

China's 'Social Credit System' Is a Totalitarian's Dream Come True. Are We Far Behind?

In its third season, the British science fiction TV series *Black Mirror* featured an episode called "Nosedive."

The episode, which was co-written by *The Office* actress Rashida Jones and starred Bryce Howard, depicted a society of smiling people who walked around with holographic bubbles that contained their "rating." These ratings were based on how people were scored by others. A positive interaction with someone was likely to earn a good score. Upload a picture people don't like, and one could find his rating downgraded.

As far as television goes, "Nosedive" was an insightful bit of art, cleverly panning the fishbowl nature of social media and the timeless human obsession with status. It struck a chord with both viewers and critics, earning an 8.3 rating on IMDB as well as Emmy, BAFTA, and SAG award nominations.

The same month the dystopian episode premiered, China updated a policy—[“Warning and Punishment Mechanisms for Persons Subject to Enforcement for Trust-Breaking”](#)— that bears a striking resemblance.

China’s [“Social Credit System”](#) literally rates its citizens. Those who score well get privileges; those who score poorly do not. A citizen with a high score is likely to enjoy various privileges—high-speed internet, the ability to travel freely, access to the best restaurants, golf courses and nightclubs—that fellow citizens do not.

China’s rating scheme is the latest and most expansive effort by central planners to use government to encourage good behavior—or, rather, behavior deemed positive by the Communist Party. The system, which relies on vast amounts of digital data, has received scant attention in the United States.

But media organizations across the Atlantic are paying a bit more attention. *The Independent* summed up China’s policy [this way](#):

“Imagine a world where an authoritarian government monitors everything you do, amasses huge amounts of data on almost every interaction you make, and awards you a single score

that measures how 'trustworthy' you are.

In this world, anything from defaulting on a loan to criticising the ruling party, from running a red light to failing to care for your parents properly, could cause you to lose points. And in this world, your score becomes the ultimate truth of who you are – determining whether you can borrow money, get your children into the best schools or travel abroad; whether you get a room in a fancy hotel, a seat in a top restaurant – or even just get a date.”

As Wired UK [explains](#), China's Social Credit System “is basically a big data gamified version of the Communist Party's surveillance methods.”

While most people outside of China's Communist Party appear wary of this mass surveillance tool, some scholars see great potential in China's social engineering experiment. Here, for example, is what one scholar from Germany [wrote](#):

“While some might view China's Social Credit System as something out of dystopian fiction, if properly implemented

the system can have positive impacts – especially when used to keep government officials and business owners accountable.”

Currently, Chinese citizens can choose to not play in the government’s game—though they then forego the privileges that accompany a good rating. That is expected [to change in 2020](#), the year the system is scheduled to become mandatory.

The ACLU [declared](#) China’s system “nightmarish,” and it’s not difficult to see why.

Ask yourself: What could the Stasi have done in the digital age? Watch *The Lives of Others* (trailer below) and see where your imagination takes you.

It’s natural to reflexively assume that China’s “nightmare” could never happen in the U.S. But the truth is, the pressure to conform to a certain set of ideas and verbiage is already intense in modern America. Political correctness is a potent and stifling force, one that is amplified by the eternal

nature of digital media.

Just ask writer Quinn Norton, a self-described “bisexual anarchist pacifist, prison abolitionist, & vegetarian” who in February was hired by the *New York Times* to be a member of its editorial board. Norton’s tenure with the *Times* lasted [six hours](#). It turns out one of her friends is a neo-Nazi, a man she has [written about](#) and tried unsuccessfully to convert. She also used [inappropriate language](#) in tweets. That was what it took for the *Times* to sack her. Many a young person with a vulgar tongue, free mind, or independent streak may already have closed the door on potential opportunities at America’s most prestigious institutions.

Additionally, there is little evidence to suggest that the titans of Silicon Valley are wise or prudent custodians of the immense power they hold.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has already shown a willingness to sell [his users’ data](#) to the highest bidder, despite his assurances to the contrary (see below). Less attention has been paid to Facebook’s [plan](#) to steer users to preferred sites to weed out “fake news.”

YouTube, which is owned by Google, seems [intent on censoring](#) ideas and speech it doesn't approve of. Twitter's censorship is arguably worse and more selective. On one hand, hardcore porn [is permitted](#); on the other, the wrong words can get one bounced quickly—apparently [depending on](#) who you are or what you look like.

Female conservative writer repeats what Leslie Jones said to see if Twitter has a bias & gets suspended! [#FreeKassy pic.twitter.com/VsCJhpZzkg](#)

– Mikael Thalen (@MikaelThalen) [July 25, 2016](#)

In a recent interview, PayPal founder Peter Thiel [spoke of](#) a “totalitarian” streak that exists in many of the tech titans.

Evidence suggests he might be right. If so, are we closer to China's “[Social Credit System](#)” than we realize?

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