



THIN-SLICED THOUGHTS AND THEORY'S ENDS

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I. Thin-Sliced Thought

The best-selling 2005 book, *Blink*, relied on the evidence of palms—or, more precisely, palm perspiration, to make the case for what author, Malcolm Gladwell, called “thinking without thinking.” Describing an experiment that required test subjects to “gamble” by drawing cards from different colored decks rigged to favor one color, Gladwell highlighted the finding that the participants seemed to know which color decks indicated the safer bet before they could consciously articulate this knowledge. By the time they had drawn the tenth card, the sweat glands in their palms, connected to a lie detector, revealed evidence of stress when they picked cards from the deck rigged to make them lose. However, it was not until they had drawn about fifty cards in total that most subjects consciously recognized their “hunch” about which color was the safe bet, and in most cases it took thirty more cards before they could clearly articulate why. The reliance on body language as evidence of knowledge is suggestive: Gladwell’s conclusion was that the palm sweat revealed one more instance of “rapid cognition,” which he describes as “a system in which our brain reaches conclusions without immediately telling us that it’s reaching conclusions” (2005a). According to Gladwell, the advantage of this form of thinking is that it allows us to make decisions about very complex data without having to consciously absorb it all.

Gladwell’s book represents an attempt to consciously reflect on a pre-conscious form of cognition, to think about the process of “thinking without thinking”—that is, to make conscious the forms of knowledge revealed by the palm’s sweat glands. The lesson he draws from his examples is that *more* information-gathering and deliberation is not always *better*. As he put it in an online discussion about the book:

this lesson is drummed into us again and again: haste makes waste, look before you leap, stop and think. But I don’t think this is true. There are lots of situations—particularly at times of high pressure and stress—when haste does not make waste, when our snap judgments and first impressions offer a much better means of making sense of the world. (Gladwell, 2005b)

It is a curious message for the digital era, removing some of the lustre from the promise of access to unprecedented levels of information. At the very moment when detailed research becomes available to a larger portion of the population, it turns out—at least according to Gladwell—that when it comes to information and reflection, more time and information does not necessarily lead to better decision-making.

Compare the role played by palms in Gladwell's interpretation of the gambling experiment with the appearance of clammy hands in the first season of *The Mentalist*, a television show that could have been based on the insights of Gladwell's book. The lead character, Patrick Jane, is a former psychic turned police consultant who possesses the observational and deductive powers of a latter-day Sherlock Holmes. He channels the observational talent he once used to dupe audiences into detective work with astonishingly effective results. Jane's role in the show is to cut through tangled police investigations by noticing a suppressed gesture, a fleeting response that, to the trained eye, pushes aside a web of lies to reveal the truth, seemingly hidden, but sitting right out there in public for those with the ability to discern it.

The mentalist, in other words, is someone who has gotten in touch with his own rapid cognition skills. He is a master of what Gladwell, borrowing a term from psychology, calls, “the power of thin slicing”—which says that as human beings we are capable of making sense of situations based on the thinnest slice of experience” (2005b). So it is perhaps not surprising that the mentalist, too, has an interest in palms. He watches them, feels them, and often holds them, to gauge the responses of his interlocutors (sometimes he moves up to their wrists to feel their pulses, highlighting his talents as a human lie detector). As he tells the wife of one potential suspect, “I used to make a good living pretending to be a psychic. I say this because I want you to understand there is no point lying to me” (*Mentalist*, 2008).

In an episode called “The Crimson Casanova,” Jane grabs the hand of a reluctant suspect, using the reactions of her palm to guide him around the room to a piece of incriminating evidence she is trying to hide: a camera with digital photos used in a blackmail attempt. The attempt to interview the suspect proves futile, but Jane, seeing her nervous glances, divines the dissimulation: “There's something on this side of the room you don't want us to find. What is that?” (*Mentalist*, 2009) Confronted with his apparent ability to read her thoughts, the suspect insists she is hiding nothing, and invites him to search what appears to be a very messy home. “Nah, too much stuff, not very tidy,” he responds, before grabbing her hand and using her as a human dowsing rod to take him directly to the camera. He leads her around the room, reading the responses in

her palm to determine when he is approaching the incriminating camera. She may have been lying, but her palm unerringly conveys the truth.

If the first example of palm reading (or palm telling) in the experiment described by Gladwell reveals the possibility of rapid cognition, the second demonstrates how it could be put to use by those who can channel their ability to “think without thinking.” In both cases, the power of thin-slicing lies in its efficiency: it is ten times more efficient than conscious forms of cognition in the gambling experiment, while in *The Mentalist* example, it saves the detectives the effort of sorting through both a tangle of false statements and the mess of an unkempt apartment. The efficiency of Jane’s approach is a recurring theme in the show; the less perceptive detectives run around chasing leads and falter in their interrogation of suspects, while Jane is always several steps ahead, which allows him to retreat to his designated sofa at the “California Bureau of Investigation” headquarters before solving the mystery at the last minute by revealing what he had figured out early on.

I pick these two examples to illustrate what might be described as a constellation of techniques, strategies, and technologies for “cutting through the glut” of information in an increasingly information-saturated era. It is perhaps not a coincidence that in an age in which a reflexive awareness of the performative and contrived character of self-presentation is combined with media saturation that a premium would be placed on efficient and accurate information processing. *Blink* is a book of its time, one which fits neatly with a range of cultural developments related to cutting through information clutter. We might include in this category a range of popular culture representations of body-reading skills, from TV poker shows like *The World Series of Poker* to series like *The Mentalist* and *Lie to Me*. The latter program’s main character is based on the work of deception researcher, Paul Ekman, who is an expert on reading so-called “micro-expressions”—fleeting facial expressions and gestures that reveal hidden emotions. Alongside these we could include the use of body language experts as commentators on television news networks. During the 2008 presidential elections in the United States, for example, the networks and the cable news regularly featured body language experts since, as a CBS news host put it, not everything the candidates had to say “was conveyed in words” (CBS News, 2008). The media publicity has helped publicize a cottage industry in self-help books promising success in business and romance through mastery of the power to both read and “speak” body language (see, for example, Goman, 2008; Hogan, 2008; Navarro, 2008; and Reiman, 2008, to name a few).

II. Visceral Literacy

The goal of cutting through the clutter of what people say to unearth what they *really* mean, think, or feel, is not limited to the body language experts, but is shared by a number of recent, related developments in marketing, surveillance, and interrogation. Neuromarketing, for example, claims that direct access to consumers' amygdalae yields more accurate insight into their reactions than listening to their words. If one of the shortcomings of focus-group marketing is that consumers may not know exactly what they want (not to mention that their responses may be influenced by the process itself), the supposed advantage of neuromarketing is that this short-circuit provides direct access to desire: "M.R.I. scanning offers the promise of concrete facts—an unbiased glimpse at a consumer's mind in action. To an M.R.I. machine, you cannot misrepresent your responses. Your medial prefrontal cortex will start firing when you see something you adore, even if you claim not to like it" (Thompson 2003). Even, presumably, if you do not know you like it.

A company called MindSign Neuromarketing in California is using neuromarketing technology to, among other things, gauge viewer response to movies in order to learn which images and plot twists elicit the strongest emotional responses. A neurologist working on the project describes it as a more accurate way of eliciting feedback:

Besides the problem of focus group subjects saying what they think the interviewer wants to hear, a bigger problem is that they don't remember what they saw a minute ago. When you ask them which scene they liked best, they can seldom remember. FMRI [functional MRI] eliminates both these problems. We can see directly which scenes excite which regions of the brain every one to two seconds, whether the subject is aware of it, or says so or not. (Silver, 2009)

Filmmaker Peter Katz describes the technology as a tool for crafting movies that cater to what viewers *really* respond to rather than what they say or think they like:

Theatrical directors can go far beyond the current limitations of market research to gain access into their audience's subconscious mind. The filmmakers will be able to track precisely which sequences/scenes excite, emotionally engage or lose the viewer's interest based on what regions of the brain are activated. From that info a director can edit, re-shoot an actor's bad performance, adjust a score, pump up visual effects and

apply any other changes to improve or replace the least compelling scenes. (ibid.)

The brain might reveal truths about audiences that conventions, preconceptions, and prejudices conceal, he suggests. “Brain scans could reveal that large groups of male football fans enjoy romantic comedies even if they all don’t want to admit it. This creates opportunities to profit from new audiences outside the obvious demographics” (ibid.).

The goal of extracting hidden, perhaps concealed responses, lends itself to other applications, including unsurprisingly, interrogation and deception detection. A deception-detection company called No Lie MRI shares MindSign’s facilities. It uses magnetic resonance imaging to track the activities of areas of the brain, “that are believed to show extra exertion when a lie is generated” (Willing, 2006).

The technology here is the great equalizer, at least in a sense. You don’t need to be a trained detection expert like Joe Navarro or a gifted visual detective like Patrick Jane: the machine does the work of unearthing the underlying truth. On the other hand, you have to be able to afford the \$30 a minute the company plans to charge—or find some other way of accessing an MRI machine. It is perhaps a sign of the times that No Lie MRI envisions a much broader market for its lie detection machine, not least because it is apparently exempt from laws that prevent employers from using polygraphs to test potential employees. Thus, the market for truth detection potentially includes: “law enforcement, accused persons [at least the innocent ones, presumably], spouses under suspicion [ditto] and job applicants [or, more likely, employers]” (Willing, 2006). In an era of media convergence, technology that can assist in the interrogation of criminal suspects does double duty for market research. At the same time, lie detection technologies migrate into the realm of popular entertainment and every-day life, not just in frequent appearances on reality TV shows, but also as devices that can assist us in our social, professional, and family lives.

Indeed, the potential applications for a truth telling machine—a foolproof one—seem as limitless as the human capacity for falsehood. The promise is to finally access the hidden truth previously available in many cases only to what Slavoj Žižek (1999) calls an imagined “big Other.” Over the years, various technologies, none “foolproof”—from hypnosis to the rack—have been developed in an attempt to unearth this underlying truth. The promise of No Lie MRI is to cut through the vagaries of speech, coerced or otherwise, in order to let the brain provide direct testimony. The notion of direct brain “witnessing” has already been invoked in India, where, in 2008, a murder suspect was

convicted on the basis of readings from an electroencephalogram. The brain scans were processed by software that, “tries to detect whether, when the crime’s details are recited, the brain lights up in specific regions—the areas that, according to the technology’s inventors, show measurable changes when experiences are relived, their smells and sounds summoned back to consciousness” (Giridharadas, 2008).

Perhaps the hallmark of such technologies is the combination of generalized scepticism with a seemingly naive or mystical faith in the reading of material traces, whether by trained experts, gifted amateurs, or advanced technologies. On the one hand of this configuration, scepticism is directed toward conscious forms of communication for being potentially misleading because people sometimes do not know what they are really thinking or feeling, or do not want others to know. On the other hand, there is a faith in the notion that because we know there must be a knowable underlying truth in many instances (in the case of whether, for example, someone has committed or is planning a crime), it must be accessible *somehow*. Different types of “truths” flow into one another in such accounts: the question of whether people have been involved in a past event blurs with that of how they might have been involved; the truth of whether they are planning a crime comes to be treated similarly to that of whether they like a movie or a product, or have been influenced by an advertisement.

In each case the anxiety surrounding the potential for deception, misunderstanding, or inaccuracy is addressed by the promise of access to an underlying certainty: accurate communication is both called into question and guaranteed. We can save ourselves from the fate of the dupe by attending to various traces, ranging from pulse rates to micro-expressions and brain activity. If we can learn to listen differently, we can hear the truth speaking directly underneath the din of conscious discourse. Inner depths, emotions, and bodies come to speak for themselves. Representation is resuscitated at the very moment it is called into question: we may not be able to trust what people say, but we can learn to trust the traces that indicate whether or not they are sincere.

III. Psychotic Collapse

There is something slightly psychotic, in the sense outlined by philosopher Slavoj Žižek (1996), in this combination of scepticism and credulity: the notion that even if we cannot trust a suspect/spouse/politician, we might nevertheless trust their brain scans. Following his interpretation of Jacques Lacan, Žižek claims that, “psychosis involves the external distance the subject maintains

towards the symbolic order ... *and* the collapsing of the Symbolic into the Real (a psychotic treats ‘words as things’; in his universe, words fall into things and/or things themselves start to speak)” (1996, p. 196). It is a world in which brain scans reveal murderers, a fleeting micro-expression can give away a lie, and George W. Bush imagines he can bypass his awkwardness with language to gaze straight into Vladimir Putin’s soul.

This version of psychosis makes one more link crucial to the relationship between strategies for reading bodies and techniques for reading bodies of data. Infotrend guru and *Wired Magazine* editor-in-chief, Chris Anderson, neatly outlined this link in his manifesto on “the end of theory, which takes its inspiration from Google research director Peter Norvig’s observation that, “All models are wrong, and increasingly you can succeed without them” (Anderson, 2008). In other words, the attempt to understand underlying logic, to access the workings of the black box hidden from direct human perception, is no longer necessary in the data-driven world imagined by Google. This is a world wherein breadth of data collection displaces the logic of representation. Google’s success as a search engine, for example, was based not on the attempt to model whether one page was better than another by ensuring that it matched some underlying model, but to let the data (in the form of page links) decide. The logic is a familiar one to marketers: if someone who drives a Buick is more likely to buy a particular brand of razor or to vote Republican, marketers do not need to know *why*; they only need a list of Buick owners and their contact information. In the petabyte¹ era envisioned by Anderson, data collection and correlation displace explanation:

This is a world where massive amounts of data and applied mathematics replace every other tool that might be brought to bear. Out with every theory of human behavior, from linguistics to sociology.... Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves. (Anderson, 2008)

It is this notion of a talking world of data and traces that links body language literacy with neuromarketing and Anderson’s version of the petabyte era—the age of the incomprehensibly large database. In each instance, the content of forms of communication plays a secondary role to the talkative traces, whether these are colors on an MRI image, fleeting expressions, palm sweat, or chattering numbers. In each case, strategies for making things speak

¹ One petabyte (PB) = one quadrillion bytes or 1,000,000 gigabytes (GB).

are designed to counter two related developments: a milieu of information glut and what Žižek (1999) has described as the demise of symbolic efficiency. In the following sections, I explore the related background conditions of information glut and savvy skepticism that such approaches address, concluding with a consideration of some their implications for the roles of information and deliberation in the database era.

IV. Info-Glut

Much of the way we think about information and knowledge assumes a context of scarcity: in a democratic society, we need newspapers to provide us with information about the world we live in, uncensored history books and encyclopaedias to fill in the background, experts to make sense of this information, and a wide range of information sources to ensure the availability of differing perspectives, arguments, and forms of evidence. Many (but not all) of the historical struggles related to information in the history of contemporary democratic societies revolve around issues of scarcity and control over access. Attempts to ban books, to license printing presses, to prevent public access to government records and proceedings, to privatize or censor information, are just some of the ways in which entrenched powers have sought to reproduce themselves through strategies of enforced scarcity.

This history helps explain why the Internet has been greeted as a potentially empowering medium: it has been portrayed as a scarcity-fighting machine, a means of enhancing public access to information and countering attempts by the state or the private sector to hoard, control, or otherwise monopolize information. In many respects, of course, this is an inaccurate portrayal of the functioning of the Internet, which introduces new forms of opacity (regarding, for example the type of information collected about users by state and private entities) even as it promises transparency. Nonetheless, in many ways, both symbolic and concrete, the Internet has had the result of making an unprecedented range of information available to the wired subset of the populace, while also equipping it with access to content creation and distribution tools. For this reason, it has been called the most powerful and revolutionary communication technology since the invention of the printing press, another technology which eventually facilitated access to a wide range of content previously controlled or monopolized by religious, political, and cultural elites.

With this background in mind, it is worth considering the assumptions that underlie the equation of access to information with empowerment. These

include the notion that information access contributes to forms of knowledge that are convergent (i.e., that more people will come to share the forms of understanding that information access enables) and efficacious (in the sense that knowledge is useful for getting things done in the world). In political terms, efficacy assumes some degree of accountability, an understanding on the part of the authorities that public knowledge can lead to consequential public action. Attempts to control information, then, work to prevent both the emergence of shared understandings and the consequences these might have for entrenched forms of power.

It is not, however, clear that the assumptions grounding the equation of information access with empowerment function the same way in the context of a reflexively savvy media culture and an environment of information glut. In such a context, power may increasingly come to rely on strategies other than information scarcity. It might, for example, enlist the proliferation of information outlets and content as a means of defusing opposition. Such is the practice of what might be described as the “postmodern right” in the United States (and elsewhere): a reliance upon the perceived cacophony of media outlets to disseminate forms of uncertainty that forestall the development of public consensus around a narrative that might threaten right-wing policies. The theorist, Bruno Latour (2004), provides a clear example of such a strategy at work by citing a press account of the Republican response to warnings of global warming in the United States:

Most scientists believe that [global] warming is caused largely by manmade pollutants that require strict regulation. Mr. Luntz [a Republican strategist] seems to acknowledge as much when he says that “the scientific debate is closing against us.” His advice, however, is to emphasize that the evidence is not complete. “Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled,” he writes, “their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make the *lack of scientific certainty* a primary issue.” (p. 226)

Luntz’s strategy is to maintain the status quo not by suppressing knowledge about global warming, but by disseminating a range of competing accounts that result not in convergence upon a dominant narrative, but in undermining the possibility that any such narrative might emerge. The goal is to contest the notion that information access might lead to convergent understandings, relying on the power of what might be described as *divergence* culture. This is a generalizable strategy for dealing with counter-narratives and critique: challenge the critique and respond with a flood of information that

demobilizes the ability to choose. By multiplying the narratives—and in particular, those narratives that cast uncertainty on one another—the goal is to highlight the absence of any ‘objective’ standard for arbitrating between them. As political commentator Josh Micah Marshall (2003) puts it in a description of the tactics of the political right, at the heart of their strategy “is the belief that ... [i]deology isn’t just the prism through which we see the world, or a pervasive tilt in the way a person understands a given set of facts. Ideology is really all there is” (ibid.).

Thus, for example, while the Abu Ghraib photographs gave the lie to the claim that the U.S. does not torture, the struggle continues over the narrative of responsibility: was this the act of a few undisciplined soldiers run amok or the direct result of policy promulgated at the highest level of government? It is telling that the contemporary response of Republican authorities to evidence that appears to contradict their dominant narrative is not to dispute the facts, but to multiply the accounts of their significance to the point of uncertainty and confusion. This might be described, following Žižek’s (2004) invocation of Freud, as the “borrowed kettle” alibi of power. The term refers to the multiplication of contradictory narratives refuting apparent facts: confronted with the fact that the kettle he borrowed was returned with a hole in it, the person accused of breaking it responds with several mutually contradictory excuses: “there was already a hole when I borrowed it; the hole wasn’t there when I returned it; I didn’t even borrow the kettle.” Such forms of narrative multiplication have become a hallmark of media coverage of political controversies during the postmodern presidency of George W. Bush: global warming does not exist; even if it does exist, it is not caused by man-made activity; if there is global warming it may have beneficial effects (longer growing seasons, etc.); and so on.

V. The Fate of “Symbolic Efficiency”

The strategy of disseminating uncertainty relies on shifts in the media environment including the proliferation of information outlets, the fragmentation of audiences, and the ways in which interactivity renders “representations of reality vulnerable to public challenge and disbelief” (Coleman, 2003, p. 35). Legal scholar Cass Sunstein (2001) has expressed his concern that audience fragmentation and mass customization threaten a shared understanding of the world underwritten by common reference points provided by the mass media. As people choose to cut through the media clutter by consuming only information that reflects their interests and political persuasions, they run the danger of insulating themselves from information and

perspectives that might challenge their own. The result, he argues, is divergence of opinions and the fracturing of shared understandings:

the consequence will be further balkanization, as group members move one another toward more extreme points in line with their initial tendencies. At the same time, different deliberating groups, each consisting of like-minded people, will be driven increasingly far apart, simply because most of their discussions are with one another. (Sunstein, 2001a)

This account of divergence is a technologically driven one: greater choice combined with technologies for customization result in selective exposure, information exposure, and selective retention of media accounts that confirm audience preconceptions. There are underlying assumptions in such a narrative that suggest more is at work than technological change. The very notion that one is free to choose not only one's opinions but also one's facts relies upon a breakdown in the notion of any guarantee of a consistent, knowable world.

The notion that enhanced access to information will lead to shared understandings relies, at least in part, upon the two-fold guarantee of an underlying unified reality and a system of representation that can approach or approximate it. The sense that such a guarantee is no longer available results in what Slavoj Žižek (1999) describes as the "demise of symbolic efficiency" and underlies the forms of divergence described by Sunstein. One is free to choose one's own opinions *and facts* in a world wherein all representations are understood as debunkable contrivances. This is a world that concedes a generalized and "reflexivized" understanding of the contrived character of all representation. To paraphrase Marshall (2003), the hallmark of the demise of symbolic efficiency is the conflation of the notion that all representations are partial and biased with the assertion that partiality and bias *is all there is*. There is no need to even listen to responsible opposing viewpoints in such a world—all such perspectives are merely a matter of personal choice or faith. Since there is no position from which they can be adjudicated, there is no basis for convergence. It is under such circumstances that, as Sunstein suggests, deliberation leads not to consensus but to divergence.

We might describe this cultural shift as representative of a kind of vernacular post-structuralism. Postmodern theory may be notoriously opaque and inaccessible in its various academic manifestations, subject to ridicule by the political right as an example of pompous and bookish triviality and irrelevance. Nevertheless, a kind of popularized version has arguably come to characterize a media-saturated culture—one that has become hyper-conscious of the constructed character of media representation. Perhaps the paradigmatic

example of this vernacular dismantling of the Enlightenment legacy and promise is provided by political journalist Ron Suskind's account of an exchange with a top Bush advisor who accuses Suskind of being a member of what he disparagingly refers to as a tired anachronism—"the reality-based community":

I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do." (Suskind, 2004)

Žižek (1999, p. 323) uses the example of the Groucho Marx question, "Who do you believe, your eyes or my words?" to illustrate the role that symbolic efficacy plays in opening up a space of possibility beyond the seemingly irrevocably given character of directly experienced reality. Symbolic efficacy, as Žižek puts it, relies upon "the distance (between 'things' and 'words') which opens up the space for ... symbolic engagement" (1996, p.196). That is to say, it is the paradoxical space of the symbolic that indicates the possibility that things might be different than they "directly" seem to us. It is not an uncommon experience to trust the evidence of the symbolic over our direct experience, as when, for example, we concede that the earth orbits the sun. Symbolic efficacy has, Žižek suggests, an important role to play at the level of social and political institutions in which

the symbolic mask-mandate matters more than the direct reality of the individual who wears this mask and/or assumes this mandate. This function involves the structure of fetishistic disavowal: "I know very well that things are the way I see them [that this person is a corrupt weakling], but none the less I treat him with respect, since he wears the insignia of a judge, so that when he speaks it is the Law itself which speaks through him." (1999, p. 323)

By contrast, the goal of techniques for bypassing the level of conscious discourse described in previous sections (body literacy, brain scans, etc.) is to brush aside the symbolic mandate in order to get directly at the "corrupt weakling" behind the black robe. In a sense, the move is a reductive one: an attempt to bypass mediation by relying on the "direct" evidence of the senses.

Media glut combined with some of the characteristic attributes of digitization, including simulation and interactivity, fits neatly with the demise of symbolic efficiency. The multiplication of readily available competing narratives facilitated by a large number of information outlets highlights the apparently arbitrary choice of one narrative over another. More information leads to more versions of the truth rather than a tighter, richer, more developed version of shared truth—at least in the current conjuncture. At the same time, the reflexive character of the media in an era of information glut—the way in which they become the object of their own debunking scrutiny (think of the multiplication of “behind-the-scenes” shows, the metacoverage of the coverage, and so on)—foregrounds the contrived, selected, manufactured character of mediation. Perhaps this generalized skepticism is reflected in a 2010 poll revealing that no major news network in the U.S. was trusted by more than half of the survey’s respondents (Public Policy Polling, 2010). The network that more people trusted (though still less than half) was Fox News—the network with perhaps the least pretence to objectivity and the greatest commitment to the notion that there really is nothing but ideology, all the way down.

VI. Direct(ed) Affects

Strategies such as thin-slicing, body-reading, and super-crunching directly address the challenges of information glut and comprise the paradoxical obverse of generalized scepticism. They allow for decision-making without having to engage in the “slow thinking” processes of rational-critical evaluation and deliberation. Their promise is to tap into more direct forms of representation or, in the case of super-crunching, to bypass the logic of representation altogether.

Without diminishing the importance or the benefits of “thinking without thinking,” non-verbal forms of communication, or data crunching, it is worth considering their consequences for the way we might think about the role of information in the digital era. Perhaps the most significant consequence is for the notion that enhanced access to information (and the forms of understanding to which it contributes), is necessarily empowering. Just when the prospect of an informed populace with access to technology for deliberation on an unprecedented scale appears on the horizon, the rules change: deliberation comes to be understood as a process of fragmentation and polarization, information proliferates without converging toward a shared understanding of reality. By the same token, Google researchers tell us that how we represent or understand the world does not matter anymore—what matters is access to and

control over gigantic databases. The Internet as equalizer is replaced by the database as a new locus of asymmetric power relations.

A second, related, consequence is what might be described as the “default of savvy scepticism” with its relentless imperative not to succumb to the fate of the dupe, to a naive empiricism and its fantasy of skirting the vagaries of mediation. This is a fantasy populated by a host of murmuring material traces, micro-expressions, and chattering data that speak directly to our “second minds.” The structures of deliberation and evidentiary appeal remain, but they operate in a different register—no longer reliant upon the guarantee of the symbolic order, but rather, upon a gut feeling, instinct, or intuition. Massumi (2005) describes the shift in terms of the logic of the “affective fact”:

The breakdown of logico-discursive reasoning and the accompanying decline of the empirical fact does not of course mean that there is no longer any logic—or any facts. There is a tautological logic that tends to prevail, and a new order of facts associated with it emerges. We have witnessed the birth of the *affective fact* as a key political operator. (p. 7)

Massumi’s examples, drawn from George W. Bush’s presidency, recall Suskind’s account of the Bush aide’s version of postmodern performativity: “we’ll act again, creating other new realities,” leaving behind the slow thinkers, the ones still lingering in the realm of symbolic efficiency. The logic of the affective fact persists into the Obama era in the form, for example, of the so-called “birthers,” who claim to have uncovered a conspiracy to hide the fact that the president was not born in the United States and is ineligible to be president. So-called “birthers” have Web sites filled with readily falsifiable evidence to “prove” their claims, but it is a self-stoking proof immune to challenge. Each piece of counter-evidence is treated as further proof of the magnitude of the conspiracy to conceal the truth of Obama’s birth. There is no evidence-based way of dismantling the beliefs of the birthers: refutations merely end up reinforcing them. As Massumi puts it, the affective fact’s “pretension to certainty” is “actually far more trustably achieved by affective facts than empirical ones due to the tautological logic they share with pure decision or command” (p. 7).

In the era of the affective fact, finally, power relies not on the attempt to control and monopolize the realm of empirical facts, but upon channeling this tautological logic. As Clough (2009) puts it, “affective modulation and individuation displace subject formation and ideological interpellation as central to the relation of governance and economy” (p. 50). The proliferation of strategies for cutting through the clutter by gaining access to the realm of the

circulation of emotions and affective intensities come to serve the modulation of affect.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is the marketing world in the interactive era that is at the forefront of attempts to capitalize on the capture of sentiment, emotion, and what might be described as a sense of background feeling tone. Once focused upon demographic facts such as background, behavior, income, etc., database marketers are turning to the Internet as a means of gathering a different kind of data. As a *New York Times* article devoted to the marketing trend put it, “An emerging field known as sentiment analysis is taking shape around one of the computer world’s unexplored frontiers: translating the vagaries of human emotion into hard data” (Wright, 2009). But this description is not quite right: the goal of marketers is not to gauge personal, “human” emotion, but rather, to assess an emotional background without having to pore over the individual contributions of millions of Internet users. Sentiment analysis relies on the efflorescence of sites that allow users to post their reactions, feelings, and ruminations about everything from politics to their social lives. It relies on technological advances that make it possible to sift through all these forms of expression without actually reading them. The goal is a kind of thin-slicing or pulse-reading of the Internet as a whole. Sentiment analysis companies develop applications that troll through twitter feeds, blogs, social networking sites, online forums, bulletin boards, and chat rooms, probing the emotional pulse of the Internet. The industry places a premium on speed and volume: processing as many posts and messages in real time in order to deliver “relevant and actionable answers fast” (Attensity, 2010).

Sentiment analysis is a subset of what marketers call “predictive analytics,” a method that “uses past behaviour and complex algorithms to anticipate future behaviour by customer segments in a way that cannot be accurately performed using human intuition” (*Business Times*, 2010, p. 8). The goal of predictive analytics is, in a sense, both pre-emptive and productive: to manage risks before they emerge or become serious while at the same time maximizing sales. The goal, in other words, is to integrate possible futures into present behavior and thereby to alter it. Applied to sentiment analysis, the goal is both pre-emptive and productive: to minimize negative sentiment and maximize emotional investment and engagement, not merely to record sentiment as a given but to modulate it as a variable. In so doing, it gives “populations over to being a probe or sensor” (Clough, 2009, p. 53). The promise of super-crunching vast amounts of data, according to Ayres (2007), is to “predict what you will want and what you will do” (p. 44). The modulation of affect comes to serve as a strategy for control.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the “investment arm” of the CIA, an organization called In-Q-Tel, has already provided backing for a sentiment analysis company called Visible Technologies, as “part of a larger movement within the spy services to get better at using ‘open source intelligence’” (Shachtman, 2009). The modulation of affect is what might be described as a convergent strategy—a management mode that lends itself to the realms of politics, policing, and marketing alike. Whether or not it turns out to be a successful strategy, it gestures in the direction of a different way of thinking about information—not as the raw material of rational-critical understanding and not as contributing to an ongoing process of deliberation based on an evidentiary, representational view of the world (one in which facts tell us about something beyond themselves). In this regard, the strategy undermines the very premises upon which important aspects of the political version of the information revolution were based: the creation of an informed citizenry and increased state and corporate accountability. Perhaps some aspects of George W. Bush’s presidency already started to demonstrate the cracks in this revolutionary promise. On the one hand, digital technology provided some forms of accountability: the digital capture and distribution, for example, of the Abu Ghraib photos, the role of the blogosphere in chasing down the story of the U.S. attorney firings, and several other stories. On the other hand, transgressions which may well have led to impeachment had they occurred decades earlier, such as the legal authorization of torture or the warrantless wiretapping of the populace, were drowned out in a flood of contradictory narratives and justified by the specter of escalated risk.

The threat, then, posed to democratic politics in an era of information saturation and savvy reflexivity, is quite different from that associated with information scarcity. Techniques for cutting through the glut and thin-sliced thought are offered up as strategies for managing information proliferation and the threat of misrepresentation, but they reinforce and reproduce the logic of the affective fact. This in turn masquerades as a democratic logic, but the democracy of information access and the freedom to choose one’s facts are countered by control over the database. The modulation of affect relies on asymmetrical information collection, the capture of productive forms of interactivity, the enclosure of information, the debunking of collective ‘knowledge,’ and the formation of new forms of ‘understanding’ limited to those who control the data. Thinking without thought becomes the recourse of those without access to the database and the technologies for gauging and managing ambient sentiment. As Clough (2009) puts it, in a description that seems to neatly anticipate the logic of sentiment analysis:

this is a dynamic background, a probabilistic, statistical background which provides an infra-empirical or infra-temporal sociality, the subject of which is, I want to propose, the population, technologically or methodologically open to the modulation of its affective capacities. Sociality as affective background displaces sociality grasped in terms of structure and individual. (p. 50)

It is a shift that calls for a two-fold counter-strategy: the development of a means for recognizing a debunked but unsurpassed symbolic efficiency and a critique of the commercial capture and privatization of the information infrastructure. Despite their promise to bypass mediation, neuromarketing, body language, and other forms of thin-slicing can disavow their symbolic, mediated character, but they cannot dispense with it. Herein lies leverage for a critique of the promise of immediacy and the tautology of the affective fact. At the same time, the strategies for the modulation of affect lie on the asymmetry of the privatized, proprietary database: information is collected without its use being subject to scrutiny; targeting strategies remain opaque along with the priorities and algorithms that guide them. The tautology of the affective fact and the direct evidence of thinking without thought works to collapse the distance between things and words, and the possibilities that lie therein.

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