

Black Mirror

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Wherever you go, as a consumer you're constantly asked about your opinion about the service. You can choose from thumbs up (smiley) or down. This becomes annoying if the service isn't satisfactory. For my daughter, I have taken out a subscription for a mobile phone. Recently, we had the SIM card blocked in the phone store when she "lost" her phone at school. The next day she found out the phone had been taken to the concierge. Getting the phone fully operational again had not happened even after three visits to the phone store and four phone calls with the help desk. Each call lasted more than 10 minutes because of the "choice" keys and the waiting time. As if there was something to choose!

Online the telephone functioned well, but the call function did not work anymore. Every time the service employee made excuses for his predecessor: all functions would be operational again after 10 minutes. And every time we were asked to evaluate the service. Again, on the sixth occasion, I received an SMS with a link to evaluate of the service. This time, thumbs down on everything. I still could not lose a substantive argument. I emailed a complaint to the only address I found after a long search. You guessed it, I never heard anything about it again.

Until recently, I rejected this sham as a stupid but legitimate way for companies to stimulate and demonstrate their customer satisfaction. In the Netherlands, it became more serious when (higher) educational institutions were forced to take part in the Elsevier student surveys. Often the dispute between universities and faculties is about a thousandth point to find out who is "the best". Many relevant aspects are ignored, such as the number of students per school, the incorrect extrapolation of points from a scale of 5 or 7 points and many other more technical (mathematical) aspects. For example, it is much easier for a university with only a few hundred students to convince students that it is unwise to "spit on their own diploma" than for an institute with thousands of students: If you want to change something, tell it

everywhere, but not in the Elsevier survey. Even without a PhD in data science, the serious methodological and mathematical shortcomings of this are clear. And if a faculty scores low or high, and doubts the resulting conclusions, this is seen as unsportsmanlike (low score), or stupid (high score). As a result, this form of insanity is given a permanent place in the curricula of higher education. Each year, Dutch university boards and their marketing departments spend lots of money on this circus, while Elsevier's cash registers are ringing. Annoying evaluation madness, but if it stays there ...

"Each year, Dutch university boards and their marketing departments spend lots of money on this circus, while Elsevier's cash registers are ringing. Annoying evaluation madness."

It does not stay there. In a brilliant episode "Nosedive" of the series *Black Mirror*, it becomes clear what the dangers of this evaluation madness can be at individual

level. People in the episode give each other likes in everything they do. A social-based credit systems defines your social position through smart algorithms on a 5 point scale. If you are a 5, you are the top, a 1 or 2 is a social outcast. A topper allows a lower (for example a 3.8) and thus earns points. But if the distance between you and the "lower" person is too large, you're harming yourself. People with a higher "likes" status have many advantages (access to certain facilities, discounts, etc.). Although this is fiction, this is already partly done on social media.

Recently I read in the newspaper that in China a social rating-based credit system such as that in the *Black Mirror* episode was already implemented. We "mold" society into what the companies (and algorithms) hold us as the most desirable outcome. In the classroom, explaining a difficult equation, my students give feedback through an app: likes or dislikes, shaping me like a pigeon Inna Skinner box. I hope they'll allow me to sing a song!