Otherwise Engaged: From Vanity Metrics to Critical Analytics

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In the age of social media the dominant mode of engagement is distraction. Whilst appearing oxymoronic, distracted modes of engagement have invited the coining of such terms as 'flickering man', 'continuous partial attention' and 'ambient awareness.' One's engagement in social media (however distracted) is also routinely measured. Klout scores and similar are often called 'vanity metrics' because they measure success or 'success theater' in social media. The notion of vanity metrics implies at least three projects: a critique of metrics concerning both the object of measurement as well as their capacity to measure unobtrusively or only to encourage performance. The second is a corrective interface project, for users are continually distracted by number badges calling to be clicked; there is a movement afoot (initiated by John Seely Brown) for so-called 'encalming technology'. The article, however, focuses on the third project, i.e., how one may rework the metrics. In all, I make four moves. In an application of digital methods, which seeks to repurpose online devices and their methods for social research, I propose to repurpose Klout scores and other (media monitoring) engagement measures for social research. Building upon 'alt metrics' for science, an alternative metrics project, I propose another one, albeit for social issue spaces rather than for science. In order to do so, I call for a change in the networks under study by social researchers, that is, a shift from the social network (with its vanity metrics) to the issue network. The change of networks (so to speak) enables concentrating on the opportunities for an alternative metrics for the social (together with social issue engagement), which I call critical analytics. Critical analytics would seek to measure the 'otherwise engaged,' or other modes of engagement (than vanity) such as dominant voice, concern, commitment, positioning and alignment, thereby furnishing digital methods with a conceptual and applied research agenda concerning online metrics.