

Sorting the Future

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It has become increasingly unsatisfying to say that “the future is not some place we are going, but one we are creating” (Schaar, 1981, p. 321). While humans have always been a central agent in future making, the human of the present appears incapable of collectively orienting that future toward some desired destination. Many may remember the now-abandoned dreams once assigned to digital technology—visions of direct democracy, an end to politicized difference of identity, and a new epoch of mechanical innovation (see Negroponete, 1995; Turkle, 1995). In their stead, capitalist decision making has reworded the lofty promises of technological fantasy, like flying cars, into poorly made commodities of short-term profiteering, like Teslas. The hype of outwardly new, popular software applications, like TikTok, is reignited from the now-cool embers of the same software applications, like Vine. The progressive telos underlining this “newness” that long grounded the allure of digital technology—the same that enthralled the futurists of the 1990s and 2000s—has stalled, its scale adjusted from the exponential logarithmic to a rudderless nominal.

But optimistic, techno-enthused soothsayers still survive. Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Larry Page all vie for authorship of a techno-solutionism that, they suggest, can magically resolve the dangerous realities of the present. And a host of critics closely read these soothsayers’ texts, be they quarterly reports or publicity stunts launching billionaires’ and their egos into outer space, like fortune-tellers sifting through tea leaves. Yet there is much more to Silicon Valley, and the tech industry general, than the Twitter feed of a CEO or some perennially delayed innovation. “People are far more interested in the outsized personalities of Silicon Valley than the complex money grabs that grant them their platforms,” Frank Pasquale (2015) writes in *The Black Box Society* (p. 99). For some, explicit materialism and political economic analysis have fallen out of technology criticism. The focus instead turns to iconoclast biography or surveys of this decade’s less lofty promises—cryptocurrency and neo-Westphalian sea steading.

Beyond these soothsayers, there exists another sect in the world of digital technology that wields extraordinary power, one we might call not soothsayers but soothdoers—those who make the future in ways initially unseen and unheard, not declaring but enacting their augury. This sect is one I first encountered as a graduate student in Oscar H. Gandy’s (2021) *The Panoptic Sort*. On initial impression, I was changed. During my first reading of the book 15 years after its publication, the rust-orange cloth paperback hummed with an aura of analytical divination: It provided that since-absent materialist framework of tech criticism, rejecting the future as some ideal aspiration of faraway possibility. Instead, Gandy (2021) focused on the practice of prediction, the precise, methodological production of a future not as rhetoric but as a type of “high art” (p. 7). That the future was a human act was obvious. Rather, how that future was produced—its material transformation into a highly profitable, industry-creating genre of study—is what gave the book its immediate and enduring purpose.

The soothdoers in Gandy's text are not oracles reclining at the foot of Mount Parnassus but white-collared technocrats and computer engineers whose task is to craft value from algorithmic predictions. They are artisans whose "high art"—much of which has now been deemed immaterial by some—is still materially produced. They are also the programmers who would go on to build Amazon's predictive distribution chains and YouTube's recommendation algorithms. And contrary to the simple soliloquy of fortune-telling, these soothdoers are constantly called to account by their managers. They must produce a future that is effective, controlling, and most important, profitable. Their tools are not vagaries and hand waving about "making the world a better place." Rather, these soothdoers rely on personal data, lax regulation, and emergent statistical models to continue building their near-trillion-dollar dataveillance industries.

Gandy offers us a unique perspective of these future-making industries that straddles a political paradox and has since shaped critical study of algorithms and dataveillance. In the panoptic sort, there is a rank conservatism, as its models use data that can only reify extant assumptions. As we see more each day, categorical discriminations of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability are both introduced and reproduced on operationalization within an algorithmic system, a phenomenon Gandy in *The Panoptic Sort* detailed in 1993 and whose legacy we now see in much contemporary scholarship on algorithmic bias. But aside from the fact that conservatism is an attending epistemic radicalism, a new methodological orientation of correlations—clustered and factored statistics that hold exclusive right to the panoptic sort's production of knowledge—that prefigures the entire field of big data and machine learning. And ultimately, grounding both political wings of this technological assemblage was a perversion of power: The panoptic sort's resulting outputs are oriented not toward some general intellect but toward a particular target that returns profit.

Foreshadowing Pasquale's complaint decades prior, Gandy's materialism saturates the reader with a dual precision and rigor rarely found since. From Marx to Ellul to Foucault to Giddens, the "question of power" never left Gandy's (2021) approach (p. 32). For a book published almost 30 years ago, its prophetic quality certainly lingers. But more significant than his own soothsaying is this analytical framework. Traditionally, futurists, technologists, and eschatologists all, in the end, imbibe their own analytical poisons: Their predictions of the future are only as rewarding in proportion to the fervor they bring in selling them. In contrast, Gandy's writing—in all its systematic sobriety—demonstrates how the panoptic sort's system of prediction was made materially productive. The melding of statistical prediction with individual data—from American Express's customer models, to Claritas/PRZIM's behavioral targeting, and to Equifax's third-party data bazaar—ushered in an industrial method of not just evaluating the probability of some potential, temporal next step but actively intervening in it at a level previously deemed impossible.

References

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