early theorist of the standardised perception of the world. Not uncommon at the time, Comenius was also known as an alchemist. He supported the idea that it was possible to turn common substances into precious ones with the help of certain conversions. The superficial goal of his educational programme was education as such. The hidden goal was the search for an alchemistic process of the social to form a better—meaning an optimised—more efficient human using 'scientific' magic. The idea of measurable educational goals came about from the division of the educational process into standardised grades, classes and the ability to evaluate pupils with marks. This system produced winners and losers, and continues to do so today. In his critique of the educational system, Ivan Illich said that 'he who has climbed the educational ladder knows the point at which he has failed and knows how uneducated he is' (Illich 1975: 39).

Transferring this example to digital self-measurement, let us look at the motto of the *Quantified Self* movement—'self-knowledge through numbers'. The starting point is always the 'common' person, the human who is not yet fully developed, or the human who represents a risk or a source of error or disturbance for society. For those of us who choose to believe Gerry Wolf, the founder of the *QS* movement, people need 'help from machines' (Wolf 2010). With the help of quantification, one's lifestyle is said to become more rational. And in accordance with social standards, 'common' people should be transformed into 'precious' people. Therefore, digital self-measurement can be considered a contemporary version of the alchemistic principle. This principle entails transforming the 'common' into something supposedly 'precious' according to normative standards. The alchemistic principle is therefore a game that produces winners *and* losers, regardless of how it is performed.

I would like to look back at another point in time. The Darmstadt Dialogues took place in the late 1950s and were, at the time, a meeting place for the intellectual elite. In 1958 the guiding question was: Are humans measurable? Back then, intelligence and personality tests were very fashionable. So, historically speaking, measuring humans is nothing new; it just continues to take on new shapes. In Darmstadt, this intellectual elite discussed the pros and cons of new psychological tests. The chair of the Darmstadt Dialogues, Erich Franzen,

summarised as follows: 'I believe the greatest benefit [of these tests] is that one can make comparisons between people' (Franzen 1959: 18).

There has been a return to the alchemistic principle in the digital age. Data collection and data analysis are used to transform the 'common' essence of humans into an optimised, 'precious' essence. However, the methods used only make sense if they are used to make social *comparisons*. But with that, the rhetoric saying that everything is getting better and that everyone can profit from it has become absurd. The game of alchemistic optimisation *inevitably* produces losers.

To put this all in more sociological terms: measuring humans has always been an expression of rationalisation tendencies that have social implications. Over time, these tendencies have led to a new image of humanity, which is currently experiencing an *update*. The modern image of society is characterised by the translation of concrete objects and complex qualitative processes into abstract quantities. Self-measurement technologies have proven themselves to be an outstanding medium for that. They represent a new form of the capitalistic passion for repetitive order. They mark the transition from the organisation of social life *by rituals* to the organisation of time and life *by processes of control and accountability*. Every measured achievement (like IQ) requires a concept of the highest achievement. There would be no fitness tracking without a pre-defined ideal step count, for example. There even seems to be a definable optimum for life quality, moods and other qualitative characteristics. This image of humanity is therefore essentially characterised by the subtle loss of any resistance to rationalisation whatsoever. One tends to see the human being as a source of energy that is supposed to perform in the most efficient and failure-free way, be it professional performance, in personal relationships or as a consumer.

3 Convivial tools

For Ivan Illich, *manipulative* technologies are the very opposite of *convivial* tools. The concept of conviviality explains when technology serves us humans and when exactly the opposite is the case. Convivial technologies are progressive; they challenge us to learn. According to the psychoanalyst Wolfgang Schmidbauer (Schmidbauer 2015), convenient technologies do the opposite; they promote the de-skilling or unlearning of basic human abilities. Manipulative technologies are regressive. This means that they increase people's dependency on experts who make decisions for us about what is 'right' and 'wrong'. More and more often, *their* standards or measurements substitute our own knowledge of appropriateness, reasonability or responsibility.

Digital technologies translate qualitative life events into abstract quantities. However, the sociological point of this assertion is that it is not machines or tools that are conditioning human beings. These machines and tools themselves are based on social programmes that we call ideologies. Manipulative tools are ideological because they force external ideas and expectations upon us, and these tell us what is supposedly 'right' and 'wrong'. The alchemistic game is concerned with efficiency, which is measured according to normative standards. We should therefore be concerned about the character of the creators of these (smart) ideologies. But we should also be concerned about the changes in character of the users of these manipulative tools. The quantified consumer is primarily the forced consumer of social programmes.

The alchemistic programme may make people 'precious'. However, the loss of individuality is the price of its success. These 'precious' people are becoming increasingly similar to one another. However, if we take a closer look, we can see a contradiction here: the promise of a unique modern individuality ends in collectively enforced conformity. Life becomes a copy of other lives. This 'precious' existence comes at the loss of one's uniqueness, which is the exact opposite of a socially inclusive society. Comparing people serves to stimulate not diversity but similarity. Using dystopic words: within this programme one could possibly see the breeding of a certain kind of human using the pressure to conform.

This pressure to conform has underlying roots. Self-quantification seems to be a belated technocratic reaction to elementary identity and complexity crises in modern exhausted societies. Everyone is having his or her own personal crisis. The collective awareness of crises is avoided, which is an explanation for the increasing individualisation of crisis management. Not only have individual lives become more easily measurable by using measurement technology such as gadgets, smartphones and apps. There is also an increased *desire* for objective self-awareness and therefore a rational lifestyle in times of crisis. Step by step, complex reality is said to become organised and systematised 'in order for it to become predictable and manageable' (Loo/Reijen 1997, 34). In other words: it is about 'calculability in a world that cannot be calculated' (Nassehi 2015, 169). Which is why the demands for self-improvement are growing in our secular culture. There is increasing pressure to produce results with an increasing amount of effort put into breaking down dangers or threats into calculable risks and expected security. This is where digital self-quantification comes into play: data suggests that the world can be controlled in a way that was previously not possible. That is a widespread and highly effective illusion. People have the desire for active self-control and positive experiences of self-efficacy in the form of self-quantification.

4 Between numerical differentiation and rational discrimination

Data collections, however, not only serve to increase objectivity and rationality. Instead, they have created new tools for making a difference. On the one hand, high-resolution data collections open the door to new possibilities of differentiation. This is how individual consumer profiles are created. This 'explosion of diversity' (Kucklick 2014, 12) initially leads to different deconstruction processes. Social institutions (such as law, education, data protection, the health-care system) are overwhelmed by the complexity that comes with the subtle differences in types of data. On the other hand, there is a need for the creation of new categories of definition and social roles because society

would be unimaginable without these categories. Self-observation based on digital data is not just becoming more *exact*; it is also becoming increasingly *divisive*. The counter term to *rational differentiation* is, therefore, *rational discrimination*.

I refer to rational discrimination when not only are differences made, but also when these differences entail social implications. More and more interconnections of data and social chances result from rational discrimination. Being socially assessable is becoming increasingly tied to economic exploitability. Economic exploitability has created the new social role of the consumer who devoutly lets his or her own data guide him/her. This *devout consumer* subordinates him/herself to his/her data. Data is given an authoritative power over him/her. Data is the key for the alchemistic conversion of people.

We begin to perceive ourselves differently when we observe one another based on data. *Descriptive* data becomes *normative* data. Normative data expresses, for example, social expectations of 'correct' behaviour, 'correct' appearance or 'correct' performance in the form of numbers. With that, normative data demands a certain socially desirable behaviour. So, little by little, an organisational principle of the social that is focused on differences and deficits is established. There is a constant search for mistakes, decreased tolerance of errors and an increased sensitivity to deviation regarding ourselves and others. In capitalism, the only thing that is counted as acceptable performance is whatever appears to be measurable and calculable (Distelhorst 2014). Rational observation represents an act of abstraction that alienates people from themselves and from others. Rational discrimination may be based on supposedly objective and rational measurement methods. However, methods of measurement produce digital winners and losers. It causes a *division* between things that create costs and money savers, as well as between 'useful' and 'dispensable' people. Above all, we have arrived at a renaissance of pre-modern appeals of 'culpability' in the guise of talk about 'personal responsibility'.

5 Greedy institutions and pre-programmed life plans

Ivan Illich suggests that powerful tools promote processes of the centralisation of power (Illich 2009, 70). He spoke of how *over-efficient* tools help to create radical monopolies that ruin the balance between things that humans can (still) do themselves and the things they are simply supplied with (Illich 2009, 82). Radical monopolies make people *compulsory consumers* and limit their autonomy, which is why they are to be seen as a specific form of social control. The sociologist Lewis A. Coser goes on to explain the development of compulsory consumerism and the forms of social control it results in. The rediscovery of the concept of *greedy institutions* (Coser 2015) is suitable for understanding the beautiful new digital world on a meta-level. Greedy institutions vicariously reduce complexity. They 'promise to end the fragmentedness of the modern human's existence' (Egger de Campo 2015, 166). They offer exclusive access to scarce, valuable resources, for example, truth, inspiration and self-awareness. For that, they demand access to the entire human existence and take over entire personalities. There is a reason that Coser sees religious sects as a perfect example of greedy institutions. 'Greedy institutions are always exclusive' (Coser 2015, 17). They offer a complete life world, including the idea of wholeness and security. Greedy institutions are the solution to the recurring problem of combining human energy and personal loyalty. The trick is to get people with different interests and role requirements on the same meta-programme and to at least simulate a collective consciousness. At the same time, this can lead to the loss of features that characterise the private individual as an autonomously acting person (Coser 2015, 27), Applying this to sociology, we can say that greedy institutions dominate their members, and the members of the institutions more or less voluntarily forgo their privileges, such as privacy, autonomy or the opportunity to make decisions.

Insecure, exhausted and in some cases uprooted individuals are trying to perform privatised contingency reduction by gathering data. They are retreating to controllable scales of measure. They are supported by greedy institutions, whose instrument of domination are algorithms that promise to reduce com-

plexity with prescribed standardised life programmes. Part of the manipulative character of greedy institutions is maintaining the appearance of voluntary action. But in fact, behind this voluntary front end there lies a great dependency at the back end, which is to some extent irreversible. Greedy institutions are characterised not only by completely absorbing their members, but also by the asymmetry of power relations. By gathering data, greedy institutions hold the key resource: total control over data. However, according to the German Advisory Council for Consumer Affairs (Sachverständigenrat für Verbraucherfragen), 'there has been a great systematic and long-lasting advance in knowledge on the part of the provider regarding data (...) if this is the new currency in the digital world, then this is not indicative of a level playing field for both sides of the market. In fact, the information and power asymmetry with regards to key resources seems to be growing' (SVRV 2016, 18).

Google can be used to illustrate modern greedy institutions. The company symbolically stands for the new, person-centred data economy that is constituted by a network of data-gathering and data-processing companies. In their manifest-like book *The New Digital Age*, Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen of Google clearly state how far greedy institutions can go (and what changes are in store for the consumer). They request nothing other than the consumer's voluntary submission: 'As in a social contract, users will voluntarily relinquish things they value in the physical world—privacy, security, personal data—in order to gain the benefits that come with being connected to the virtual world' (Schmidt/Cohen 2013, 257). And when Google claims that being connected to the virtual world and technology are the best way 'to improve the lives of everyone' then we have to remember the decisive question: *Who* is even making the decisions regarding what is considered 'normal'?

6 On our way to an assisted life?

Digitalisation is in full swing. And the digital gurus agree that it is irreversible. This leads to various concerns. The digital transformation can be metaphorically illustrated by comparing libraries and fitness studios (or gyms). No one

can actually calculate the utility of a library, for it has an effect on so many different unseen qualitative dimensions. Libraries can be regarded as tools for a convivial society. They contribute a certain value to the common good, even if it is impossible to put a number on it. Gyms, on the other hand, are places designed to reduce complexity. People who go to the gym define a personal objective, such as weight loss or increased muscle mass, and put together the corresponding training plan using the right instruments. Gyms follow the logic of maximal individual utility maximisation—and responsibility. We have come to treat all spheres of society, such as work, health and relationships, as if they were designed like a gym. The fallacy here is that many areas of life are more like a library: no one knows exactly how cause and effect are connected. We let manipulative tools instead of convivial instruments assist us in reaching our goals, and sometimes even allow the means to become an end in itself. So are we on our way to becoming a completely assisted society that cannot live without the aid of manipulative tools, greedy institutions and algorithm-based, decision-making engines? Are we at the mercy of the alchemistic principle?

7 The desire for a copied existence and the desire for vulnerability

Before I come to my conclusion, I would first like to mention an expected counter-movement. The omnipresent pressure to be perfect has also led to discontent. The premise of the corresponding counter-movement has been brought to a head by Jens Jessen in the outcry *Ruin your Bodies,* an article that addresses the underbelly of the new, data-driven consciousness, being the increasing *morally charged* lifestyle, the 'emergence of a culture of prohibition, a propensity to patronisation and incapacitation, other people's shameless involvement in one's life plan'.

The most important job of consumer protection is therefore the *demoralisation* of the debate. This means a looser link between data regarding individual lifestyles and economic calculations of costs.

My concluding assertion from the perspective of consumer protection is rather sobering: *You cannot save people from something that they desire*. I will explain this by summarising my arguments. When taking a closer look, digital self-measurement appears to be a contemporary return to the alchemistic principle in the guise of algorithmic domination. Hereby, qualities are increasingly being transformed into quantities. The price we pay for this are the new social distinctions that are currently being shaped. But we have to be careful: if data is linked to social opportunities, the result will be rational discrimination. This can be understood as the increased sensitivity to differences and deficits. Rational discrimination leads to changes, not only in how people see themselves and others, but also in how they treat themselves and others. Modern societies are competitive and promote social sorting. The more we rely on data to be our 'mirror of the self', the more vulnerable we will be to the propositions and appeals of greedy institutions and their social meta-programmes.

All of these processes support each other mutually: the over-efficient person becomes a 'voluntary' consumer of over-efficient and manipulative tools that are coupled with pre-programmed life plans by over-efficient institutions. These life plans are highly attractive and welcome, even if no one would actually admit it. The alchemistic principle, the use of over-efficient and manipulative tools and the acceptance of pre-programmed life plans result in 'reproduced existences'. As the sociologist Niklas Luhmann (Luhmann 1991) postulated, the principle of reproduction is as much a simple strategy as it is an effective one to reduce complexity.

In the context of consumer research, this principle can be called *desired vulnerability*. The desire for convenient technology is greater than any reservations one might have about negative consequences. The will to follow social user manuals is stronger than the knowledge we have of the implications these actions can have. However, life is about more than just following a user manual. Even if there is no all-encompassing solution, I do not want to end on a pessimistic note. So what *should* we do if humans cannot be saved from something that they desire? A far-reaching answer would be to change our desires. Consumer protection should take social, moral and ethical standards into account—and begin working at the level of a new *utopian* thinking. I do not consider this to be completely impossible. After all, we not only eat and drink. We have also come to *desire* healthy eating habits and fair trade products.

This baseline could serve as an alternative frame of reference for the digital consumer in the twenty-first century.

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