

Searching traces of we – mapping unintended collectives

The world wide web could be described as a complex intermingling of spaces with varying degrees of public-ness, from seemingly private to explicitly public. But it is more succinctly described as two distinct types of public space, with each of these spaces creating a very different kind of stage. On the first we are invited to act and interact; we share photos on Flickr, bookmarks on del.icio.us, and our thoughts and opinions in blogs. We might not reveal our real name, but the construct of the individual is intact and enacted. The second type of stage, which is the one of interest here, is very different. On this stage we are oblivious to the fact that there is an audience, whether we are shopping on amazon.com, navigating our favorite online newspaper, or searching Google. In the single isolated moment, this space might appear as a tool for private entertainment and consumption, but if we expand our perspective just slightly, we see that over time and space, it is a place we share with others, dispersed geographically and from the past to the future. It is a public space where we constantly leave traces of our actions, thoughts and opinions.

In 1996 the late search engine Magellan started the ingenious and aptly named feature *The Search Voyeur*. It provided randomly selected real-time searches made by the Magellan users. These were the early days of the web and maybe we were all too easily entertained, but few were able to look away when a new set of searches – spanning from the clever and entertaining to the bizarre and sad – popped up on the screen. *The Search Voyeur* clearly

demonstrated that it is much more fascinating to know what people are really interested in, than what they say they are interested in.

From watching the behaviors, choices and interactions of others we – humans and non-human animals alike – learn where there is a good place to live, where to search for resources and what our most favorable choices in terms of sexual reproduction are. According to captivating research by a group of American biologists and ecologists, even plants benefit from spying on their neighbors¹. Wild tobacco plants spy on sagebrush plants growing next to them. They eavesdrop on airborne “messages” from the sagebrush revealing if it is under stress from being cut. If so the tobacco plants produce more flowers, allowing them to reproduce before potentially being cut down themselves.

The reliability of this “inadvertent social information”² depends on it not being produced intentionally. It ought to be generated by individuals who are putting all their effort into performing their best, not into communicating with others. Any intentional message can be a lie or a deception, made to mislead the receiver, whether it is for the benefit of the sender – generating less competition for resources and mates – or meant as an innocent joke. Even if a message is not deliberately misleading, an unintentional message might still reveal more about its sender³. In the nineteenth century, an Italian art critic, Giovanni Morelli, found that in order to identify the authorship of a painting, say a portrait, one

¹ Richard Karban, John Maron, Gary W. Felton, Gary Ervin, Herbert Eichenseer, Herbivore damage to sagebrush induces resistance in wild tobacco: evidence for eavesdropping between plants, *Oikos* 100 (2), 325–332, (2003)

² E Danchin, L Giraldeau, T Valone, R Wagner, Public information: from noisy neighbors to cultural evolution. *Science* 305, 487–491, (2004)

³ Lisa Jevbratt, *Inquires in Infomics*, Chapter in Network Art ed. Tom Corby, Routledge, London, (2005)

should focus on the parts made with least intention such as the earlobes or fingers of the subject ⁴. Parts painted with the most care and precision, such as the eyes or the mouth typically reveal less about the artist than the school and tradition the painting was made within.

Ten years after the launch of *The Search Voyeur* the US government catches on to the data wealth of the web, and orders major search engines to hand over their search history data to them. The data is supposed to be used in an effort to uphold an online pornography law by establishing a profile of internet use. The demand coincides with the US government aggressively pursuing internet data for purposes ranging from various online crime investigations to national security⁵, so one could wonder how the search data is actually being used. The realization that this data might be interesting not only as a pastime for random web users but in a range of criminal investigations, can make anyone self-conscious about their own “Google portrait”. Even if that portrait is not of a pornographer or a terrorist, it might not be the side of oneself that one would want to show to anyone. We can all have moments when we wonder what our search-selves look like; it is easy to seem scatter-minded, obsessive, “cyberchondriac” or just plain ignorant when in the midst of a search flurry. But we need to take the risk of revealing our own ugly “Google face” in exchange for the possibility of seeing the faces of others.

⁴ Carlo Ginzburg, “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method” in *History Workshop Journal*, (1980)

⁵ It is interesting to note that the search engines involved are not only used by Americans, they are among the top ten most visited websites in Sweden and most other countries according to alexa.com.

The net art duo named 0100101110101101.ORG launched the project *Life Sharing* in 2000. It provided complete access to their personal computer over the internet for several years. The idea was very interesting and important, but for some reason it never seemed interesting to actually look at the information stored on their computer. It doesn't make their project less important, rather it emphasizes that what one wants is not to see one individual with all their data flaunted, any more than seeing ones neighbor running naked down the street. What *is* interesting is that our neighbors has, over time, unintentionally created a pathway across the lawn between their cottages and the parking lot as a result of them all taking the same shortcut.

The digital inadvertent social information collected behind everybody's back (right in front of our noses) is interesting because it forms a vast *collective* data body. By sharing our online actions with everyone else, through collaborative information filtering at amazon.com, through our searches in Google, and the traces we leave in all the websites we navigate, we entertain hopes of becoming one with, and be cradled by, this body.

The data body is present in the network whether we experience it or not. We can catch glimpses of it by means of one of the new search voyeurs⁶ or the search engines listings of their most popular searches⁷. The voyeurs, or spies, display discrete searches one by one, showing the individual, but unless we spend days spying, the collective is difficult to sense. The listings provide aggregated data of searches allowing us to see more of the collective but they

⁶ Search voyeurs come and go as search engines reprioritize. The search engine metacrawler 's *Metaspy* seems fairly stable. <<http://www.metaspy.com/info.metac.spy/metaspy/>> (2007)

⁷ For example AOL Hot Searches, Google Zeitgeist, Yahoo Buzz

hide the individual. Google's latest cumulative search term listing is *Google Trends*, a quite addictive feature. It is a plain representation of aggregated search data, showing a simple graph of the amount of searches made since 2004 of anything the user types in. A search for "equinox, full moon, solstice" suggest that the collective mind of Google users are quite in tune with the planetary movements as evident by the nice rhythmical spikes in the right positions on the time axis.

We also experience the collective data body every time we read "hello, we have recommendations for you" on Amazon or "movies you'll love " on Netflix. Anyone who patronizes these types of shopping sites knows how effective collaborative information filtering is. It is uncanny how well we are known within the collective. There are also ways in which we can reap the benefits of the collective without actually experiencing it ourselves. Infodemiology⁸ collects and maps people's web searches for disease symptoms, in order to predict epidemic outbreaks. Still, the collective data body could be made much more available to us. In "The Transparent Society"⁹, David Brin describes a future society where our every act is recorded, not to far from the truth today. However in his society we all have access to the data, not only corporations and governments. It might be a too utopian wish, but we could at least hope for more access to this abundance of data, and for systems and projects using it, allowing us to see the collective body naked without the veil of aggregation, providing alluring hints of individuals.

⁸ G Eysenbach, Infodemiology: tracking flu-related searches on the web for syndromic surveillance. AMIA Annu Symp Proc. 244-8 (2006)

⁹ Perseus Books (May 1998)

It is within this context the web based project *The Voice*¹⁰ should be read. It is a “parasitic” project commissioned by the Swedish Public Art Council feeding off the user traffic on the art council’s website. The project provides an accumulating visualization of all the words the visitors to the council’s website search for in the website’s internal search engine as well as the words they searched for in an external search engine which led to the council’s website. The result is an ever-changing image of what the visitors to the website are interested in, how this interest compares to, and differs from, what the public arts council is doing and believing, and how it is represented on the web in general. What we see is a word-image, a kind of virtual palimpsest, where words that appear more within the different contexts visually stands out, and clusters are created by the similarities of the words. Potentially, emerging from the separate opinions and interests expressed through the searches, from a cacophony of voices, is a consensus, a collective identity – one voice.

¹⁰ Project URL: <http://jevbratt.com/the_voice/>