Manufactured desire, the myth of digital sharing

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Introduction

We as humans desire to share feelings and experiences to others in an attempt to connect and cross those membranes that negotiate and define the possibilities of communication. It is a determined quest for meaning and reassurance which we journey through, as that also defines ourselves and the societies in which we create. This, I believe is the unconscious natural desire to share. The essence of unconscious natural desire is a productive force yearning to travel across membranes and in this pursuit produces new realities as a by-product. I define the essence of 'manufactured desire', the second order, as an ideologically driven construct to exploit the productive power of the unconscious by artificially substituting itself as the first and natural order. This is the source of the myth of digital sharing.

Enthralled by propaganda's power to harness people in war times, Edward Bernays' invention of the profession of public relations (PR) in The United States was euphemistically transformed into a business model for peace time (Curtis, 2002). Essentially, this was the channelling of the spell of political ideology to the ideology of consumption. PRs' innovative spin was the instrumentalisation of psychoanalysis to uncover the hidden unconscious desires by coupling to it commodities in order to seduce people to purchase what they didn't need beyond biological need. The documentary, 'The Century of the Self', illuminated that this is the budding and menacing beginnings of the enterprise of the manufacturing of desire as an ultimate means of ideological control headed by social and economic control in the Capitalist economy. In our networked society, the desire to share our profiles on social platforms seem to be accepted as the norm now. I will argue that this desire is an artificially 'manufactured desire' understood through Roland Barthes' notion of myth explored in his book 'Mythologies'. Accordingly, myths are a second order semiological system with the task of superimposing a historical intention with a natural justification. Barthes maintains that processes of naturalisation and neutralisation is the most pertinent instrument for ideological inversion which defines this society. "[…] myth operates the inversion of anti-physis into pseudo-physis" (Barthes, 1972, p. 142). By turing an engineered man-made form into a form that falsifies nature, a myth can assume its underestimated force of innocence. Advertising deploys reward mechanisms to the engineering process of the 'manufactured desire' to share so that

it can become mythologised. The strategy of 'gamification' is one such device. The capitalistic economic system aims to harness the forces of the old significance of desire to construct and preempt desired realities. And this reality is to make the boundaries of work and play indistinguishable so that by sharing we are consuming and by playing we are working. In the 1920's, Bernays had worked for the American Tobacco Company and was assigned to break the taboo on women smoking. By representing the women as suffragettes lighting up what he deemed 'torches of freedom' at a publicity stunt, he instilled the symbol of independence and freedom on cigarettes (Curtis, 2002). In a similar fashion the desire to share and reveal personal information online has been strategically naturalised by advertising and marketing rendering it innocuous, accepted and most importantly, economically sustainable.

Manufacture desire is a myth

Bernays' legacy of engineered desire is the psychoanalytical method of attaching ideals of mass produced goods to the unconscious desires. The manufactured desires are the cultural ideologies on consumption that Freud and Lacan describe as "hook[ing] into the body's [natural] capacity for sexual, erotic activities and its capacity for aggression" (interpreted by Bocock, 1993, p. 88). The ideology of consumerism steals and leeches on the unconscious desires so that the illusion of satisfaction and happiness may be sought in products. Thus manufactured desire as a second order semiological system, is a powerful myth with the ability to socially engineer and control. It is the product of propaganda, the operation of public relations and the goal of advertising.

The logic of manufactured desire follows the logic of myth because it metamorphoses its original character in order to camouflage itself as the natural state. Barthes describes myth as a form of speech "not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters its message" (Barthes, 1972, p.107). Provided that it is conveyed by a discourse, every object can be speech, since everything can be talked about - thus nothing can be safe from myth. The very function of myth is that it transforms history into nature. This act of naturalisation is a distortion of perception, or what PR calls 'perception management'. In this process, the mythical secondary layer captures the historic concept and fraudulently presents itself as natural and pretends to have always been there, thus is experienced to be innocent and unquestion-

able. Mirroring this, is the process of manufactured desire, the signification of unconscious desire is resurfaced by the ideology of consumption through commodities, transforming and duplicating itself as a simulacra of the natural. The libido which sits in the unconscious is fused together with advertised consumer products so that it can forget about the true original signification and assume its own originality, artificially. Advertising embeds the libido with false symbolism and creates false natures - this is the manipulative course of naturalisation.

Just as manufactured desire as a myth naturalises the first order, it also serves to neutralise it. This what Barthes refers to as 'depoliticized speech'. This process is exactly that of the bourgeois ideology. In the transition of neutralisaion, myth purifies it so that on this innocent ground, the man-made desire can be complacently celebrated. The aim is to fade out the political qualities in agreement to the myth makers' needs, so that it becomes a simple *matter of fact.* This monolithic reduction of the complexity of human events allows it to transcend contradictions and stand euphorically clear (Barthes, 1972, p.143). The more it propagates its representations, the more neutralised it becomes. It is in this neutralised state that it obtains and holds the power to become safe and normalised to achieve popular embracement.

<u>Politics of digital sharing</u>
"Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life."
facebook.com

Today, the notion of sharing is a mythical manufactured desire in the information and attention economy. Since the data we intentionally or unintentionally give away by commenting, tagging, blogging or by divulging our own content is commercialized, the act of sharing which inevitably entails attention, can be considered and valued as a commodity. As an extension of Dallas Smythe's notion of audience as a commodity put forward in 1977, the 'attention economy' measures our attention as a type of unpaid labour that users conduct on behalf of advertisers (Scholz and Liu, 2010, p. 12). The logic of packaging and branding in advertising works in a similar way in its use of people as walking billboards. The notion of the 'first enclosure' by Dmytri Kleiner refers to the capitalist capture of the internet's infrastructure or better known as the dotcom boom in the mid 1990's, as a way to control internet access via ISP's. Kleiner's idea of the 'second enclosure' refers to the outbreak of Web 2.0 in the mid 2000's where a handful of internet companies controlled the gateways and homogenised the database practices. During the second enclosure and the ensuing hype of the greatness of digital share, the so-called 'interconnectivity' ideal was captured by social media platforms to usher in potential new commercial models. The fact is while Web 2.0 was promoted as a participatory platform, a few major players including Google and Yahoo engulfed their competitors by buying out smaller, more independent companies such as Flickr and Youtube. This created an oligarchy dominating its increasingly uniform landscape with centralized aggregation of the personal data being shared within this new expansion of private territory. Contained inside the gated doors of corporations, the collected information is revealed can be subject to a discriminating frame of interpretation or devious commercial use. Profiles of personal information are more than just consumer profiles, along with its content generators and the attention they both give and receive, this data is now monetised and decontextualised by third parties. This means scrutinising and mapping out demographics, psychographics and consumer behaviour data to condition and preempt behaviourial patterns to sustain the ideology of consumption. In addition, the ramification of sharing could render users vulnerable to governmental pressure tactics (Lynch, 2011). Sharing is the current perversion of consumption. So it follows in the eyes of the economic system, that the desire to divulge personal information should accordingly undergo a procedure of naturalisation. Because when this desire is mass-produced, it urges a disclosure of private information, which is itself a sought-after product, to be experienced as an everyday innocuous normality to be praised and even endorsed. As it must exist under the radar and avoid being identified as an artificial desire, sharing thus disguises its commodity status so that it can conceal its ideological alignments away from the public eye. Talk of "giving people the power to

share and make the world more open and connected" (facebook.com, info page), where users can generate content, rather than just consuming it, is used as a marketing strategy since the very infrastructure of the internet is inherently collaborative, and rewritable - Arpanet was originally designed to share information and resources across a decentralized network. The empowerment of the internet is its inherent ability to distribute as much control as possible in the hands of individual people. By capturing this truly altruistic notion of sharing and the freedom to distribute taken from the free software movement, the delicate fabric of context broke. We must remember that act of sharing and thereby paying attention constitutes digital labour, not freedom. In other words we are the digital workers and consumers of the attention economy, however natural, fun or liberating it may appear to be.

   The idea of digital resource sharing is not the same within private social platforms, instead, it pretends to, and in many ways has seduced us by the billions. What we now understand as digital sharing, or rather what the corporations call sharing is like a 'stolen object', mass-produced into replicas circulating in the market masquerading as an antique. This is the success of the mythologisation of the orchestrated desire to share. The present commercial and thereby political relevance of sharing conveniently develops anterograde amnesia to appear like it's upholding non proprietary values of freedom and human goodness that once was. It is by no surprise that the social act of digital sharing is capitalized and that the notion to share has become an euphemism for content production, reproduction as well as consumption in the networked age. Advertising ideology as put forward by Judith Williamson in 1978 that "they are selling us ourselves" (quoted in Leiss, Kiln, Shaley, 1990, p. 32) seems to have taken on another level of meaning and accuracy.

<u>Politics of digital reward</u>
As the economy of personal information is contingent on data solicitation, this particular form of exchange characterized by a divulgence of personal information in return for varying degrees of pleasure or the possibility or promise of reward (Elmer, 2004, p. 77) is extremely vital for its own sustenance. Reward mechanisms are the guarantors of the myth of digital sharing, for if there is no symbolic gain, we as digital workers will turn away from their sugar coated platforms. If we recall the "Torches of Freedom" strategy, the cigarette both held and rewarded symbolized values of independence, gender equality and freedom. Digital reward systems are employed to motivate by ultimately promising idealised values of interconnectivity, intimacy and openness simultaneously linking it to economic value such as money, products and symbolic value such as social status. Foursquare, Swipely, Gowalla are just some examples of companies intertwining 'reward' into their corporate terminology and promotional material, while social game applications on Facebook for example have adopted more psychologically addictive methods.

   The term 'gamification' is a relatively new form of motivational strategy to drive participation in non-gaming activities. As with most reward systems applied by commercial entities, the promise of rewards in 'gamified' platforms are dubious and largely false: users are fooled into thinking that they're receiving joy and having fun. Gowalla is a location-based social network that is developed around the psychology of social status. The system of a digital passport allows users to collect stamps and mark the places they have visited. Pins are awarded and shown on the digital passport so that users may display and compare achievements among their network. In 'gamified' spaces, shared experiences inevitably induce competitive practices to stage hierarchical social structures. However, the real reward is perhaps addiction, or at least the manufactured desire to play more and to share more. It is a kind of psychological bribery in which manufactured desire is imposed and prototyped 'real-time', and an automated technical process of integrating or cross-referencing information about services and commodities with consumer or sale data is performed without solicitation. Timothy Chang, a principal partner of the social game funder, Norwest Venture Partners, who also happened to coin 'gamification', blatantly highlights: "[b]asically game mechanics are a way to get consumers addicted to things" (Technotica. "FarmVille invades the real world"). Addiction however, is only one part of the process of manufactured desire. It is the persuasion of endorsement that ensures that

you will too, recommend it to a friend. The mechanism of reward gives a brief sense of gain to perpetuate an insatiable fling not only to yourself but to exploit people around you. The infectiousness of addiction and its attempt to make it an everyday activity is the real truth of interconnectivity. Needless to say, it is gaining the attention of advertising agencies (gamasutra.com, Gamification Summit 2011 Announced) with the prospect of turning mundane or exploitative activities into something which is enjoyable. It is free labour at its best. The fact that the Gamification Summit 2011 event was sold out marks the profitable booming of the social gaming advertising branch.

FarmVille

FarmVille, a virtual agriculture social network game on Facebook and also available as an App on the Apple iPhone, is experienced as just another simulation game at first. However if one digs further, along the way you will see many layers of tell-tale signs of its mythical status demonstrating not only the understanding of the mechanism of game but also how it instrumentalises the psychology of reward to manufacture the desire to play and share. Sown on the idyllic romanticism of the 'back-to-the-basics' rural life, players are encouraged to manage a digital farm by planting, growing and harvesting crops, trees and buying livestock and building decorations or buildings. Beyond the game's setting suggesting the homestead, the facade of the farm acts as a Trojan Horse, or rather a little brown pixelated pony weaning its way into ones daily routine. Inside this pony lies an army of false significations which are waiting to reward you with addiction. In its naturalised state, the false creeps through the back door of nature. The reality that players are wielded as a resource for economic progress and private capture is drained out of the form of the game, only to be absorbed by the concept of nature. FarmVille is a prime example of depoliticized speech. It fades out the ideology of consuming in sharing and playing, so much so that it becomes pure, simple and squeaky clean that even children may play it.

The aim of the game is to advanced through by planting crops. When it grows for a period of time, harvesting can take place and earn

Farmville's primary currency called 'farmer coins'. Optionally, these coins can also be bought with 'real-life' money encouraging the player to progress faster if, or rather, *when* competition or frustration sets in (FarmVille. wikia.com). Not surprisingly, the option to redeem money back from virtual money is not possible. According to graduate student, A. J. P. Liszkiewicz personal accounts, "[w]ithout at least eight in-game neighbors, in fact, it is almost impossible to advance in FarmVille without spending real money." On the first layer, users are rewarded for their labour and attention with the symbolic value, albeit the painfully slow process. On the second layer users are given the chance to exchange monetary value to further increase symbolic value packaged in coloured pixels. What this symbolic value contains is the promise of social status. Users can also be awarded experience points (XP) for performing certain actions to purchase all kinds of tantalizing paraphernalia such as ponds, trackers, fences, etc. for the customization of their farm decor. It is here that manufactured desire is engineered, regardless of superficially. It produces emotional attachment and some sense of satisfaction since it is *designed* to feel like the fruits of ones labour. Fundamentally, the game obliges attention for if a farmer fails to harvest in time, the plant will wither and consequently one will suffer loses of experience points (XP) or receive no points at all (Farmville.wikia.com). As each crop will wither in a different time, its obliges further responsibility. As the masterminds behind FarmVille, the game developer Zynga brilliantly crafted the analogy to nature by drawing on survival elements of nurture, obligation, responsibility. Adapting offline farming, the game's inherent design demands attention: It rewards you with FarmVille currency or XP for adding 'neighbors', which implies inviting friends from Facebook, harvesting crops, trees and animals and expanding your thriving farm. Logically to those in power to change and define what should be desirable or not, it punishes you for the lack of attention. Furthermore as it is a multiplayer interactive game, Zynga outsources most of its 'missionary' workload to its digital foot soldiers via the entanglement of social obligation and social responsibility. Encouraged through the act of sending 'gifts' to coerce other members to participate, sharing and comparing farms to friends' becomes game survival.

This is the perfect manifestation of Smythe's audience commodity, in the most literal sense of the word players are paying (with) attention while performing the unwaged labour for the advertisers. What is exploited here are players as digital workers and playing and sharing will inevitably be monetised. With over seventy-three million players (Liszkiewicz, 2010), the distribution of attention is greatly imbalanced. What this reflects is the flourishing digital labour industry, and with it the rise of the data service economy and its deliberation of the blurring boundaries of playground and sweatshops. This is what gamification is about; by sharing we are consuming and by playing we are working.

Conclusion

The act of digital sharing and connecting online is a manufactured desire. It is a manufactured desire because the current economy of information and attention desires so, furthermore because it is existentially and commercially contingent on the incoming flow of data and clicks. In the hands of the ruling corporations, the internet is not a medium for interpersonal exchange, but data retrieval. Only by expropriating its communicative function could the web developers' turn the internet into a shopping mall. This is the history of myth making. The role of the propagandist, like the role of the advertiser, harnesses and synthetically fabricates the productive power of unconscious desires. The mythical second order of desire is then programmed to tease the natural order with reward mechanisms promising it idealised notions of interconnectivity, serendipity and openness. Once tempted, manufactured desire capitalises; seizing the moment it undergoes an operation to embed and establish its own form by assuming its eternal naturalness. When its commodity status is safely camouflaged, the ultimate strategy for reward is to perpetuate and circulate addiction at its users' expense - this is the protocol of gamification. Sharing is openly accepted regardless of efforts to draw attention to its drawbacks including privacy violation, market oligarchy, lack of contextual framework for interpretation and digital labour exploitation. Fundamentally faithful to the ideology of consumption, the myth of digital sharing bribes, steals and captures all the while tries to march innocently into the future.

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