Are Metrics Blinding Our Perception?

By ANAND GIRIDHARADAS

CAMBRIDGE, Massachusetts — The Trixie Telemetry company believes in hard, quantifiable truths. It believes that there is a right time and wrong time to breast-feed a baby. It believes that certain hours and rooms are better for a child's naps than others and that data can establish this, too. It believes that parents should track how long their infants have gone without soiling a diaper and devote themselves to beating this "high score."

To these ends, the company sells what is a coveted service in this age: a dashboard. It invites you to enter data on your baby's life, and it produces color-coded charts, Sleep Probability Distributions, digestive analysis and such, to help parents make data-based decisions.

Don't laugh, because Trixie Telemetry is made from the essence of our age. Computers have become an extension of us: that is a commonplace now. But in an important way we may be becoming an extension of them, in turn. Computers are digital — that is, they turn everything into numbers; that is their way of seeing. And in the computer age we may be living through the digitization of our minds, even when they are offline: a slow-burning quantification of human affairs that promises or threatens, depending on your outlook, to crowd out other categories of the imagination, other ways of perceiving.

Self-quantification of the Trixie Telemetry kind is everywhere now. Bedposted.com quantifies your sexual encounters. Kibotzer.com quantifies your progress toward goals like losing weight. Withings, a French firm, makes a Wi-Fi-enabled weighing scale that sends readings to your computer to be graphed. There are tools to measure and analyze the steps you take in a day; the abundance and ideological orientation of your friends; the influence of your Twitter utterances; what you eat; the words you most use; your happiness; your success in spurning cigarettes.

Welcome to the Age of Metrics — or to the End of Instinct. Metrics are everywhere. It is increasingly with them that we decide what to read, what stocks to buy, which poor people to feed, which athletes to recruit, which films and restaurants to try. World Metrics Day was declared for the first time this year.

The once-mysterious formation of tastes is becoming a quantitative science, as services like Netflix and Pandora and StumbleUpon deploy algorithms to predict, and shape, what you like to watch, listen to and read.

These services are wondrous. They also risk lumping us into clusters of the like-minded and depriving us of the self-fortifying act of choosing. What will it mean to prefer one
genre of song when you have never confronted others? It is one thing to love your country because you have seen the world and love it still; it is quite another to love it because you know nothing else.

In the Age of Metrics, vocation after vocation is discovering numbers. Doctors are going quant with evidence-based medicine, which promises to improve care by quantifying different treatments’ probabilities of success. Wall Street has gone quant, with financial models automating trading — sometimes brilliantly, sometimes disastrously. Academia has gone quant, with once-humanistic fields like politics, on which I work at Harvard, studied in a more rigorous way, but at the price of having ever less to say about the world’s big questions. Even charity, built on the instinct of altruism, has gone quant.

Philanthropists were once satisfied with a fuzzy feeling and, in the United States at least, tax benefits. Increasingly, though, they insist on precise metrics of their “social return on investment.” They want to know how much money is funding vaccines and not staplers at the charity’s offices. And so the Rockefeller Foundation and other groups have created the new Impact Reporting and Investment Standards, a set of metrics that make causes rigorously comparable.

“The power of metrics is that it enables us to deploy our marginal dollar to the best problem-solver, not just the best storyteller,” said Antony Bugg-Levine, a managing director of the Rockefeller Foundation.

But there are also worries. What will be the fate of causes, like women’s empowerment, that produce something not easily counted? Will metrics encourage too much outside second-guessing of charities? Will metrics encourage charities to work toward the metric (acres reforested), not the underlying goal (sustainability)?

Focusing on the wrong metrics already distorts policy-making around the world, according to a fascinating new study commissioned by the French government.

We use gross domestic product to measure everything. It makes it easy to compare economies, but it makes us undervalue what cannot be measured, the report said. Trees are killed because the sales from paper are countable, while a forest’s worth is not. Unemployment grants are cut because their cost is plain, while the mental-health cost of idleness is vague.

In short, what we know instinctively, data can make us forget. But the commission’s solution was revealing of our times: not more balance between qualitative and quantitative, but more metrics: new statistics on human well-being and economic sustainability to contend with data on production.

The commission’s chairman, Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate in economics and the author of a forthcoming book, “Freefall,” on the Great Recession, has been a critic of the world’s saturation by business logic. I asked him what he made of metricocracy. He said metrics were valuable tools but were in danger of squelching other ways of perceiving. But he argued that his commission had no choice but to speak in metricese.

“In this world in which we are so centered on metrics, those things that are not measured get left off the agenda,” he said. “You need a metric to fight a metric.”

Technology brings ever more metrics. The strange thing is that nothing in them prevents us from using other lenses, too. But something in the culture now makes us bow before data and suspend disbelief. Sometimes metrics blind us to what we might with fewer metrics have seen.

The future’s challenge to us — when we are rearing children, making economic choices, picking the songs to live and dance by — may be to decide how metrics might inform our decisions without becoming them.

E-MAIL: pagetuo@iht.com
A version of this article appeared in print on November 21, 2009, in The International Herald Tribune.