

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. My aim is to experiment with different networked media online and offline to locate, analyze and manipulate existing infrastructures that could serve as networking platforms outside the commercial business.

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. "The most important thing about a technology is how it changes people". (Lanier, 2010, p.4) 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, have 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.

Social networks have grown, their use is free, and we feed them our data, which is then used for commercial purposes. Already in 1990 Mark Poster states that it becomes "norm" that our lives are governed by databases. By constantly filling in profiles in order to use social websites, we feed these databases 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 digital identities we have created or are being created for us? Participatory surveillance as it is exercised on social networking sites has existed since the Industrial Revolution, and I want to explore how it influences our online existence.



Facebook jargon graffiti sprayed on a house wall in The Hague

	Everyone	Friends of Friends	Friends Only	Other
Your status, photos, and posts	•			
Bio and favorite quotations	•			
Family and relationships	•			
Photos and videos you're tagged in	•			
Religious and political views	•			
Birthday	•			
Permission to comment on your posts	•			
Places you check in to [?]	•			
Contact information	•			

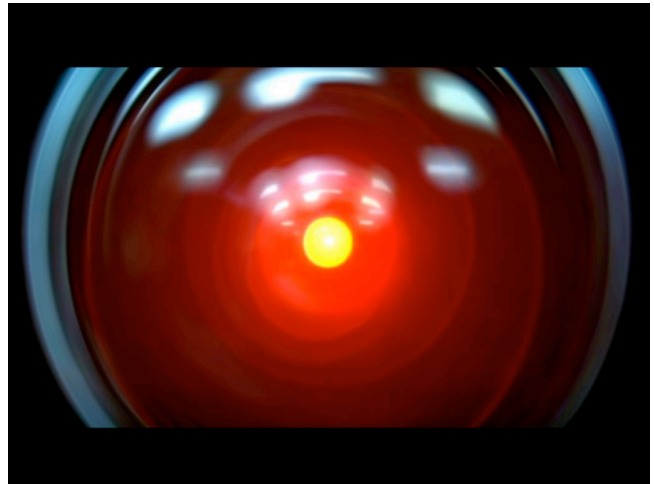
Privacy settings panel on Facebook to control what to share

As opposed to so-called real life relationships on facebook, every person we are connected to is considered to be a “friend”. But people in our friend list are rather heterogeneous, and our relationships with them extremely diverse. Marketers generally divide this mass into strong and weak ties, terms defined by the American sociologist Mark S. Granovetter. Expanding on this terminology, Paul Adams, Senior User Experience Researcher 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.”

(Adams, 2010, p.125) 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.

I want to examine especially whether these temporary ties, from a non-marketer’s position, can also be constituted in offline spaces. This could be in observing how people connect temporarily for example 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 undetermined way. These connections are interesting to me since they happen to function opposite to the logical processes normally associated with a computer network. I am also interested how these online and offline experiences intersect.

Next to being fascinated by the ways in which the computer mediates our relationships and communication, I have also been interested in the issues of privacy and how our personal data is being used through this mediation for commercial purposes. One example is “Bonuskaart friends”, a project I did in 2010. It is a social network that connects people according to their shopping behaviour at the Dutch supermarket chain Albert Heijn. Like any customer card the Albert Heijn bonuskaart is an effective tool for data mining and creating customer profiles. The website I programmed only required you to fill in your unique card number, and it would then scrape all the information about your shopping from the publicly available Albert Heijn-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. The work playfully questions the use of datamining for marketing purposes and opens the possibility of connecting through similar shopping lists.

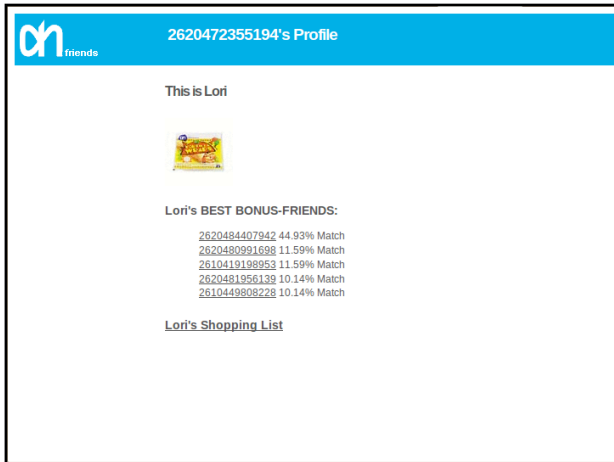


HAL 9000 is the sentient on-board computer of the Discovery One spacecraft in 2001: A Space Odyssey.

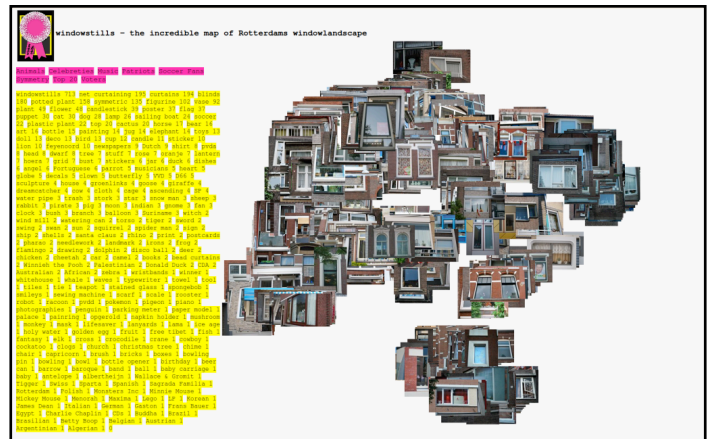


Social network, analog. The summit book of Rosenkranzhöhe, Austria (2118m), every visitor can leave a trace in the book.

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.



Bonuskaart-Friends: The Bonuskaart-number is the only data needed for creating a complete profile with pictures



Windowstills: With the map people can find each other by common interests through similar decoration in their windows

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.

For my theoretical research, where I want to focus on how the desire to be connected and the fear of being surveilled are discussed in works by Wendy Chun, Jason Read and Mark Andrejevic. I will also keep track on currently developing projects like Diaspora and Thimbl, which promise to be de-centralized alternatives to commercial platforms like facebook and twitter. In the course of 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 those similarities and differences. My search will take place in offline spaces, where people meet and interconnect or leave traces that can be tracked down. I want to play with the interdependency of people's desire for privacy and the prevailing fashion of publishing personal data online in order to be part of an online network. The outcome of my practical work should be the visualization of these found networks, made possible through a medium, online and/or offline in tune with the respective infrastructure of the space I used for my research.

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- Thimbl, Be followed at your own domain. Free open source and distributed micro-blogging <http://www.thimbl.net>
- Twitter <http://www.twitter.com>
- YouTube - Broadcast Yourself <http://www.youtube.com>



Diaspora: A de-centralized alternative to facebook?