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When describing the new Chinese social credit system, anyone would be quick to point out the massive influence the system could exert, or the destructive capability the system would have on a free society. People would be quick to classify it as a “weapon of mass destruction.” However, even though the Chinese social credit system would eventually qualify as a WMD under O’Neal’s definition, there are a significant amount of aspects the Chinese SCS gets right in terms the issue of fairness against efficiency that O’Neal mentions in her book, though the SCS tends to use sheer volume rather than efficiency to achieve this.

One of these elements that the system does well is addressing the issue that O’Neal points out in her examination of the use of crime data. Regarding the use of geography in order to predict nuisance crimes, she states, “This creates a pernicious feedback loop. The policing itself spawns new data, which justifies more policing. And our prisons fill up with hundreds of thousands of people found guilty of victimless crimes. Most of them come from impoverished neighborhoods” [1]. O’Neal points out two areas of contention, one being that the use of geography will create data that suggests more policing in these impoverished areas, and the other being that this feedback loop targets impoverished people who commit very minor crimes. However, the Chinese SCS circumvents both concerns. Computerized surveillance allows them to police every neighborhood, having data streaming in from all points of the map, disregarding the pitfall of human entered data, which allows the data points to get concentrated in one area as

described by O'Neal's feedback loop. Therefore, concentrated data in an area would be truly representative of the higher crime rate. Second, the monitoring of minor crimes is more important to the goals of the SCS than the overarching goals of the police force. The goals of the police force would prioritize the stopping of violent crimes, such that the police can minimize the number of victims in crimes committed. In contrast, the SCS aims to monitor and correct behavior of people in society, to promote a "friendlier" or "better" society. Therefore, monitoring and punishing minor, victimless crimes is a greater priority on the SCS agenda, as it would eliminate this "antisocial" behavior that directly impacts the "quality" of society. As the goals are more aligned, the SCS has more of a reason to punish nuisance crimes, thus addressing O'Neal's second concern.

Even in terms of monitoring the behavior of individuals, organizations, and government, the Chinese SCS is relatively transparent, compared to some of the WMDs mentioned in O'Neal's book. For example, the Kronos personality tests on job applications can form the basis for the denial of a job position, but "people who apply for a job and are red-lighted [by the personality test] rarely learn that they were rejected because of their test results" [1]. O'Neal, again, has two problems with this phenomenon. The first is that the system is completely opaque, refusing to communicate with the victim the reason that they had been rejected. Second is the use of the proxy of a personality test, something that has been contentious in its ability to truly represent someone's personality. Furthermore, it was used as a proxy to judge how well an employee can fit into a workforce, under the assumption that similar people would be able to mesh together well. Kronos states, "We can help you screen, hire, and onboard candidates most likely to be productive—the best-fit employees who will perform better and stay on the job longer" [1]. Again, the Chinese SCS avoids both these problems. Addressing O'Neal's second

concern first, the SCS does not use proxies to judge someone's social credit, as areas as broad as "governmental affairs, judicial affairs, social activities, and commercial behaviors" [2] represent the broad scope of trying to judge someone's value in society. Furthermore, many of the criteria that the SCS uses to evaluate point changes are direct results of actions people take, and whether they are beneficial or detrimental to society. In this sense, these point changes are not based on proxy: the individual has actually directly impacted society with their actions. This then transitions to O'Neal's first concern. While the reason for docking points may or not be conveyed to the Chinese citizen, there are clear and transparent actions that the citizen can do to improve their score. Furthermore, the score itself is transparent to citizens, and any punishment assessed to citizens, such as less optimal seating on a train, is directly attributed to be a result of an individual's lower credit score. Even if not explicitly stated, there is no other explanation for these punishments. Thus, the SCS remains significantly more transparent and proxy-free than other WMDs.

However, despite having some elements of a fair model, the Chinese SCS would still classify as a WMD, due to two main concerns: the first being that, in the sheer volume of criteria being measured, there are some alarming proxies in the system, and the second being that the values of the members of society are not necessarily aligned with the one creating the criteria for good behavior in the social credit system, causing massive influence against the will of society. The first concern is especially apparent when the SCS aims to use social media in its evaluation of social behavior. One of the most contentious points is the evaluation of connections of social media, and the idea that having a friend who is a "worse citizen" will directly impact an individual's social score. Having a friend who is a "worse citizen" is a proxy for how good a citizen an individual is: connections on social media are not always based on shared ideals, as

reasons for connections range from geography—same hometown, college, etc.—to shared hobbies and interests, reasons that neither represents the true character of a citizen, nor has directly caused any direct negative impact on society. However, these proxies can be removed or replaced, and as mentioned before, many of the criteria used to evaluate social credit score are not proxies. The second, more overarching, concern is that the person who decides the criteria for being a “good citizen” is largely opaque, and not decided by the citizens, who are directly affected by the SCS. Such is the nature of an authoritarian government, and therefore, this problem is likely to never be addressed by the Chinese government. As a result, the already oppressed dissidents of the Chinese government are further pushed into a corner, as their social media presence and actions are even more closely monitored than before, and now that the SCS can be used to administer punishment on individuals, these people are not subject to punishment for their societal ideals. Thus, an inevitable consequence of the SCS is further oppressing this minority, something that would classify as a form of harm in O’Neal’s definitions, and would earn the Chinese SCS the title of WMD.

References

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