

Contemporary Social Media and Creative Practice 2018

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Transcript: Ben Grosser



Ben Grosser

👤 Founding Member · November 2, 2018

Hi Everybody,

As an artist, I focus on the cultural, social, and political effects of software. How is an interface that foregrounds our friend count changing our conceptions of friendship? Why do we care about how many "likes" we get, and what makes us want *more* (rather than, say, less)? Who benefits when a software system can intuit how we feel? To examine questions like these, I construct interactive experiences, machines, and systems that make the familiar unfamiliar, revealing the ways that software prescribes our behavior and thus, how it changes who we are.

My primary artistic research method—at least as it relates to much of my net-based work—is what I call "software recomposition" → treating existing websites and other software systems not as fixed spaces of consumption and prescribed interaction but instead as fluid spaces of manipulation and experimentation.

A key strategy is erasure. For example, my ongoing work Facebook Demetricator is a web browser extension that removes all quantifications from the Facebook interface. As code, the work sits between user and system, watching for and hiding the Facebook numbers that count everything from "likes" to "shares" to comments and more. This removal then enables myself and others to explore the roles metrics play in prescribing sociality in online spaces. Feedback from Demetricator's users has revealed that hiding social metrics blunts feelings of competition and removes compulsive behaviors. Perhaps most interestingly, Demetricator has helped users realize that they craft rules for themselves about how to act (and not act) within Facebook based on what the numbers say. Additional works of mine that employ erasure are my other Demetricators (for Twitter and Instagram), as well as Textbook and Safebook. Related works that examine the effects of metrics in software interfaces include Get More, Please Don't Like This, Reload the Love, and More Like This.

Obfuscation is the recomposition strategy in my work Go Rando. This work intervenes in Facebook's "reactions" (Haha, Wow, Sad, etc.). While "reacting" can help your friends understand how you feel, these recorded feelings also enable an emotional surveillance that fuels government profiling, targeted advertising, and political manipulation. Go Rando not only aims to let users disrupt this data collection, but also to create conversation around the effects of emotional surveillance in personal, public, and civic life. Materially, the work is a web browser extension that obfuscates a user's feelings on Facebook. Every time a user clicks "Like," Go Rando randomly chooses one of the six reactions for them. Over time, they appear to Facebook's algorithms as someone whose feelings are emotionally "balanced"—as someone who feels Angry as much as Haha or Sad as much as Love. Beyond the injection of noise into a user's data-based emotion profile, the work employs humor to encourage reconsideration of Facebook's effects.

In addition to my artworks, I occasionally write and publish articles, and I spend a lot of time in conversation with the media. These conversations—and the articles they contribute to—is an intentional outcome for me; I use my artworks as fuel for public discussion about the ways that technology shapes our lives.

I'm happy to talk about any aspect of my practice, from concept to code to discourse—as well as any related subject (e.g. privacy, surveillance capitalism, etc.) or specific topic (e.g. Facebook as an enabler of disinformation campaigns, Twitter's suggestions they may be recognizing the negative effects of metrics, etc.). Or to just respond to the conversation as it evolves. Happy to be on the panel, and thanks to Judy for assembling it!

Ben



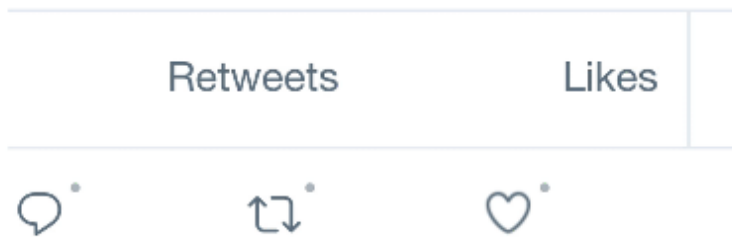


Judy Malloy Welcome Ben Grosser! Your work has been very influential in -- in your words -- "...revealing the ways that software prescribes our behavior and thus, how it changes who we are" Great to "see" you here!

Your student guide is [Jose Pena](#)

And here is Ben's bio:

Ben Grosser - Facebook and Twitter Demetricators



Ben Grosser creates interactive experiences,

machines, and systems that examine the cultural, social, and political implications of software. Recent exhibition venues include Arebyte Gallery in London, Museu das Comunicações in Lisbon, Museum Kesselhaus in Berlin, and Galerie Charlot in Paris. His works have been featured in The New Yorker, Wired, The Atlantic, The Guardian, The Washington Post, The Telegraph, El País, Libération, Le Monde, Süddeutsche Zeitung, and Der Spiegel. The Chicago Tribune called him the "unrivaled king of ominous gibberish." Slate referred to his work as "creative civil disobedience in the digital age." Grosser's recognitions include First Prize in VIDA 16, and the Expanded Media Award for Network Culture from Stuttgarter Filmwinter. His writing about the cultural effects of technology has been published in journals such as Computational Culture, Media-N, and Big Data and Society. Grosser is an assistant professor of new media at the School of Art + Design, co-founder of the Critical Technology Studies Lab at NCSA, and an affiliate faculty member with the Unit for Criticism and the School of Information Sciences, all at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. <https://bengrosser.com>



Kate Pritchard Hi Ben! Welcome to our seminar. Have you done much research or have any thoughts on the bots that interfered with the election? I recently read this piece and was very intrigued. <https://www.nytimes.com/.../russian-trolls-vaccines.html>



NYTIMES.COM

Russian Trolls Used Vaccine Debate to Sow Discord, Study Finds



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Ben Grosser 🙋 Hi *Kate*. Much of my thinking around disinformation campaigns, whether driven by bots or human operatives, has focused on the roles of metrics on FB. Metrics are used to profile/analyze users in order to segment us into groups ... to activate our "hopes and fears" (as a Cambridge Analytica head put it). For some that might mean showing an anti-vaccination message to someone who would agree with it; for others, it might mean the opposite ... showing an anti-vaccination message to someone who disagrees. In fact, often it's this latter method that is most effective ... getting people angry can activate us more than showing us agreeable messages. That said, bots themselves haven't been a primary focus for me, though I do try to follow all the threads analyzing how disinformation campaigns were working in the runup to the 2016 election (and how they're still playing out now).

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Jose Pena Hey Ben & Welcome! You mention "Feedback from Demetricator's users has revealed that hiding social metrics blunts feelings of competition and removes compulsive behaviors." This idea of competitiveness on social media is very much related to capitalism because capitalism relies on being competitive.



Ben Grosser 🙋 *Jose*, I examine the relationship between capitalism and metrics at length in my paper *What Do Metrics Want?* But in short, I argue that understanding this relationship begins with our evolutionarily developed need for esteem. To survive, we need to feel valued, whether it's respect from others or confidence in ourselves. This need now plays out in the context of capitalism, where value is quantifiable and growth is a constant requirement for success. The result of this intersection—our need for esteem and capitalism's need for growth—has led us to develop a deeply ingrained "desire for more." We see this desire for more play out in all aspects of life (steps on the fitness tracker, choices at the grocery store, etc.), but it becomes hyper in the face of social media metrics. Never before has our every social interaction been quantified and shown back to us in real-time. The result is an extreme focus on whatever the numbers say, and a need to excel in metric terms. IOW, when we see metrics that reflect our sociality ... and we see metrics of others reflecting their sociality ... we can't help but compare ourselves to them, to feel competitive, to want our metrics to be better than their metrics. Here's the paper: <http://computationalculture.net/what-do-metrics-want/>



COMPUTATIONALCULTURE.NET

What Do Metrics Want? How Quantification Prescribes...



Judy Malloy Hi Ben

Thanks for your informative answers to Kate Pritchard and Jose Pena's questions! And here is another question:

There have been a few rumors and scattered news -- [https://www.telegraph.co.uk/.../twitter-remove-like.../...](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/.../twitter-remove-like.../) -- that Twitter is considering removing the "like" button

This would be great news if true, and much credit is due to you for your work that has so clearly demonstrated the problems with the social media "like" culture.

Do you have any thoughts about whether or not this will happen?. And if it does, how it might change the Twitter experience?



TELEGRAPH.CO.UK

Twitter to remove 'like' tool in a bid to improve the quality of debate



Ben Grosser 🐦 Jack Dorsey (Twitter's CEO) has been hinting for months about possible changes. The first time was in an interview with the Washington Post, where he said Twitter was thinking about the potential negative effects of the follower metric's prominence in the interface (almost as if they finally woke up and realized oh, maybe our design choices have had consequences!). Another was a similar suggestion he made in front of Congress during his testimony this past summer. The article you linked is the latest suggestion they're rethinking things.

Yet despite all this talk, nothing has changed yet. Frankly, several tech journalists, such as Will Oremus (Slate) are quite skeptical about this latest report, and Twitter has not confirmed any intention to remove the "like" button ... only, that once again, they're rethinking things. Talk, but no action.

But let's take this latest as a real possibility ... what if Twitter removed "like"? What might that change? I would argue that unless all visible metrics are hidden from the Twitter interface, that users will flock to any metricated engagement actions that are left. So, for example, I suspect that if 'like' were removed that 'retweet' would see a surge in use ... that retweet, would, in a sense, become the new 'like'. Retweet obviously has additional effects beyond a recording of engagement (because it's also a rebroadcast), but still, it would become the sole metricated indicator for any individual post.

I of course would like to see them instead wipe out all visible metrics. I think doing so would have a much bigger effect than removing 'like.' Like is not only a visible metric tracker, but is also used by many to keep track of posts they've liked. Users would be upset if it goes away.

But the big elephant in the room is that Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms are wholly built upon and reliant on surveillance capitalism. Metricated trackers enable their profit mechanisms, so to remove like or to deemphasize follower counts would have a negative effect on the bottom line. So I doubt they'll change much (if anything).

Slate wrote about Twitter Demetricator when it came out (I'll link below) and I know Jack Dorsey is aware of it (he corresponded with the writer on Twitter about it). Removing metrics has even reached the consciousness of Kanye West, who suggested (about a month ago) what he thought was a previously unheard of idea: that we should hide metrics on social media. Dorsey responded to Kanye that he's thinking about it (Kanye posted a screenshot of the conversation). So it's not like Dorsey isn't aware of possible big changes ... he just isn't making them.

That said, I do think Dorsey is more sincere about wanting to change *something*. (This is in high contrast with Facebook who I don't think wants to change anything and really would just prefer we all stop looking at them so closely). One example: last March, Twitter posted a call for proposals (CfP), admitting they needed help to improve the "health" of conversation on Twitter and wanting academics or anyone else to propose new ideas. The CfP was simple. It's first question was: What's your name/title/etc.? The second question? What new *metrics* do you propose? In other words, Twitter (and the rest of Silicon Valley) cannot imagine a solution to any problem that isn't metrics-based.

So I guess that's a long way of saying I'll believe it when I see it 😊

<https://slate.com/.../the-demetricator-will-change-how...>



SLATE.COM

The "Demetricator" Will Change How You Use Facebook and...

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Judy Malloy Thanks, Ben, as always, for your knowledgeable and insightful summary of potential metrics changes on Twitter!

A personal take is that in the spirit of the Internet, it would be good to give each user a choice of metrics on their account. Personally, even though it is useful as a quick and dirty Zotero (i.e. I use likes to store information), I would like to eliminate likes. In the exploratory arts "likes" are not applicable indications of the depth of our work -- nor should we strive for or be judged by likes. However, because sharing information is in the spirit of the Internet, I would like to retain retweet.

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Write a reply...



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