

Social Credit Ratings Won't Work

Netflix's *Black Mirror* and Fox's *The Orville* have both dedicated episodes of their show to this idea of a social credit rating. In *Black Mirror*'s episode, "Nosedive" (Series 3, Episode 1), "society uses a technology where, through eye implants and mobile devices, everyone shares their daily activities and rates their interactions with others on a one-to-five star scale, which affects that person's overall rating. One's current average can be seen by others and has significant influence on their socioeconomic status."

In *The Orville*'s episode, "Majority Rule" (Season 1, Episode 7), "when two Union anthropologists go missing on a planet similar to 21st century Earth, Ed sends a team led by Kelly to find them, but the mission quickly goes awry when they realize the society's government is completely based on a public voting system to determine punishment."

The protagonists in both episodes eventually find themselves receiving poor ratings and falling in popularity, one becoming a social pariah, and the other sentenced to mental execution. Both are excellent portrayals of the dystopian nature of social credit rating systems. Personally, I wouldn't want to live in either society. Fortunately, I believe such rating systems will never take root in the real world in any meaningful way.

Financial credit rating systems have existed for quite some time, and serve the very important function of tracking a person or business's loan repayment history in order for future lenders to gauge risk. At their core, these credit rating systems are based on objective, verifiable facts. Sure, mistakes are made, and can be corrected, but for the most part, everything on your financial credit report shows exactly what happened in the real world.

Social credit rating systems like those portrayed in *Black Mirror* and *The Orville* are not built on objective, verifiable facts. Quite the contrary; they are built on subjective, unverifiable opinions. Take two popular individuals, Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Depending on your subjectively-derived opinion, one of these men should have a 5-star rating, and the other a 1-star. If everyone in the world voted, both of these men would probably sit around 2.5-stars, which tells you exactly nothing about either men.

Take any random controversial figure at any point in time, say Galileo Galilei. Today he'd probably have a 5-star overall rating. But in the 17th century, he wouldn't even break 2-stars until the end of his life. What does either rating tell us about Galileo? Methinks the only individuals who would garner 5-star ratings would be those who are completely non-controversial and unknown. Your quiet, polite, domestic Aunt Sally would earn and maintain a 5-star rating. How meaningful is this?

5-star rating systems and the like work for brands, products, and places. Records of criminal behavior and financial credit are also quite useful. But social credit ratings are not only dangerously dystopian, but impractical and ultimately meaningless. China's new social credit score experiment notwithstanding, I doubt we'll ever see anything like what these shows portrayed.