Reputation Addiction

Emily Rosamond

'Someone just searched you on Google.' I open the automated email. 'To see what city they came from and what paper they viewed, click on the link below.'[1] I press the button. There, on the analytics page, is a list of cities for my so-called 'searchers,' along with the content they viewed. (To see who they are and where they work, I'd have to pay the premium fee.) A graph illuminates an ebb and flow of interest in my work – a fluctuating tally of visits per day, colour-coded by profile views, document views and unique visitors (Figure 1). Academia.edu is a social networking site – a LinkedIn for academics – which allows researchers to display their profiles and publications, share CVs, see job listings, and invite peer feedback on draft papers. The site touts itself as the best way for academics to freely disseminate their research. Yet in doing so, it also participates in producing new kinds of images of networked selfhood: diagrams of page views, tallies of visits. What role might these images play in creating users that are addicted to the platform – and how might the pull of these images be resisted?
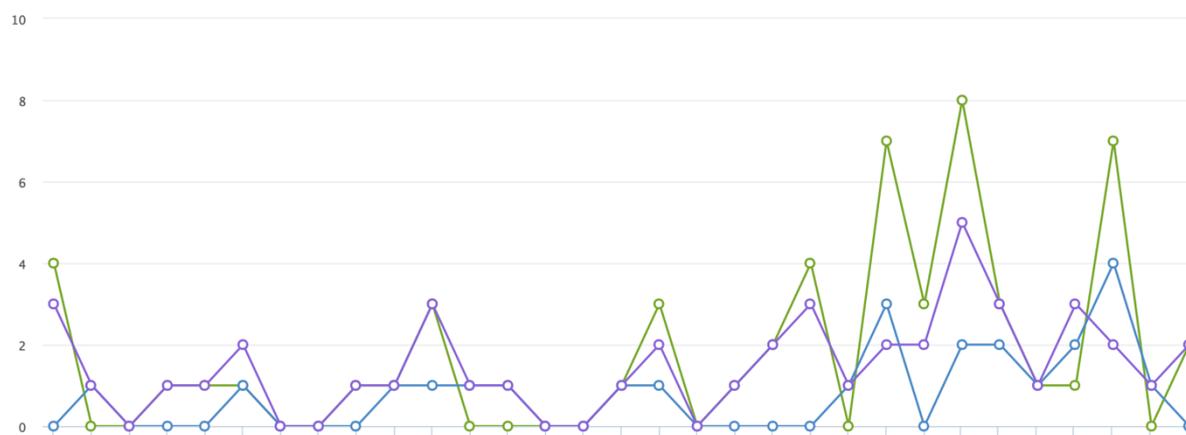

Figure 1. A sample 30-day traffic overview from academia.edu.

The page view counters, lists of "likes," and calligraphic traffic overviews that many social networking sites (including Facebook, Youtube, Amazon, and Airbnb) generate often produce reputation-images of their users.[2] They tally ebbs and flows of attention that accrue around users or their work. This attention, particularly for academics, is a form of currency. While workers in many fields might benefit from visibility on social networking sites, an academic's employability is particularly strongly tied to how much attention their work

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[1] Academia.edu, email message to author, 30 March, 2017.

[2] For an analysis of digital reputation more broadly, see, for instance, Alison Hearn, 'Structuring Feeling: Web 2.0, online ranking and rating, and the digital 'reputation' economy,' *ephemera* 10(3/4) (2010): 421-438; and Emily Rosamond, ''All Data is Credit Data:' Reputation, regulation and character in the entrepreneurial imaginary,' *Paragrana* 25(2) (2016): 112-124.

receives – so the pressure to render one's work visible online is especially intense. Academia.edu translates this pressure into traffic overviews and reputation-images. Like money in the bank, uploaded papers can start to gather *interest* – more and more views, which accumulate over time. (These can be viewed in the all-time visitor tallies, prominently displayed on user profile pages). The longer an article is up, it seems, the more interest drips in, as if on a decent investment: more or less quickly depending on the moment's market for this or that particular flavour of intellectual attention, but nonetheless evening out into some sort of slow accumulation. At the same time, such activity generates revenue for the site, providing data flows for entrepreneurs in research and development (R&D), who, in turn, use the data to improve 'trending papers' algorithms. Richard Price, founder and CEO of academia.edu, raised seed capital from investors before moving his business to San Francisco. He describes academia.edu's business model as follows:

> The goal is to provide trending research data to R&D institutions that can improve the quality of their decisions by 10-20%. The kind of algorithm that R&D companies are looking for is a 'trending papers' algorithm… A trending papers algorithm would tell an R&D company which are the most impactful papers in a given research area in the last 24 hours, 7 days, 30 days, or any given time period. Historically it's been very difficult to get this kind of data.[3]

Unlike academic publishers, academia.edu profits not from the dissemination of articles as such, but from the sale of data flows of expressed *interest* in those articles. Particularly within the R&D sector, having a real-time picture of an academic paper's impact could be valuable for researchers. Yet it also incentivizes the platform to habituate researchers to use the site regularly, in order to bulk out data sets. In producing images of impact and esteem, the site expresses how pervasively intertwined profit-driven sharing and the habituation of users have become in many online contexts. The financial logic of garnering *interest* in one's work is mirrored by the need to behaviourally condition platform users to check in regularly. What new alignments of behaviour, self-presentation and finance are conjured into being through this diagrammed line, choreographing users' online movements?

One way to answer to this would be to posit that sites like this are actively performing – but also, in a sense, *theorizing* through this performance – reputation addiction as a platform aspiration. In other words, in an attention economy filled with for-profit (but ostensibly, for the user at least, "open access") platforms that need to fatten up their data streams, these platforms aspire to inspire users to become addicted to their own reputations.

How does this happen? From one perspective, we could say that reputation-images reroute affect toward representations of social power. Online metrics reshape the relation between affect and quantity. There is no doubt that, whatever one might think of online social networking platforms, to see a large quantity of responses to one's work is meant to feel *good*. (This might be coupled with a slight anxiety, as there is nothing in this sheer metric expression of reputation to indicate whether the attention is positive or negative. Nonetheless, in the absence of clear signs of negativity, the presumption that interest is positive tends to

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[3] Academia.edu CEO Richard Price, quoted in Hadas Shema, 'Interview with Richard Price, Academia.edu CEO,' *Scientific American,* 31 October 2012, https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/information-culture/interview-with-richard-price-academia-edu-ceo/ and re-quoted in Gary Hall, 'Should this be the last thing you read on academia.edu?' n.d., accessed 3 April, 2017, https://www.academia.edu/16959788/Should_This_Be_the_Last_Thing_You_Read_on_Academia.edu.

prevail.) Metrics diagrams train online users to feel positive reinforcement directly as it relates to a quantity of reputational reinforcement.

Affect, according to many theorists, is already a predominantly quantitative phenomenon. Silvan Tomkins, for instance, understands affect as a quantity of psychic charge – a 'density of neural firing.' This quantitative density, in turn, produces a variety of qualitative affects (such as fear, surprise, or delight) based on the rate of change in density. For instance, a sharp increase in neural firing might be felt as being startled, whereas a less steep increase might instead be felt as interest.[6] Yet if affect is always, already a felt relation to quantity, reputation metrics on academia.edu and other sites invite users to feel in direct relation to *represented* fluctuations in quantities of attention for their online work – to generate quantities of psychic charge that are tied to the tides of represented quantities of attention.

Such conditions form the affective background against which reputation addiction works. Platforms train users to continually check their online reputation metrics, and indeed, to affectively respond directly to ebbs and flows of interest – to extend their very capacities for self-awareness by inscribing this performative link between metrics and reputation. Reputation addiction, I argue, plays a key economic role within what Shoshana Zuboff describes as surveillance capitalism – a new regime of accumulation that involves directly intervening in online users' habits as a source of profit. According to this regime, companies compete for surveillance assets (as in, for instance, Google's routine practice of expanding the scope of its collection of data before laws are set in place to limit these practices, and then deploying their substantial capital to ensure that any resulting lawsuits will be minimally effective[8]). By reinterpreting habituation as a direct field for profiteering, surveillance capitalism actively alienates users from their own behaviour.[9]

Of course, analysing behaviour using metrics is just one aspect of this phenomenon; yet it is perhaps one of the most poignant expressions, in surveillance capitalism, of how the platform's need to increase its data flows becomes wedded to users' affective need to reorient themselves into this broken, filtered pseudo-community space: to *feel* their sociality, their network-extensivity, as a relation to metrics, rather than to any given social act – or indeed, to reset the stage, such that metrics tabulations come to be seen – to be felt – as a lifeline of reputational worth.

What is at stake in a theory that would understand reputation addiction as a surveillance-capitalist phenomenon of central importance? Further, how can one protect oneself from the reputation-addictiveness of platforms? This essay is a short piece of a larger project that aims to generate the theoretical frameworks required to understand the ways in which reputation mediates between the (speculative) value of people and platforms – and, in doing so, becomes a battlefield of competing claims on valuation. Yet even with this brief example, we can point to a few preliminary answers. First of all, the case of academia.edu shows how important it is to understand reputation addiction as predominantly an expression of the needs of platforms, rather than of the 'addicts' themselves. As such, the affects of managing one's

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[6] See, for instance, Silvan Tomkins, 'Affect Theory,' in *Approaches to Emotion*, ed. Klaus R. Scherer and Paul Ekman (New York: Psychology Press, 2009): 163-196.

[8] Shoshana Zuboff, 'Big Other: Surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization,' *Journal of Information Technology* 30, 2015: 75-89. As Zuboff claims, Google's Street View project pioneered in this vein; its Street View cars collected data from private Wifi networks without authorization. This set the stage for a declarative method that Google would repeat: 'incursion into undefended private territory until resistance is encountered' (Zuboff, 78).

[9] Zuboff, 'Big Other,' 75.

online reputation need to be understood as expressions of a power relation instantiated by data. If reputation is the network-extensivity of subjects – the sum total of our very *selves* as they circulate outside of us, as esteem, gossip, attention, or even data – then the feeling, in our veins, of reputation will reflect the politics of the platforms through which our reputations, by circulating, take shape.

As tempting as it might be to resist these power dynamics by simply opting out – snatching back one's dignity, staying offline – this is not an option for many people. In many fields (including academia – my own professional world), in order to have careers, all apart from the most well-established need to cultivate reputations to a certain extent. Thus, perhaps it might be better to think of strategies of resistance less predicated on withdrawal, and more predicated on something like a pacifist form of engagement with what can be a deadly weapon: the platform's interest in usurping user attention. This might be linked, oddly enough, to some of the philosophies informing martial arts practices. If martial arts are profoundly pacifist precisely *through* their deep consideration of fighting, then perhaps, analogously, we might practice the reputational arts as a form of profoundly anti-surveillance-capitalist observation, which explores the idiosyncrasies of ebbs and flows of interest and attention, in order to find sites for minute tactical interventions.

Bio: Emily Rosamond is an artist and writer. She completed her PhD in 2016 as a Commonwealth Scholar in Art at Goldsmiths, on character in the age of big data. Recent publications have appeared in Paragrana (2016), Finance and Society (2016), Message (2015) and the International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media (2015). Forthcoming essays will be included in A Market of Values: Transacting (Intellect Books, 2017) and Moneylab Reader #11 (Institute of Network Cultures, 2017). Emily exhibits individually and with her collective, School of the Event Horizon.