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BY LILLIAN WEE PHOTO ABDUL GHANI ISMAIL

# SOMEONE'S BUILT ANALYTICS THAT UNDERSTAND MANGGLISH

IMAGINE YOU ARE at a national football match. While the crowd cheers, the noise is so loud that it drowns out everything but you do not seem to care. There you are, sitting and calculating.

Barely halfway through the game, you know which team will take the prize and you would be right.

That is the story of Nate Silver, an American statistician and writer who analyses baseball matches using the sabermetrics method. In the 2008 US presidential election, Silver successfully predicted the outcomes in 49 out of 50 states.

Silver is an inspiration to Shahid Shayaa, managing director and founder of Berkshire Media, a social analytics firm based in Kuala Lumpur.

To Shahid, big data is not about the massive size of the data but how such information can be used to provide specific value to stakeholders.

"Essentially, data needs to tell a story. It's like crude oil. You need to process it at the refinery," he explains during a conversation over coffee.

An example of a business jargon and an invocation of a coming disruption, big data has quickly become tiresome. But there is no denying the vast increase in the range and depth of information that is routinely captured about how we behave, and the new kinds of analysis that this enables.

By one estimate, more than 98% of the world's information is now stored digitally and the volume of that data has quadrupled since 2007.

Algorithms that predict stock-price movements have transformed Wall Street. Algorithms that chomp through our web histories have transformed marketing initiatives.

Shahid is one of those guys who fervently believes that big data can and is changing the relationship between companies, the government and consumers in Malaysia.

## How big data is really about the small things

There is a lot that data can do for companies and consumers. But more than that, it can also draw patterns and behaviours in relation to a country's political and socio-economic landscape.

Utilising social data can help companies develop services that anticipate customers' needs before they change, instead of after the fact. This is done by first understanding why people say what they say.

"We go deep into it. If [someone] says bad things about a brand, we can drill down to the individual users and their behaviour online," says Shahid.

This means hovering your mouse over one out of hundreds and thousands of consumer "bubbles" and knowing specifically what they are saying online as well



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as where and when they are saying it. Such data informs companies' decisions and may increase their chance of having a viral video.

"Most of the agencies out there would say, 'Let's come up with a video to gain likes', but there is no empirical data to support that. So, we start from the other side of the coin. We look at the data, look at what people like, what people read. Such things are not [done] in one month, but two years!" says Shahid.

There is now an array of social analytic tools. A simple Google search would bring up platforms such as Hootsuite, Socialbakers and Google Analytics.

However, there is something huge that is lacking from these platforms – built in English and with English as the medium of communication, they do not track words such as *bagus*, *sedap* and *mahal*.

Thus, Berkshire Media built an in-house platform that can track sentiments expressed in English and Malay, giving it and its local clients a slight competitive edge.

Over the next six months, Shahid plans to roll out the platform's ability to track data in Mandarin and Hokkien, which is a big leap for Malaysia's social analytics landscape.

"If we can track the sentiments of people living in, let's say Kerteh [who speak a variety of dialects and languages], we can see how they are adapting to the changing industries there just by seeing what they are saying and how they are reacting to things. This is very valuable information for governments," Shahid explains.

Another aspect that most companies fail to see is

these data platforms need to be specific to their needs – a kind of dashboard with options to choose from and which presents the data they want in a manner that is easily understood. This helps remove unnecessary data that stakeholders may not need for their goals.

When Berkshire Media provides data dashboards to its clients, it ensures that only the relevant data is furnished.

"Social media isn't about just listening. It's about analysing the right data. We can now analyse more than 100 topics in Malaysia and abroad. The more data we harvest, the more value we can bring to our clients," says Shahid.

The pay-off is clear. According to a study by MIT Sloan Management Review and IBM Institute for Business Value, organisations that excel in analytics often outperform those that are just starting to adopt analytics by a factor of three to one.

And top performers are 5.4 times more likely to use an analytic approach over intuition and gut instinct when making decisions.

It all comes down to people doing business with people. Social data provides organisations with the insights they need to understand individuals like never before. And that's a competitive advantage that cannot be beat – even in a world saturated with technology.

"Innovation is key. Whatever you see right now is based on innovation – by the people with a passion to change something in other people's lives. That's the greater calling, which is to essentially solve problems for businesses and consumers in all areas," says Shahid. ■

