

The Future-Oracular: Prediction, Divination and the Politics of Certainty

Schemas of Uncertainty: Soothsayers and Soft AI Symposium
Sandberg Instituut, Amsterdam
18 April, 2019

Abstract:

In 2007, Google CEO Eric Schmidt stated that Google's future ambitions were "to enable Google users to be able to ask questions such as "What shall I do tomorrow?" and "What job shall I take?" In online environments, automated prediction is remarkably personalized. In what Shoshana Zuboff has dubbed "surveillance capitalism," identifying, predicting and directly intervening in behavioural patterns has become a newly predominant regime of accumulation.

Yet Schmidt's statement speaks to an emerging cultural logic that goes well beyond mere prediction: an oracular mode of address, geared toward uncertain, decision-fatigued neoliberal subjects, who seek clear and singular paths toward their "right" course of action. How might this emerging mode of address best be theorized, and differentiated from the broad range of other predictive modalities within surveillance capitalism? What forms of fatalism arise in prediction-heavy online environments – and how do these fatalisms manage the distinctions between "private" and public life?

Exploring these questions reveals the need to understand the oracular mode of address as expressive of a politics of certainty. In uncertain environments, the uneven distribution of access to information and exposure to risk allows those with better access to 'certainty' – the capacity to speak with some culturally- or institutionally-sanctioned authority about the future – more purchase on that future, even as the apparent certainty of their predictions might, in fact, produce greater systemic risk. The oracular address performs a willed alignment of the desires of the uncertain to the volatile ordering of the future that certainty performs.

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