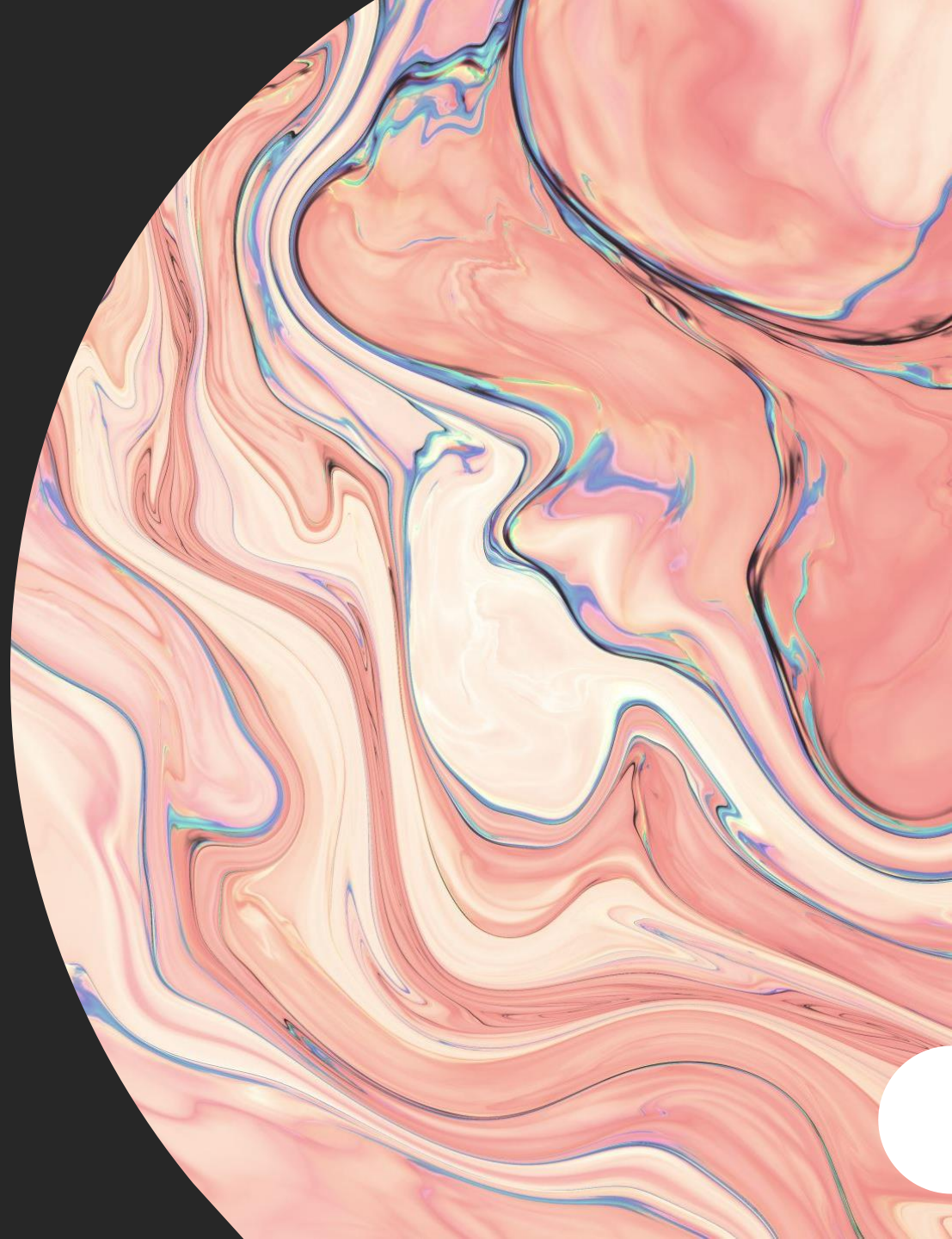


CRITICAL THINKING

17 week homework



- Through her art, Moll invites viewers to consider the ethical implications of our reliance on online shopping and the personal data that we willingly or unknowingly share with corporations like Amazon.

The Hidden Life of an Amazon User

A project by Joana Moll

On June 17th, 2019 in Utrecht, The Netherlands, I purchased *The Life, Lessons & Rules for Success: The Journey, The Teachable Moments & 10 Rules for Success Cultivated from the Life & Wisdom of Jeff Bezos* from Amazon' s official website. The web browser used to place this order was Firefox Quantum 67.0.4, installed on a Dell XPS 13 computer that used the operating system Ubuntu 18.04.2.

In order to purchase the book, the Amazon website forces the customer to go through twelve different interfaces composed of large amounts of code, which is normally invisible to the average user. This code carries out all sorts of operations, such as organizing and styling the site' s content, allowing interactivity, and recording the user' s activity. Overall, I was able to track 1,307 different requests to all sort of scripts and documents, totaling 8,724 A4 pages worth of printed code, adding up to 87.33MB of information. The amount of energy needed to load each of the twelve web interfaces, along with each one' s endless fragments of code, was approximately 30 wh.

According to their own promotional materials, Amazon' s business model is based on "obsessive customer focus," which entails "constantly listening to customers to enhance and improve the customer experience." In other words, their business relies on continuously tracking and recording their customers' behavior and activity in order to amplify the monetization of each user and ultimately to increase Amazon' s revenue.

Thus, the 8,724 pages of code that track and personalize user behavior and experience and were involuntarily loaded by the customer (me) through the browser, are evidence of Amazon' s core money-making strategy at work. Moreover, all the energy needed to load this relatively large amount of information was effectively unloaded on the customer (me), who ultimately assumed not just part of the economic cost of Amazon' s hidden monetization processes, but also a portion of its environmental footprint.

The Hidden Life of an Amazon User aims to shed light on Amazon' s often unacknowledged but aggressive exploitation of their users, which is embedded at the core of the so-called internet companies' business strategies. Such strategies rely on apparently neutral, personalized user experiences afforded by attractive interfaces. These interfaces obfuscate sophisticated business models embedded in endless pages of indecipherable code, all of which are activated by user labor. In turn, these strategies have a significant energy cost, part of which is involuntarily assumed by the user. To put it bluntly, the user is not just exploited by means of their free labor, but is also forced to assume the energy costs of such exploitation.

This project narrates the journey I undertook inside the intricate labyrinth of interfaces and code that make the purchase of Jeff Bezos' s book possible. Thus, the project allows the user to navigate through the twelve different interfaces that participate in such processes, and explore the vast amount of code that was hidden "behind" them, while witnessing the mounting energy costs that are inadvertently paid for by every Amazon customer.

[illegible]

While browsing through this work, I felt a sense of interest and some hidden sense of surveillance, that my actions and information would be unknowingly recorded whenever I browsed through these meaningless documents and symbols, even if this information was not something I wanted to reveal, that my personal data and privacy was being recorded, and that this was a personal violation of my privacy and something I did not want others to know.

After reading *The Hidden Life of an Amazon User* by Joana Moll, I found myself reflecting on the impact of minor or small technologies on our daily lives. Moll's exploration of the vast amount of data that Amazon collects on its users, and the ways in which this data is used, highlights the pervasive influence that technology has on our actions, thoughts, and behaviors.

Moll's use of visualizations, such as the "algorithmic object portrait" of a user's data, brings to light the complexity of the algorithms that govern our online experiences. She notes that "the seemingly minor choices we make while browsing and purchasing can trigger a cascade of automated decisions that determine what we see and how we see it."


This idea of minor choices having a significant impact on our online experiences reminded me of the concept of "nudging" discussed in the assigned reading "The Ethics of Nudging" by Cass R. Sunstein and Richard H. Thaler. They write, "Nudges are not mandates. Putting the fruit at eye level counts as a nudge. Banning junk food does not."

Similarly, Amazon's subtle nudges, such as the "recommended for you" section or the placement of certain products on the homepage, have a profound impact on our purchasing decisions and ultimately shape our online identities.

Moll's project also sheds light on the power dynamic between the user and the corporation, as she notes that "the user is almost always left in the dark" regarding the collection and use of their data. This lack of transparency echoes the concerns raised in the assigned reading "Designing for Digital Well-being" by Sara Wachter-Boettcher, who writes, "We don't know what data they're collecting or what they're doing with it, and we don't know how to control our own experience."

Overall, *The Hidden Life of an Amazon User* serves as a thought-provoking commentary on the ways in which minor technologies, such as algorithms and recommendation systems, have a profound impact on our daily lives. As Moll notes, "it's important to realize that these systems are designed to influence us, and they do so in subtle and pervasive ways."

Reflecting on this idea, I am reminded of the importance of being critical and informed consumers of technology, and actively seeking out ways to take control of our online experiences. As Wachter-Boettcher writes, "The way we design, build, and deploy technology is never neutral." It is up to us to ensure that these technologies are used for the betterment of society, rather than to further perpetuate power imbalances and exploit our personal data.



I hate exercising, I browsed and refreshed the page non-stop and only ended up burning 2.32 calories, which I thought would pass for my new gym equipment.

~{>W<}~

01MB
31Wh
2.32Kcal