The temporary networks of the unknown

An attempt to explain my desire and curiosity to understand the desire and curiosity that leads people into the usage of new technology in order to sustain their desired identity and their curious networks.

Interpersonal real-world social relationships and connections are complex, and challenged by their unpredictable nature. Even though it seems hard to analyze human behavior only by the means of computational logic, we are facing an era where our "digital shadow" gains importance in our everyday lives and also shape our offline behavior but also constructs us as subjects. This digital copy exists not only through the profiles on social networking platforms such as facebook or linkedin that we and our friends are creating ourselves, but is built out of innumerable tracking and surveillance systems through every move we make, every purchase we do and every click we perform on the Internet. But even though surveillance especially on the web is more feasible to everybody we are actively contributing private data as personal information, preferences, even private pictures to online repositories and sharing them with the world. What desire makes us loosen our views on privacy when going online?
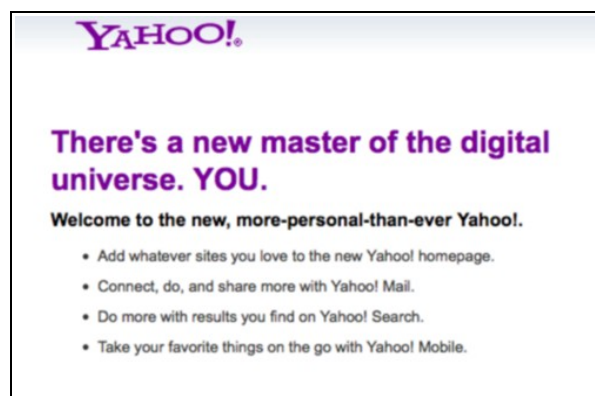

Image 1: Screenshot of the Yahoo Startpage

In my research I want to focus on how technologies are shaping the individual by gathering personal data in databases and trying to profile and categorize our characters. How are we coping with the existence of us in the relation to others in an economy of social networking and data mining. I want to search for alternatives of these mainly commercially oriented platforms both in digital and non-digital realms.

I am interested in the emerging gray zone between the desire to exhibit ourselves and the fear of surveillance both online and offline. I want to explore how our constant visibility can be understood as our right but at the same time also be an infringement of our rights on a different level. I want to research on Foucault's term of Governmentality and how participatory surveillance has been shaping our society from the beginnings of the industrial revolution. How are the commodities of social networking influencing our everyday behavior and how are we shaping our "second self" online? How far do the interfaces of social networking platforms narrow our possibilities to express ourselves and to what extend to they enhance our creativity?
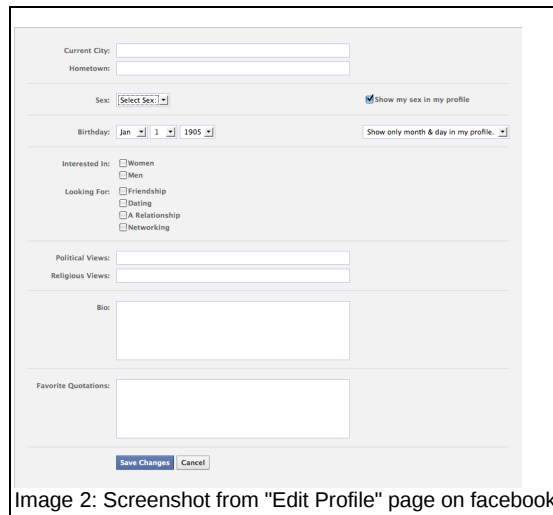
Image 2: Screenshot from "Edit Profile" page on facebook

The code that is written to create applications to make our lives easier and save time, abandon georaphical borders and execute recurring tasks for us. I want to question to what extent the execution of software enhances or takes over our habits and how binary simplification and standardization of human behavior shapes our behavior and senses.

We understand online platforms such as facebook, hyves, linkedin as the contemporary tools for social networking, but also other special interest platforms such as YouTube (video), flickr (photo), last.fm (music), tripadvisor (travel) or iens (eating) create a space for interaction and exchange among their users. What sort of communities are emerging online and to what extent do they impact our sense of community and our ways of interaction in our offline life?

As Mark Poster puts it we have moved into an information economy in which we become policed by databases and we accept this state to be the "norm". In the economy of social networking, that are free and open, the revenue model lies in the fact that we, the users are becoming the products. So how do we deal with the situation in which we are not only selling ourselves to capitalism but also sell ourselves to each other, to our friends, family, colleagues and acquaintances? In what way are we coping with the diversity of these connections and the different modes that are required in order to stay competitive but still represent a valid image that we have of ourselves? To what extent have we accepted the computer to be the mediator of our communications and how are we facing the possible manipulations of our interpersonal communication?
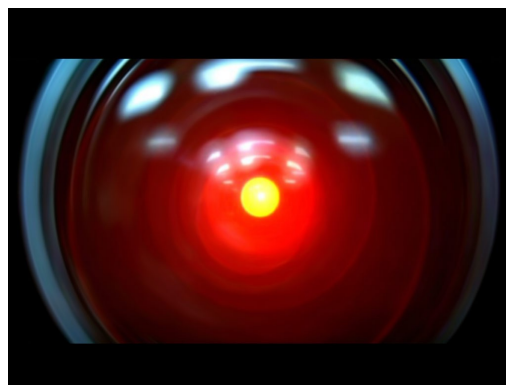

Image 3: HAL 9000 ithe sentient on-board computer of the Discovery One spacecraft in Arthur C. Clarke's fictional Space Odyssey saga.

We are technically part of an infinite number of social networks, unconsciously, through every move we make, but we do not always see the actual links between us and our peers. In social media terms these links are called "temporary ties" and describe the connection that one user has to the other when buying an item from them on ebay or relying on a reference written by them on amazon.

Can these temporary ties, from a non-marketer's position, also be constituted in offline spaces? I want to examine how people connect temporarily in situations like sharing an elevator, responding to scribbles on a public toilet or when two women on a party are wearing the same dress. These temporarily emerging links between people happen in an unpredictable and not determined way and are interesting to me since they happen to function opposite to the logical processes within a computer network.

During my previous research on public private space experience, borders between private and public spaces and examination of technologies that play a more and more intrusive role in our lives I came across many discussion-rising points on the grey zone between real life and virtual life. In my project "windowstills" I worked with apartment windows in Rotterdam, who seem to have been decorated for the outside world by the inhabitants. They therefore resemble a public social profile, but rather in an urban context than in cyberspace. My intention to analyze, tag and categorize these windows resulted in an interactive map, that not only lets the viewer see all those windows collected in one database but also makes it possible to sort and view them by the items or the decoration they contain. I hung invitations on the windows I selected for the database to give the window-owners the chance to see the project but also to meet likeminded people at the exhibition space. The uniqueness and diversity of the people that showed up resulted in my opinion from the rather arbitrary way of categorizing and tagging windows by hand and not automatically. The technical part of the project only enhanced the expressiveness of the project rather than taking over the process of linking and mapping.
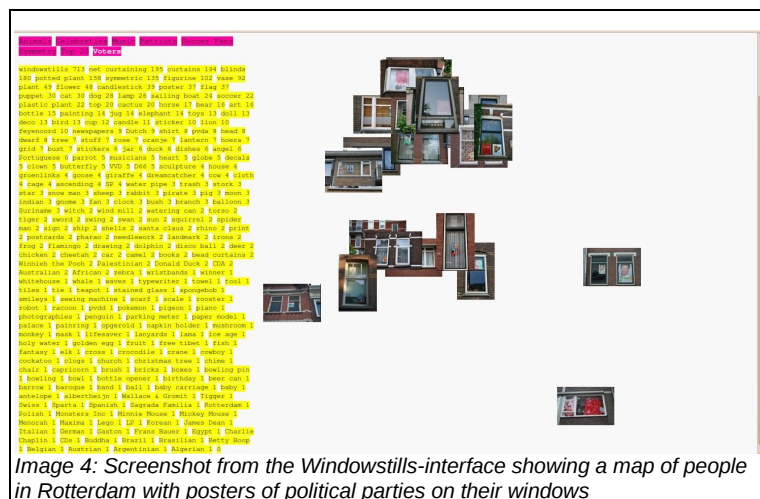

Image 4: Screenshot from the Windowstills-interface showing a map of people in Rotterdam with posters of political parties on their windows

When software tries to profile us, only our data that is available through databases is being surveyed. Code tries to emulate human interaction in logic reasoning, as trying to conclude what a person might also like, based on available data. I would like to visualize these processes by searching for them, analyzing them and re-enacting them in the search for networks that are not rendered by computational code and connect people in a more subtle ways. A desired outcome of my project would be the result of exercises on tracking and

recording temporarily emerging networks and uncover invisible processes that connect people without databases, but make use of software to visualize their existence. This could be possible with a public installation, a website or the distribution of software.

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