Out Of Our Minds

Ariane Koek

Preface – Now

How do you feel today? This hour? This minute? This second? What are you thinking about right now? Do your thoughts and feelings relate to one another? Or are they quite separate? The essay below was written one month before the global pandemic was declared. That was before high fear and anxiety ran riot as the coronavirus spread globally and we humans became biohazards. Now at the beginning of the first wave of the pandemic, days, hours, minutes, seconds are spent with our emotions, as time blurs into one long "now".

There is an art piece that comes to mind at this long moment in time. It is an installation by Raqs Media Collective – Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta. Called *The Arc of a Day*, it consists of 24 clocks purporting to tell the time from different cities of the world, installed in the reception area of the Deutsche Bank building in Birmingham, England. It is the group's response to a life of stress dictated by time. The numerals on the clock face are replaced by words relating to emotions – Anxiety, Fear, Hope, Duty, Ecstasy, Fatigue – and instead of the number 12, there is the word Epiphany. Whilst the piece was created in response to a world driven by productivity, time and capitalism, it now has a different resonance. Time seems irrelevant as "real" life – or "normality" – is suspended. Only emotions count.

In Sanskrit, the 3,500-year-old classical language of the Indian subcontinent, there is only one word for tomorrow and yesterday, not two separate ones. They are indistinguishable from one another because they don't exist now. Only today is honoured with a word of its own. It feels as if time is returning to the original Sanskrit notion.

↑ Raqs Media Collective, *The Arc of a Day* (detail), 2014

In English and Dutch there is an expression: "now and then". It means from time to time. Perhaps the essay below stands in this frame. I thought about rewriting the entire piece – but then resisted. Who knows – by the time this catalogue is published, even a rewritten essay will be out of date. Time is moving both swiftly and slowly all at once now. Contexts are changing rapidly and will continue do so. Life may have taken on another meaning entirely. Because of this, this essay is situated in Now and Then.

Now and Then

In the 21st century, feelings, not facts, are the new truth. Facts put forward by experts no longer have as much significance, importance and value as they once did. How many times do we hear a sentence today beginning with "I feel…" or "my feelings are…" in order to legitimise a stance or decision? An individual's feelings are rarely if ever argued against, dismissed or even disputed. Feelings now have primacy in our society and are taken seriously, whereas facts are readily dismissed, including by leaders such as presidents and prime ministers, as "fake news", the opinion of the "elite" or biased and

completely irrelevant unless it suits them in this post-truth world. So how did we get to this point in society where feelings are an "unassailable" truth and facts are falsehoods?

During the Enlightenment, the intellect and the life of the mind had primacy. Facts were seen as objective, secure and sources of information seated in the mind and consciousness, while feelings were dismissed as unstable and subject to the whims and caprices of the individual's soul and/or external world. The irony is that whilst the Enlightenment in Europe promoted the idea of individualism and the rule of the mind as the seat of consciousness – as exemplified by Descartes' "I think therefore I am" – the Enlightenment dismissed feelings as being too individual and too variable. There is an inherent contradiction here.[1] The contradiction has now bled through into our century and reversed itself: feelings, more than reason, mark our reality and truths today.

One reason for this reversal is our increasing interaction with and growing dependence on technology in the 21st century. According to a report in 2016 by IBM Marketing Cloud, we generate 2.5 quintillion bytes of information every day, enough to fill a bookcase half a kilometre tall and stretching around the Earth at the equator. It has also been estimated that worldwide people spend seven hours a day minimum screen time.

This has led to what technologist Adam Greenfield describes as a "milieu of continuously shattered attention".[2] We don't have the attention span and time to think, understand, check, and digest all the instantaneous and unprecedented amounts of information we can now access in a split second. But we do have the attention span to check in with how we feel – just a moment will do or the eight seconds that the average human apparently today possesses – and then we can talk about and express our own feelings with unquestionable individual authority, which no one can deny as being real. The theorist Paul Virilio's thesis of speed defining our society, politics and humanity has never seemed more relevant. Speed is creating new values and truths.[3]

With the birth of the World Wide Web in 1990, we were offered for the first time the ability to connect to volumes and rates of information across time and space in just a few seconds, just under the speed of light. But with the rise of constantly unfolding universes of information and facts comes a dismissal of information: too much information has led to its devaluation because it is everywhere. This is what the critic Frederic Jameson calls "pastiche" – when meaning has been blasted out of language due to infinite repetition, and truth and reality have been fragmented into images rather than words.[4] Words, the bearers of information, no longer have the same weight in a fragmented image-driven and image-ridden world. Furthermore, with easy access to facts, everyone now feels they can claim to be an expert. The democratisation of knowledge has some upsides of course – and downsides, too:

"The problem is that everyone feels equally well-qualified to make such a guess and then post it on their blog where it becomes their personal version of the truth that can be easily shared and propagated. And that's how misinformation begins."[5]

Repetition creates a new supposed truth that proliferates throughout the Internet. This misinformation aggregates veracity by sheer force of being accessible and repeated. The Information Age has become the "Misinformation Age", says the Columbia University astrophysicist and TED Speaker David J. Helfand. The misinformation is amplified further by mainstream newsgathering media, which still has to come to grips with its new role in an endlessly rolling, 24-hour news cycle, day in, day out. Traditional media is no longer the sole source of breaking news stories: citizens can break news at any time. So what then is the role of mainstream media? And how do they fact check? Couple this with the general population's inability to process, critically assess, prioritise and filter the sheer volume of information to which we all have access, let alone detect and assess fake news, and the only things that every individual can count on as being true and dependable are their own feelings. Finland is one of the few countries that is taking the flood of information, and in particu-

lar fake news, seriously. So much so, that schools now teach children how to evaluate information and detect fake news.[6]

Then there is the death of the expert. Those who claim they are working with facts are viewed with suspicion, because there are so many so-called facts floating around. This is not to say that facts have not always been subjective and open to dispute, or replaceable by new knowledge: this is how science itself progresses. But in public perception, facts seem to be changing all the time; they are seen to be swiftly updated or challenged every moment of the day, thanks to technology, and therefore one cannot rely on them. The suspicion of facts has become further amplified during the coronavirus crisis, when the public witnesses daily how science tries to understand the behaviour of a new lethal virus in order to find a global solution. The public views this emergent scientific knowledge-making sceptically, because the situation just confirms the notion that the truth is always changing: how can one rely on science, let alone on scientific experts who are trying to find a cure or a vaccine, when there is no certainty?

Today society treats experts and their so-called objectivity and truth with open suspicion and even hostility. Certain presidents and prime ministers have done nothing to dispel this attitude, in what commentators call post-truth politics – a political culture in which debate is framed largely by appeals to emotion and personal beliefs disconnected from the details of policy, and by the repeated assertion of talking points for which factual rebuttals are ignored. Countries that have been identified with post-truth politics include Australia, Brazil, India, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. What we are witnessing with the coronavirus is nothing less than post-truth politics grappling with the fact that it must rely on scientific experts to prevent mass deaths. But how does post-truth politics do this when it is built on an ideology of fundamental truth being based on opinions and emotions? How this pandemic will end, no one knows. But in many ways, "I feel therefore I am" in the 21st century has replaced Descartes' "I think therefore I am". Our feelings give each of us legitimacy, authority and agency – we talk about "gut feelings", the "feel good factor" and doing things because they "feel right". As always, language reflects the changes that are happening on a deep societal level and the common usage of these sayings displays this directly.[7]

↑ Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley, *Rand/Goop*, 2019

The so-called "feel good" factor is endemic in the global wellness economy, which in 2018 was valued at $4.5 trillion, and includes the emerging re-wilding movement in which people pay to get in touch with themselves and their feelings with holiday packages that take them into the wilderness of outdoor nature – and of their inner natures, too. The American artists Mary Reid Kelley and Patrick Kelley created a large-scale multimedia installation, *Rand/Goop* (2019), exploring the feel-good be-healthy approach of actress and health activist Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop. Their suggestion is that her approach is not a million light years away from the libertarianism of the right-wing writer and philosopher Ayn Rand. By putting the words of each into the other's mouth, the installation invited the speculation that the two women and their philosophies are almost indistinguishable. The works suggest that both believe in the triumph of the individual – a foundation of libertarianism – rather than the collective good. The work deftly shows the link between "feeling good" and the individual, free markets and capitalism, where feeling good is a commodity to be bought and sold for profit under the guise of individual growth, rather than as a right that is freely given.

Another reason for the rise of feelings as the new facts may be society's increasing connection with

technology, while also becoming ever more fearful of it. There's nothing new in this fear. Since the industrial revolution, society has been terrified about machines taking away manual jobs. However, what is different today is that machines, or rather technology, is now competing with humans, not on the basis of our manual skills but rather our cognitive skills – and winning. They can process information, update it, connect and network it more quickly than we can. So promoting our emotions as truth becomes even more important to the human psyche in order to display our unique human-ness, in the face of fear that machines may, at some point in the future, take away our jobs, or even rule over us. Our own emotions distinguish us from machines – for the time being. But for how long will machines be unable to feel, or to recognise our emotions? Is the emotional machine far from being a real possibility?

In 2023, the affective computing market is expected to be worth up to $26 billion. Investment in affective computing – technology that can recognise feelings in human beings – is the latest trend hitting Silicon Valley. There is hype surrounding it, with claims, for example, that it can make brokers in the stock markets less emotionally driven, so that the markets won't be so vulnerable to the unpredictability of human feelings; or that it can ensure the hiring of the right people for the right jobs due to facial recognition software that can detect emotional vulnerabilities. These claims are overblown. The software relies on categorisation of the emotions that our faces show. Yet our emotions are highly individual and nuanced in their physical display, as the anthropologist David Le Breton outlines in his essay on the face and its role in our emotional lives.[8] He points out that our emotions are far more complex and varied than the famous six universal ones that the American psychologist Dr Paul Ekman propounded. The software used to detect emotions has proven to be flawed, partly due to its dependency on a system of categorisation with limited accuracy, due to the biases of the information entered. For example, trials prove that the software has problems detecting happiness on the faces of people other than Caucasian. And what about the role the whole body plays in emotions? Someone's face can indicate one feeling while their body reveals an altogether different emotion. Reading emotions physically, even just on the face, is not as easy as reading texts and numbers – whether for a machine or human.

But can machines now actually feel, too? A great deal of research is being done into emotional technology and emotional robots. The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, in a recent essay in "Nature", hinted for the first time that he now considers feelings to be within the scope of machines in the future. He continues this speculation in this book. For him, feelings are intimately connected to physicality and a sense of mortality or an ending. Maybe machines do not have the same chemistry and physiology as we do, but they have their own machine bodies/physicality. Damasio and others argue that when machines come to understand their own vulnerability to being switched off by us humans, a machine-like feeling of empathy may drive machines to emotionally connect with themselves and us. Emotions are needed for survival.

Then turn the question around and ask how well we are able to read emotions in each other and ourselves. Research shows we are losing touch with the feelings of others and particularly with the emotion of empathy, a key in human development. Children in the USA are required to have lessons in empathy in order to be able to relate to other children – rather than to their iPads. It seems so much easier to connect with technology, which does not have the messiness of human emotions and emotional outbursts. So we are taking the line of least resistance. Social connections are cracking wide open, whilst at the same time technology is promising easy ways to manage our feelings.

Earlier this year it was announced that a device called Hapbee will enter the US market, potentially late in 2020, at a price of $359. "Choose How You Feel", it says. The website claims that it is "the first wearable that lets you choose your feelings by stimulating the cognitive response of the feelings you desire without ingesting any harmful substances or chemicals". It looks

like a watch or Fitbit in which you dial in your preferred emotion in one of six general categories: Happy, Alert, Pick Me Up, Relaxed, Calm and Sleepy. This is yet another example of how we are becoming so obsessed with our own feelings that we are even trying to trigger and control them by creating external accessories to instigate them. However, technology is also being used and developed, with some success, in helping people with developmental issues, such as autism, to read emotions and relate to others.

But there is a greater power in emotions than just being the new unassailable truth in a world of constant change and connectivity. Emotions are now being weaponized, too. According to the filmmaker Adam Curtis in his 2016 documentary "Hypernormalisation", psyops and the manipulation of emotions are alive and kicking today in politics and society. There is nothing new in this. Psychological operations or psyops – the method used by the US military since the Second World War to effect mass sentiment change, winning "hearts and minds" – weaponizes emotions to achieve a desired affect. The advertising market has long recognised the superpower of emotions to mobilise the masses and influence behaviour. However, when you now have masses of self-obsessed individuals who value how they themselves feel and place great importance on feelings to drive most of the choices and decisions in their life, what better way for advertisers, let alone politicians and leaders, to mobilise whole countries via emotions. Hence the rise of post-truth politics mentioned earlier in this essay. Emotions are now being weaponized more than ever to trigger popular behaviour patterns in a world where feelings are what matter most, and what give politicians power.

One of the clearest examples of this psyops behavioural strategy is the Vote Leave campaign in the UK referendum to leave the European Union in 2016. The data firm Cambridge Analytica was hired by the Vote Leave campaign to find and then trigger the emotions of disaffected voters who no longer vote and are traditionally ignored in campaigns. It was reasoned that by harnessing their disaffection, based on fear and anger

at their economic and social circumstances, one could switch them from "persuadables" to passionate advocates of Brexit. This was done by millions of specially targeted adverts – some say a billion – on Facebook, aimed at luring them in with the promise of prizes and money, and then sharing information that targeted their individual emotions, such as racist hate and fears over immigration.

The data used to inform the targeting was part of Cambridge Analytica harvesting, apparently without Facebook's knowledge, the behavioural data of up to 87 million Facebook users. This had also given them insight into voter habits ahead of Donald Trump's presidential campaign in 2016. Using a viral personality app called myPersonality, Cambridge Analytica and their associate companies were able to cross-reference personality types against what people had liked on Facebook, in order to profile people, their experiences and their emotions with a high degree of accuracy. They proved that human beings can be hacked by appeals to their pre-existing fears, hatreds, biases and cravings. It is easier now than ever before in our hyperconnected world to push the relevant emotional buttons to create the desired reaction. Emotions can now be weaponized on a scale and at a level never before possible.

And that is not all. Emotions are also increasingly (according to some) up for sale and entangled in moneymaking, too. Harvard professor Shoshana Zuboff[9] has shown how emotions and our behaviours are now commodities that are sold in what she calls a "behavioural futures market", where such data is shared and sold to enable companies to predict and determine behaviour in order to increase their profits. She says that behaviour and our emotions were identified by Facebook and Google when the dot.com bubble burst in 2001 as the last place that could be leveraged for capital because it was free from regulation:

"Larry Page grasped that human experience could be Google's virgin wood, that it could be extracted at no extra cost online and at very low cost out in the real world. For today's owners of surveillance capital, the experiential realities of bodies, thoughts and feel-

ings are as virgin and blameless as nature's once plentiful meadows, rivers oceans and forests before they fell to the market dynamic. We have no formal control over these processes because we are now essential to the new market action."[10]

Zuboff recently described in an article for the "New York Times" how in 2017 a leaked Facebook document acquired by "The Australian" exposed the corporation's interest in applying "psychological insights" from "internal Facebook data" to modify user behaviour. The targets were 6.4 million young Australians and New Zealanders. She quotes a document written by executives in which they claimed that "By monitoring posts, pictures, interactions and internet activity in real time, Facebook can work out when young people feel 'stressed,' 'defeated,' 'overwhelmed,' 'anxious,' 'nervous,' 'stupid,' 'silly,' 'useless' and a 'failure.'" As she continues to say, the depth of information gives Facebook the power "to pinpoint the time frame during which a young person needs a 'confidence boost' and is most vulnerable to a specific configuration of subliminal cues and triggers. The data are then used to match each emotional phase with appropriate ad messaging for the maximum probability of guaranteed sales".[11]

We are no longer just consumers: we are also consumed. Our own experiences and emotions, which make us who we are, are used for profit. In essence, we no longer own our emotions or even ourselves. Emotions are commodities that are up for sale, manipulation and detection – often without our awareness, as we sign up for a new app and give our emotions and experiences unwittingly away – for free.

Technology was created, according to Martin Heidegger in his famous essay, to immunize man against change, to liberate man from his dependency on *physis,* on fate, on accident, by controlling the supply and exchange of commodities.[12] However, technology is also now the means for accelerating change and volatility by using our own internal experiences and feelings. We are caught in this double bind where technology is part of the problem – it is leading to de-education of the accident of our emotions – and is part of the solution – it helps us to control our emotions, connect and even cue them at will. So, where does that leave us?

Science fiction writer J.G. Ballard once argued that the biggest developments of the immediate future will not take place on the moon or Mars but on Earth. He said that it is not an outer space suit that we need but an "inner space suit" for the revolutions happening inside us all. He was talking about the need to concentrate on the rise of biological sciences and what that would do to the human body and ourselves. Ballard's words can be applied to the space and time in which we find ourselves now, and our quest to find where the truth(s) really lie(s) – in a world where emotions are still fundamental to our identities and our existence as human beings.[13]

Further reading

- Richard Yonck, "The Heart of the Machine: Our Future in a World of Artificial Emotional Intelligence" (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2017)
- William Davies, "Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World" (New York: Vintage, 2018)

References

1 One key exception was the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume, who pointed out that emotions are key to the formation of human identity and should not be locked off from consciousness.

2 Adam Greenfield, "Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life" (New York: Verso Books, 2017)

3 Paul Virilio, "Speed and Politics", introduction by Benjamin H. Bratton; translated by Mark Polizzotti (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006)

4 "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", an essay by Fredric Jameson in "Postmodern Culture", editor Hal Foster (1983). His thoughts drew and built on Walter Benjamin's key essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935)

5 David J. Helfand, "Surviving the Misinformation Age", in "Skeptical Inquirer". (2017) 41 (3): pp. 34–39. Archived from the original on October 6, 2018. Retrieved October 6, 2018.

6 https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/05/how-finland-is-fighting-fake-news-in-the-classroom/

7 When talking about our emotional states we often refer to them in technological terms, which reveals how emotions and technology are coming closer together in our minds. We speak of our need to "reboot" or "reprogramme" ourselves when we are emotionally upset or we talk about how we "connect" with someone or an idea. Are we ceding our emotions to technology? The language we use indicates this.

8 David Le Breton, "Des Émotions sous verre", essay in Clément Lambelet's book, "Happiness is the Only True Emotion" (Paris: RVB Books 2019)

9 Shoshana Zuboff, "Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the Frontier of Power" (London: Profile Books, 2018)

10 "The goal is to automate us: Welcome to the age of surveillance capitalism. Interview with Shoshana Zuboff" by John Naughton, "The Guardian", January 20, 2019

11 https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/24/opinion/sunday/surveillance-capitalism.html

12 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology" (New York: Garland Science, 1954)

13 Interview with J.G. Ballard quoted in Sandro Moiso and Simon Reynolds (eds.), "All That Mattered was Sensation" (Italy: Krisis Publishing, 2019)