

## 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

Computers do not only serve as tools used for carrying out repetitive tasks – the success of commercial social networking platforms shows that the machine has also become an important mediator of our social relationships. Even though human interaction is complex and unpredictable, we seem to accept that we have to truncate our behavior and communication according to the requirements of computers and machines. In order to create an online identity and connect with others we are tempted to publish our very personal data. I am interested in the emerging grey zone between the desire to exhibit ourselves online and the fear of surveillance and loss of privacy. In my research I want to search for networks that appear beyond the commercial business and experiment with possibilities of rendering them visible.

Technology has brought the benefits of being able to abandon geographical and political borders to us. But while making our lives easier, computers also alter our behavior and determine the ways we interact with them. Through online platforms the web is now also part of our social environment: We share our thoughts instantly via twitter, post our private photos on flickr, upload our videos to youtube and connect to each other via facebook. These activities, which used to be done in a private face-to-face manner, now become actions that are performed via commercial services and are visible to everybody. Real-world social attributes are compressed into an equivalent digital format.

Already in 1990 Mark poster states that it becomes “norm” that our lives are governed by databases. By constantly having to fill in profiles in order to be able to use a social website we feed these databases ourselves and create a multitude of digital identities. But also through every action we perform online we generate a digital shadow of ourselves. How are we coping with the variety of our digital identities that we created or that are being created for us?

Participatory surveillance as it is exercised on social networking sites exists already from the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution and I want to explore how it influences our existence online.

As opposed to real life relationships on facebook every person we are connected to is considered to be a “friend”. But the group of people in our friend list is rather heterogeneous and our relationships we have to them extremely diverse. Marketers generally divide this mass into strong and weak ties. Paul Adams, lead for User Research for Social at Google, also names the group of temporary ties, which is becoming more commonplace online: “Temporary ties are people that you have no recognized relationship with, but that you temporarily interact with.” With the growth of user generated content we are more and more confronted with texts, reviews and opinions of people we do not know but whose advice we accept. 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, signing a visitor’s book 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.

The issues of the computer as a mediator of our friendships and the resulting loss of privacy have also been a central point in my previous work:

“Bonuskaart friends” is a social network that connects people according to their shopping behaviour at the Dutch supermarket chain albertheijn. Like any customer card the albertheijn bonuskaart is an effective tool for data mining and creating customer profiles. The website I programmed only required to fill in your unique card number and would scrape all the information about your shopping from the publicly available albertheijn-website. By questioning the relevance and sensitivity of this data, the social network of Bonuskaart-friends, which is based upon the look of facebook, tries to portray possible abuse and false conclusions about a person based on that data.

In “Windowstills” I collected the data myself on the street: Apartment windows in Rotterdam are often decorated so uniquely that they resemble sites and profiles on a social networking website. Regarding the window as the grey zone where the public eye meets the private realm of a citizen I categorized and tagged every single window and connected similarly decorated windows with each other. Performing the online routine of categorizing and tagging onto an offline medium challenges the gap between privacy definitions online and offline.

In both projects I made use of an existing but yet unconnected infrastructure and tried to visualize possible networks by remediating and manipulating the data. For my final project I want to go deeper into the exploration of new forms of networks that do not comply with the rules of commercial social networking sites. By being the person who determines the establishment and construction of these visualizations I also take the responsibility for the resulting networks. Therefore I want the research on Michel Foucault’s term of Governmentality and explore power not only as an oppressing force, but also as the origin for productivity and creativity.

My practical research online I will analyze the constitution of popular networking sites and examine the threshold the user has to cross in order to be part of the network. I will try to implement these findings in my search for alternative, offline emerging networks and experiment with the similarities and differences. I will also keep track on the development of the project Diaspora, a highly anticipated de-centralized alternative to facebook. A possible outcome of my research and experiments will be the visualization and constitution of my findings.

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