Ben Grosser Interview with Valentina Tanni for *Arttribune* (Italy)
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Questions by Valentina Tanni
Answers by Ben Grosser

1. You recently gained a spotlight in mainstream media because some of your art projects (like Twitter and Instagram Demetricator) anticipated by many years a change in social media platforms that big companies like Facebook and Twitter are discussing and adopting right now. I'm referring to the removal of like and retweet numbers, in a general trend to give less importance to metrics. Can you tell us how and when you first came up with this idea and how did you develop it?

My Demetricator project began back in 2011, when I realized I was obsessing over my own social media metrics on Facebook. After posting a status, I most wanted to know how *many* "likes" it had received, or how *much* it had been commented on—more so than *who* liked it or *what* those comments said. Once I became aware of this, I wondered: *why*? Why do I care so much about the numbers? What are they doing here in the first place? Who most benefits from this obsession, and who is made most vulnerable? As an artist focused on the cultural effects of software I wanted to make something to help me answer this question, so I started writing code to hide the numbers. In 2012 I released this code as a web browser extension called Facebook Demetricator so that I and anyone else could try out social media without the numbers, to see for ourselves how our everyday experience of social media might be different without the metrics. In 2017 I released a Demetricator for Twitter, and later, one for Instagram.

But beyond this overall obsession with the metrics, I also realized that I always wanted my own numbers to go up. *More* likes felt better than less. I wanted *more* friends, *more* shares, *more* comments. This led me to ask whether the presence of these metrics might be influencing our feelings, and ultimately, our actions. For example, did seeing how many likes my last post received change what I wrote for my next post? Did knowing how many others had already liked a friend's post affect whether or not I also liked it?

So, I dug into existing research at the time, and used what I read—in combination with feedback from users of Demetricator—to theorize what I call the "desire for more." This theory starts with our evolutionarily developed need for *esteem*. To survive, we need to feel valued, whether it's respect from others or confidence in ourselves. While this need has served us well as a species, it 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 this deeply ingrained desire for more. Now that our every social interaction is measured and reported back to us in real-time,

we can't help but want our numbers to be higher. Needless to say, as we've seen over the last few years, this vulnerability has proven useful for social media corporations, adversarial foreign governments, and many others.

2. Did the big platforms reacted in some way to the launch of your softwares? I'm thinking for example about Go Rando, your browser extension that randomizes Facebooks reactions... did you get any letter or comment by Facebook?

In the early days of Facebook Demetricator (October 2012) I recall watching—via my website visitor logs—developers at Facebook discover and install the project. So they've been aware of it from the beginning. But beyond that, I heard or saw nothing from them for years until the summer of 2016 when Facebook came after me with a legal effort to get Facebook Demetricator kicked off the Google Chrome Web Store. They were successful for a while (many months) while I pursued help. I was fortunate to gain pro bono legal representation from the Electronic Frontier Foundation, who agreed with me that such an attempt by big tech to stifle artistic critique was of concern for the wider user community. Essentially we argued that the browser is the domain of the *user*, not the platform, and thus manipulation of their site within the browser was protected. In the end, Google agreed and reinstated Demetricator in July of 2016. Facebook itself never wrote back. In hindsight, Facebook's legal action was quite ironic given that they're now co-opting my demetrication efforts into platform experiments themselves.

Jack Dorsey, the CEO of Twitter, has indirectly acknowledged my demetrication efforts (in a Tweet response to an article about my work). He has talked more of late about the perils of visible metrics and Twitter has experimented a bit in a beta app with hiding like counts in threaded replies. However, none of these experiments have made it into their main platform.

As for Go Rando and my many other Facebook manipulations, I have never heard anything further from Facebook. Though all of those works came after the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit vote (e.g. its all post Cambridge Analytica), so perhaps they're now just too busy with legal challenges focused on them to file complaints against independent artists.

Also, to be clear, my intention is always to create work that persists, that changes a user's experience of a site in new ways, but that does so in a way that avoids the legal "cease and desist" letters that some artists seem excited to receive. From my perspective, getting a cease and desist is easy, while making work that challenges big tech without provoking a legal reaction is much harder. I focus on the latter.

3. Net art has a long tradition of working on the concept of the interface, exposing its structure and biases. Do you feel that your work follows in some way this tradition?

I do. Many artists and art collectives since the 1990s have examined the politics of the interface and its underlying structures, including (but not limited to!) I/O/D, Alex Galloway, Electronic Disturbance Theatre, JODI, Eva and Franco Mattes, Mendi and Keith Obadike, Joana Moll, and Julian Oliver. My work is informed and inspired by their efforts.

4. Artists in the past have always played a very important role in subverting new technologies, questioning their structure, their use and their effect on people. Do you think that this role is still valid and active to day? Can art still be a critical force that help society question market choices?

The 1990s vision of the web as a decentralized democratizing communications infrastructure has been almost entirely supplanted by platforms from a few massive corporations designed to keep their users within centralized walled gardens. As a result, it's more important than ever for artists to challenge—both directly and through external critique—these systems, probing how they work, what they make possible, who they most benefit, and who they make most vulnerable. And while it can seem daunting—as an individual artist—to take on the world's largest corporations, it's more possible than it might seem. I can cite my own path as evidence here: back in 2012, many thought the idea of hiding visible metrics on social media platforms entirely constructed around those metrics was, well, pretty crazy. Those tuned into the work as interface critique understood what I was going for. And some users also tried out the work and found themselves unexpectedly appreciative of the changes it made possible. But nobody at that time—including myself—imagined that after seven years of effort on the project Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter would all start trying it out themselves. In other words, art—as a discipline that aims to find problems rather than solutions, as a practice that works to uncover the existence of systems previously unseen—is perhaps uniquely positioned to critically examine and imagine alternatives to the technology platforms that are now ubiquitous throughout contemporary life. Why? Artists, unlike big tech corporations, aren't beholden to shareholders, aren't focused on profit, and don't tend to treat users as sites of exploitation. This gives them a radically different position from which to consider any system of interest.

5. Which are the artists and intellectuals you're more inspired by at the moment?

In terms of theorists and scholars, I'm reading and/or regularly focus on the writings of Mark Fisher, Wendy Chun, Geert Lovink, Matthew Fuller, Anne Helmond, Lucy Suchman, Søren Pold, Christan Ulrik Andersen, and Taina Bucher. In terms of artists, I'm always watching what's recently been made by Joana Moll, Julian Oliver, Lauren McCarthy, Ricardo Dominguez, Laura Poitras, Nicolas Maigret, Winnie Soon, Dries Depoorter, and Julien Prévieux.

6. What are you're working on lately? Can you give us a little preview on your future projects?

I recenty finished a huge film project that uses Mark Zuckerberg's video recorded appearances from 2004-2018 to chronicle big tech's capitalist mania over the last fifteen years. So, I've been in recovery a bit, watching and reading and thinking towards new yet unformed future efforts. But I also have a number of projects nearing completion, including my Autonomous Video Artist (a self-navigating video capture machine that builds and shares its own video art), and a new browser extension that reveals to a website's visitors whatever that site's developer meant to hide. I've also been spending a lot of time looking at music industry software, from digital audio workstations like Ableton to distribution platforms like Spotify, thinking about how their designs influence the music we like, the music we want, and the music we (don't) know about. And finally, I'm always dreaming of and prototyping new social media manipulations, so new works out of those experiments are always a possibility.